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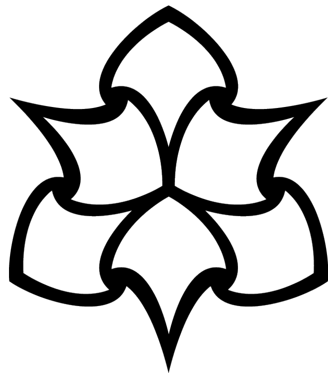

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Distrust by Design? Conceptualising the role of Trust and Distrust in the development of Further Education Policy and Practice in England

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Distrust by Design? Conceptualising the role of Trust and Distrust in the development of Further Education Policy and Practice in England

It would be relatively easy, and with good reason, to assume that social trust is a normatively good value to promote within institutions. Trust encourages cooperation between actors, and thus normalises policies, practices and behaviours that tend to work for the social good of all people, rather than just individuals. To assume all of this would also be to assume that trust should, in aspiration at least, be central to public policy design. However, I argue in this conceptual paper that the competitive landscape of the English Further Education sector in the years since Incorporation does not lend itself to the values of cooperation and social good. The extent to which forced competition has become normalised has made concerns over financial health commonplace around the boardroom in FE Colleges. In this context, perhaps the benefits associated with building and maintaining trust in this context are problematic. Perhaps it is important to consider whether in fact, *distrust* is fundamental to institutional survival? This paper draws upon three key theoretical concepts from the trust literature to conceptualise how the Further Education policy environment could necessitate measures which enlist organisations and individual actors towards objectives which are increasingly linked to competition, centrally devised standards and institutional survival. In this way, I suggest in this paper that strategies of distrust may be of greater use in the design of institutional policy, as the need to establish control encourages self-interested practices which take primacy over cooperation.

Key words: trust, distrust, neoliberalism, further education

Introduction

Leading a Further Education Institution is a treacherous activity, fraught with possible dangers and the ongoing battle to survive. In a competitive market place where resources are scarce, therefore, College principals are faced with little choice but to carry out their work with the brute force required to keep going in a sector where playing it safe is not an option. Damien Page (2017) would have us believe this to be the case; and as such he argues that principals are given an undue reputation as 'managerialist tyrants who plunder the pleasures of professionalism and autonomy from the people' (ibid: 34). In constructing this argument, he names the conflict implicit in much of the FE research literature: the decline of trust between the leaders and the led. Further, the conceptualisation of a brutal, 'lion-like' principal provides us with an alternative understanding of leadership in practice. What if the act of distrusting is based on intention, rather than consequence?

> 'What is often forgotten when people engage in disparaging commentary about principals[1] is the indomitable power of the external environment…yes, principals make swingeing cuts to their staffing, and yes, they may impose contractual changes…and yes they may create teaching environments in which teachers are continually surveilled and evaluated. But let us remember that these are not voluntary acts of managerialist despotism… the principal's sole responsibility is the survival of their college and the education of their students, if that is threatened it is incumbent upon them to take whatever action necessary' (Page 2017: 35-36)

The provocation made by Page (2017) here brings notions of trust and distrust into sharp focus. He makes explicit how uncertainty can shape leadership behaviour; particularly when their institution faces significant financial insecurity. In doing so, he exposes how an institution's response to uncertainty influences perceptions of trust on both sides. Relationships based on trust tend to lead to harmonised workplaces which promote agency and cooperation. Indeed, management research has shown that trust is a crucial mediating factor in the smooth running of an organisation; from industrial relations to perceptions of job security and employee wellbeing (Lewicki, Elgoibar, and Euwema 2016; Wang, Mather, and Seifert 2018). However, given the increasing precariousness of the environment in which the Further Education (FE) sector operates, it is worth considering whether the benefits associated with building and maintaining trust in this context are problematic. For example, agency can lead to risk-taking that could fail to meet the expectations of external auditors (ie, Ofsted). Similarly, policies predicated upon high trust (such as full-time permanent employment) are inefficient compared with casual labour, which allows institutions the flexibility to cope with the ebb and flow of an uncertain funding and policy environment. Perhaps it is important to consider whether, in fact, *distrust* is fundamental to institutional survival?

In this paper, I will draw upon three theoretical concepts provided by the trust research literature to illustrate how concepts of trust and distrust can be understood from both a policy and organisational perspective. I will explore how the global trend towards economic advancement necessitates measures to position education and 'skills' as the solution to these problems; thus, actively shaping behaviour towards these objectives. In the act of problematizing our commonly perceived understanding of trust in this context, I will demonstrate how on a policy level, forms of low trust and distrust can be utilised to exert control over institutional and individual practice, but also how distrust can be reciprocated to *resist control* by those individuals who are subject to such power. In doing so, I will consider whether English Further Education policy is designed to create distrust, and if so, to what effect. It is important to note that instead of making claims of absolute truth, I intend that this paper will provoke debate. The purpose of this article is to stimulate thinking around the role of trust and distrust in educational

[1] A principal is often also referred to as the Chief Executive Officer (CEO)

leadership and governance, particularly in the context of economic austerity, and global competitiveness. If the sole job of a principal is indeed to ensure the survival of their college, then this exercise frames the lack of choice inherent within this context to explore how distrust effectively limits the capacity for choice; distrust grows where agency is limited.

Page's (2017) chapter, *In Defence of the Principal* (see Daley, Orr, and Petrie 2017) is a provocative piece which is narrated from the perspective of a college principal, justifying the (often distrusting) behaviour that is perceived by staff from leadership. Whilst the chapter presents in many ways as a blunt instrument with which to point out the strategic and managerial failures of FE leadership, it at the same time creates a legitimate line of intellectual inquiry which this paper intends to explore. In doing so, it will posit that distrust fuels the increased and ongoing instability across the FE sector; created by a neoliberal policy environment which favours competition rather than cooperation. This competitive environment, coupled with political and financial uncertainty, steers the practice of college governance towards managing the huge risks, most of which are financial, associated with failing to ‘get it right’. Although this threat is very real, in part due to the ever-increasing scrutiny and ‘intervention’ by the FE Commissioner (Hill, James, and Forrest 2016; J Burke 2018), the changing shape of governance in recent years has nevertheless been to the perceived detriment of those who are working at the ‘chalk-face’ (Hill 2000; Gleeson, Abbott, and Hill 2011); a shift that has been described as a move from trust to ‘mistrust’ by Thompson and Wolstencroft (2018). They argue that FE leaders have little say in the direction of their organisations due to heavy-handed political influence over vocational education strategy.

The subject of this paper is timely, given the insolvency regime set to come into force in 2019; further increasing the burden of risk which will be imposed upon college corporation governing bodies. Although to date the number interventions by the FE Commissioner for financial concerns have been limited, the Department for Education have expressed their belief that this is set to increase three-fold in the wake of the insolvency regime (DfE 2018). Its forthcoming implementation has been attributed to the recent wave of resignations by prominent college leaders in anticipation of blame for mismanagement of funding (Burke 2018). Further, the explicit link between Ofsted grading and financial health reinforces the responsibilitisation of leadership in conforming to central objectives, and limits opportunities for delegation of authority to staff within Colleges.

Instability and forced competition for the market-share of students has proved corrosive to building trust relationships amongst staff within Further Education Colleges (FECs). For example, research by Coffield et al. (2007) focuses on the lack of participation in the creation of policy design, whilst O’Leary’s (2015) research on graded teaching observation illustrates how instrumentalised pedagogy is to the detriment of teacher creativity and autonomy. Further, Boocock’s (2015; 2017) work on FE governance highlights the prevalence of leadership models which promote agent self-interest, and

Avis' (2003) study on professional trust relations reflects how this combination of elements reinforces the performative nature of the institutional environment; leading to the construction of trust relationships which are conditional and based on the achievement of strategic objectives. This constitutes a weak and conditional form of trust which is intended to incentivise self-interested and individualist behaviour, known as transactional trust (Uslaner 2002).

One of the issues that Andrew Boocock (2017) highlights is the use of Principal-Agent modes of governance in FE. The so-called P-A model assumes that individual 'agents' (ie, managers and lecturers) are self-interested and require incentives to meet governmental targets and thus conform to demands made of the 'principal'. This model encourages staff within FECs to engage in gaming behaviours to secure funding. Not only does this undermine intrinsic motivations, but privileges conformity at the expense of staff agency and local decision-making. Guido Möllering (2006) further criticises the P-A model as it assumes trust to be a one-directional process, and does not account sufficiently for how the 'agent' (or trustee) is likely to respond, or indeed, how likely they are to reciprocate trust based on the incentives provided.

> 'An effective policy of localism will require a significant shift away from the current low-trust principal-agent solutions manifest in funding and monitoring systems, driven by marketization, managerialism, 'targets and terror' (Boocock 2017: 308)

Intrumentalisation of self-assessment and rigidity of Ofsted grading criteria indicates the level of conformity required to achieve security, which Boocock (2013) argues is to the expense of meaningful critical reflection in pursuit of favourable Ofsted grades.

Problemetizing Notions of Trust and Distrust

There is a consensus amongst trust researchers that the capacity to trust hangs upon a few key concepts including: *competence, benevolence, integrity and reciprocity* (Skinner, Dietz, and Weibel 2014; Lyon, Möllering, and Saunders 2016). The decision to accept such vulnerability is based on an assessment of whether the other potential 'trustee' has the ability to be trusted (competence), whether they have the 'trustor's' best interests at heart (benevolence) and whether they are honest about their intentions (integrity) (see Lewicki and Brinsfield 2016). These are qualities which are shaped strongly by perception, and whether the act of trusting another will be reciprocated (Sztompka 2008). The act of trusting therefore constitutes a 'leap of faith' on the part of the 'trustor' that the 'trustee' will not betray them (Möllering 2006). Therefore, conflicts in vision and purpose could lead individuals to question the best interests of other parties.

In the FE sector, the question of vision and purpose is a fraught debate. Such debate sits within an ideological landscape encompassing a broad range of stakeholders internally (students, lecturers, leadership teams) and externally (employers, funding bodies, trade unions, membership organisations,

168 local and national government). Each party is motivated by different intrinsic and extrinsic factors,
169 which are often at odds with the wants and needs of the other players in the environment. This has
170 created fertile ground for fractious, low-trust relationships to emerge between those that create policy,
171 those that implement policy, and those that are the subject to such policy.

172 The business principles of efficiency and educational principles of inclusion and social justice play
173 out in an environment of conflicting interests; leading to a cycle of binary thinking in which those
174 who implement policy (leadership) and those subject to policy (staff) have often found themselves
175 either side of the ideological divide. This in effect precludes the possibility of either party taking the
176 'leap of faith' required to trust. The next section of this paper will use the theoretical literature on trust
177 to explore how the evolution of policy has contributed to the creation of a low trust environment
178 within FE organisations.

179 ***The Evolution of Distrust in FE Policy***

180 Since 1992, the English Further Education system has been subject to sustained cuts in government
181 funding (IFS 2018), as well as systematic deregulation; forcing Further Education Colleges (FECs) to
182 operate within a 'quasi-market' competing with other FECs for funded student places, and thus,
183 financial stability. The previous Liberal-Democrat-Conservative Coalition Government (2010-2015)
184 and the current Conservative Government's austerity strategies have been particularly aggressive, and
185 there have been no signs of the Government slowing down its approach to this already impoverished
186 sector since. As such, cuts to courses, departments and redundancy have become an everyday feature
187 of working within the Further Education environment (O'Leary and Rami 2017).

188 Successive governments have become increasingly instrumentalist in their approach to FE policy.
189 Provision which had largely been provided locally by Local Education Authorities (LEAs) and
190 voluntary groups became increasingly rationalised and audited. The *1992 Further and Higher*
191 *Education Act* was the tipping point in the evolution of instrumentalism, audit and free market
192 competition. The removal of the sector from LEA control forced Further Education Colleges (FECs)
193 to compete with other colleges for funding in a competitive 'quasi-market', which was centrally
194 administered through the newly-established Further Education Funding Council (FEFC)[2]. The council
195 imposed strict conditions for funding (Bailey and Unwin 2014) and its function served to extend
196 accountability into central government (Lucas and Crowther 2016). The increased autonomy afforded
197 to institutions allowed the government to disassociate from the practices of individual organisations.
198 Although it has been argued by Lucas and Crowther (2016: 587) that the need for change in the FE
199 sector was justified, it was the 'dominant political belief by government at the time in a competitive

[2] Since 1992, further education funding bodies have gone under several iterations, which is currently the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA)

market that formed the basis of incorporation'. It is therefore the long-term impact of this ideological position, rather than the need for change itself, which has rippled through the sector since.

The drive towards competition was guided by the neoliberal principle that the freedom afforded by de-regulation would permit opportunities to test, try and fail on the assumption that high quality service would be guided by the free market. Given the perceived lack of importance of the further education and skills sector, FE was ripe for this kind of experimentation (Keep 2006). Providers were forced to compete with neighbouring institutions, which brought with it an aggressive form of individualism (Finlay and Finnie 2002; Ball 2005). The upshot of the forced competition imposed by the Act led to budgetary deficits within FECs, which diverted attention away from pedagogical matters to excessive administration (Keep 2006). Job losses, the casualization of employment, and reductions in conditions of service and pay led to substantial industrial unrest (Williams 2003), which has seen a recent resurgence as the impact of austerity bites harder than ever in colleges across England (O'Leary and Rami 2017).

In the thirty years since Incorporation, the sector has faced some of the most dramatic and rapid policy change globally (Keep 2015), serving to keep the FECs along with their many and various stakeholders in a constant state of flux. This chaotic environment has resulted in a decline in collective identity and shared values base which would allow those who work in FE to have a common understanding of its role and purpose in society (Lucas and Crowther 2016; Duckworth and Smith 2018). The 'local knowledge' of educators became de-valued by managers due to a centralised preoccupation with meeting targets (Smith and O'Leary 2013); exposing the conflicting interests between policymakers, the implementers of policy and the subject of policy. The *All Change* report produced by the Institute for Government (2017) attributed policy churn to a conflict in perceived purpose of FE and the high levels of discretion ministers have in making changes to the system.

The fundamental difference in value-orientation amongst the actors at play continue to increase the distance between those who lead and govern FE institutions, and those who learn and work within them (Boocock 2011). These insecure work environments heightened anxieties and insecurities amongst staff members and reduced professional autonomy and trust in the employer-employee relationship (Williams 2003).

Presently, the strain upon these professional relationships is tightening as disputes over pay get louder (Burke 2018), and ever-more lecturers consider leaving the profession (Jones 2015). A recent workforce survey by the Association of Colleges reported an overall 17.8% sector staff turnover rate for the year 2016/17. Whilst 42% of management staff and 48% of teaching staff did not report a reason for resignation, staff at 80% of Colleges reported stress and mental ill health as a main reason for sickness absence. Further, 61% of Colleges reported compulsory redundancies (AoC 2017). The report suggests makes explicit the fragile environments in which staff in FE are working, contributing

to the strain created by high stakes policy.

A study of note by Wang, Mather, and Seifert (2018) into job insecurity in the UK (in particular post-2008 financial crisis) found that collective trust in management was a key mediating factor in softening feelings of job insecurity and anxiety during times of uncertainty. In particular, the study posited that the notion of 'hidden job insecurity' (characterised by the loss of 'valued job features' such as pay or responsibility) played an important role in feelings of commitment towards an organisation. Within the FE context, it is possible to argue that professionalism and autonomy are abstract 'valued job features' which have been lost (Thompson and Wolstencroft 2018), and are currently mitigating against institutional commitment and loyalty in the retention of educators in FE, leaving the 'job survivors' to do more with fewer resources (ibid).

Social Traps and Institutional Trust

The ongoing conflict between unions and policy-makers exposes the breakdown of trust between employees, institutions and government. Bo Rothstein's (2005; 2013) notion of the 'Social Trap', illustrated in *Figure 1*, helps us to understand how the policy churn and its subsequent implementation in FECs can be understood. A 'social trap' is a process whereby distrust is perpetuated on the basis that all other actors also believe that others will choose to distrust. According to Rothstein (2013:1021) 'people have no choice but to make judgements based on the imperfect information that is available to them'. This 'imperfect' information informs perceptions, and thus can influence the behaviour of individuals towards each other. Therefore, perception becomes a force which perpetuates a 'trap' of weak trust.

[Insert Figure 1 here: The Social Trap: Policy, Practice and Distrust in FE (adapted from Rothstein 2005)]

Figure 1, therefore, allows us to understand how the perpetual reinforcement of high risk and low trust relates to Ewart Keep's (2006: 52) assertion that constant government intervention in the FE context has led to policy stagnation, in which the power of the state is reproduced and reinforced by political short-termism.

> 'a cycle of state intervention [forces central government] to intervene further in order to shore up earlier interventions, targets and policy goals; and this process in turn is driving a continuous reproduction and strengthening of state power within the Education and Training system' (Keep, 2006: 52)

Keep (2006) further argues that the state secures its control over the market by using various agencies as enforcers, of which Ofsted, the FE Commissioner and the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) are currently key players. Therefore, the centrally derived need to control institutions makes it common sense for College leaders to shape the behaviour of employees towards governmental

objectives. The best way to regulate behaviour of Colleges is to actively, and increasingly, distrust College leadership through the use of strategic policy intervention. In his critique of Ofsted, Coffield (2017) demonstrated that in some cases, school leaders welcomed regular visits from the inspectorate as they believed it supported them to push staff into altering their practices. Through the concept of the 'social trap', we can understand the need to 'push' in such a way arises when the stakes are high. Authoritarian tactics such as this then become necessary; contributing to high levels of distrust over time. Once distrust has been established, it can be difficult to escape the trap that is created by it (Rothstein 2005).

Conceived in this way, the 'social trap' of distrust in policy design described in *Figure 1* becomes a cyclical process which is perpetually reinforced in spite of itself. While the policy surge goes on, the critiques of it tend not to change. Instead, the constant churn of policy keeps the conditions ripe for uncertainty, while performative practice within institutions becomes embedded. When risk is introduced at every stage in the process, behaviour becomes easier to manipulate (Avis 2003).

Lazzarato (2009) contends that what lies at the heart of neoliberalism is not capital, but competition. Thus, for neoliberalism to survive, the conditions for competition need to be created, leaving individual actors and institutions vulnerable to 'losing'. In creating levers which manipulate behaviour, the assumption is that individuals will act to protect themselves against uncertainty (Boocock 2015). In this sense, neoliberalism not only dictates what educationalists do, it *becomes* what educationalists do. Ball and Olmedo (2013: 85) state that "[neoliberalism] speaks and acts through our language, our purposes, decisions and social relations". As such staff are at risk of becoming *subject*, rather than subjective.

The stream of policy which has been implemented since Incorporation has been predicated upon a low trust a relationship with FECs, in which trust is conditional upon FECs meeting increasingly narrow targets. FECs are now solely responsible for success or failure. As such, falling success rates are the responsibility of individual teachers, just as failure to succeed is the responsibility of the student (Finlay et al 2007). Boocock (2015: 728) argues that 'funding and targets are two of the most powerful levers' used in government policy to meet retention and achievement targets on an institutional level, whilst keeping day to day governance at a distance. Top-down policy reforms assume certain levels of 'self-interest' (Boocock 2017) which allows the government to assert control under conditions of apparent 'freedom' (Steer et al. 2007). Coffield (2007) has argued that the use of such 'steering mechanisms' makes the need to control education professionals explicit.

The policy strategies taken on by institutions meant that students from disadvantaged backgrounds were less valued under this new economic framework of education (Boocock 2015), demonstrating decreased trust in students as well as staff. As Smith (2007: 43) has reflected in his work on the impact of the 'quasi-market' environment, 'the "preferred student" carries no baggage, needs no extra

support… is *predictable* in being able to achieve accreditation' (emphasis added). This need to predict outcomes for students demonstrates why a low-trust environment becomes essential to institutional survival in a competitive market.

The externalisation of quality assurance, and what constitutes quality also allows the state to impose punitive penalties upon those providers who do not meet the appropriate levels of 'rigour' and 'standards'. Illsley and Waller (2017) contend that the standards agenda curbed much of the discussion regarding curriculum development and practice, which in effect led to an increasing focus on 'college' needs rather than 'student' needs. In doing so, it set the template for establishing control on an institutional level. In essence, autonomy is afforded upon very specific terms. Therefore, the need for an institution to survive takes primacy over the needs of students.

This problem was exposed by the *Wolf Revie*w (Wolf 2011), a report which accused colleges of cynically chasing funding from an ever-shrinking pot to provide 16-19 year-olds with 'inferior' low-level qualifications of little value; a practice which Allan (2017) argues has increased since the raising of the participation age in post-compulsory education. Smith (2007) refers to this kind of practice as the 'ducking and diving' nature of colleges, who to ensure institutional survival become preoccupied with self-interest. Therefore, through the lens of distrust, the recommendations of this report can be understood as an attempt to mitigate against a set of practices which were the result of assumed agent self-interest in (distrusting) institutional policy-making. The latest overhaul of FE provision has left the sector reeling with an ever-present sense of uncertainty, as the government turns its attention to reforming apprenticeship provision and prepares to roll out its flagship 'T-Levels' programme.

Since 2015, the Conservative Government's continuation of the austerity project has accelerated the skills agenda, coupled with crippling budget cuts. The report published by the Institute for Fiscal Studies captured a 40% reduction in funding over the last decade (IFS 2018). Colleges have struggled to stay afloat, often forced to merge with other providers in line with the Area Review process. The Area Reviews proposed a further 'rationalisation' of curriculum offer to focus on local and national industry needs whilst also maintaining 'tight fiscal discipline' in doing so (DBIS 2015). Further, the increased presence of the FE Commissioner and the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) have forced Governing Boards in FE to become preoccupied by the precarity of their financial position to avoid the risk of college closure due to financial ill-health.

The high risk policy environment, combined with a continuing austerity project (Ryan 2018), diminishes the capacity for FE organisations to enhance cooperation, creativity and autonomy amongst staff; factors which are key to building trust (Uslaner 2002; Rothstein 2013; Rothstein and Uslaner 2005). This has led Rothstein (2013) to assert that this is why the 'fish rots from the head down' in institutional hierarchies.

> 'Agents in a group that have lost trust in one another cannot easily mimic or fabricate the

339 level of trust needed to ensure collaboration, even if they all know that they would be better
340 off if they could' (Rothstein 2013:1012)

341 **New Public Management: self-interest, survival and distrust in the organisational context**

342 The discussion so far has demonstrated that the move towards free-market practice in the public sector
343 has been accompanied by the rhetoric of individualism; incentivising self-interest through the creation
344 of a high risk, high stakes environment. In order to manage this level of uncertainty, a new style of
345 management has emerged. Commonly referred to in the literature as New Public Management (NPM),
346 this style of management can be considered the backbone of a modern neoliberal state. According to
347 Clarke and Newman (1997), 'new managerialism' made efficiency an imperative in public sector
348 management: this would allow for the creation of a more efficient government at a reduced cost
349 within a high stakes environment (Keep 2015; Vallentin and Thygesen 2017). Further, by relaxing
350 regulation and reducing the power of the unions, NPM practices also supported managers to establish
351 the 'right to manage'. This so-called 'right to manage' is made legitimate by tools of audit and
352 performance management.

353 In practice, the NPM approach has changed the nature of leadership in education and other public
354 sector organisations. Leadership roles which were traditionally the occupation of experienced
355 educationalists and pedagogues, have now become occupied by experienced business managers:
356 preferring the title of 'Chief Executive' rather than 'Principal'. As such, the guiding principle of
357 'fairness' which might have traditionally been attributed to the spirit of public service, have instead
358 been gradually replaced by principles of 'efficiency' (Vallentin and Thygesin 2017). Smith and
359 O'Leary (2013) have described how leadership under NPM represents a quest to seek 'quantitative
360 wholeness', whereby the only data which is considered meaningful is translated through figures. They
361 assert that 'managerialist positivism… normalises the representation of complex sociological and
362 qualitative phenomena in reductive and numerical forms' (Smith and O'Leary 2013: 246). Not only
363 does this approach reinforce hierarchical norms within institutions, but also valorises numerical data
364 to the exclusion of complex ecologies of practice which form the basis of meaningful educational
365 relationships.

366 The distance that has been created between 'those at the top' and 'those on the ground' is stark, and
367 O'Leary (2016: 10) contends that the work of principals has become so far removed from 'the
368 realities of what it means to be a practitioner that it is debatable whether they have the skills or
369 knowledge base to support improvements in teaching and learning'. This lack of faith in leadership
370 was demonstrated by Hill (2000) when his research into lecturer perceptions of leadership revealed
371 that less than 50% of teachers surveyed felt that they were trusted by their Governors or their College
372 Management Team. Further, over 50% of the respondents also reported that the (then) FEFC and the
373 Department for Education at the time were 'poor' at representing their professional interests.

374 ***The distinction between Trust and Distrust in the organisational context***

375 The establishment of a centralised, hierarchical system of management has been to the detriment of a
376 more democratic system which would have been more conducive to building trust relationships
377 (Boocock 2015). For example, a research study conducted by Vallentin and Thygesin (2017: 151)
378 attributes NPM to the dissolution of trust in Danish public services, stating that 'NPM reforms have
379 been blind to the value of cooperation across public agencies… undermining trust'. The assumption
380 that those at the centre know best, with limited opportunity for agents to contribute to decision-
381 making or provide feedback is one of the central pillars of the system that has been created (Keep
382 2015). The sentiment that 'followers' need only follow has been further echoed by Coffield (2017) in
383 his work evaluating the evolution of Ofsted.

384 In the organisational context, the work of Roy Lewicki and colleagues (Lewicki, Elgoibar, and
385 Euwema 2016; Lewicki, McAllister, and Bies 1998) has illustrated that trust and distrust could be
386 construed as two distinct concepts which can coexist within the same relationship. According to
387 Lewicki, McAllister, and Bies (1998), trust is based on the confident *positive* expectations of another
388 person's conduct, while distrust is defined as confident *negative* expectations of another's conduct.
389 Therefore, disposition towards both trust and distrust can influence the way an individual engages
390 within an organisation. This complicates our understanding of low/weak trust and distrust. Low or
391 weak trust is based on weak ties or lack of collaboration, yet can still be considered a form of trust.
392 Distrust, however, constitutes an assumption of malfeasance on the part of the potential trustee;
393 leading to assumptions of negative outcomes and harmful motives from the 'trustor's' perspective.
394 Therefore, in the case of distrust, risk management becomes an essential feature of practice within
395 institutions. Management of potential risks allows college leaders to incentivise employees to
396 conform, thus allowing them to trust them to perform despite the presence of distrust.

397 According to Lewicki, McAllister and Bies (1998), the combination of 'low trust' and 'high distrust'
398 in relationships leads to relations which are verified through the monitoring of 'vulnerabilities' and
399 the reinforcement of 'bounded relationships'. Therefore, the use of performance management and
400 graded observations in FE could be construed as 'low trust-high distrust' tactics which result from a
401 preoccupation with the risk and uncertainty created by the policy environment. This notion is reflected
402 in the work of Thompson and Wolstencroft (2018) where they found that middle managers felt that
403 they had been deceived as leadership fell through on their promises to afford them autonomy; instead
404 enforcing the pursuit of corporate objectives.

405 This conceptualisation of the role of trust and distrust in organisational relationships makes explicit
406 how the use of distrust in policy design can create the trust necessary to meet centrally defined
407 standards. This illustrates the logic that would underpin the deliberate use of high distrust policies
408 (observation, inspection, audit and performance management), which would allow those that create

409 policy to control, as far as possible, the conditions within which individuals can work. The high risk
410 and uncertainty that is created by neoliberal competitiveness ensures that the work of policy-makers is
411 mediated successfully by those leadership teams; who in this context exist to implement the policy
412 that has been created. In effect, distrust reinforces the manager's right to manage.

413 **Trust and Moral Space: On the breaking of bonds**

414 According to Sztompka (2017: 4-7), trust is the cornerstone of what he refers to as the 'moral space'
415 of social life. This space is characterised by six moral bonds, namely; *'trust, loyalty, reciprocity,*
416 *solidarity, respect and justice* … [of which] trust has a special rank among them. It is most
417 fundamental in the sense that all other bonds either presume or imply some measure of trust' (ibid: 4).
418 The relentless drive towards productivity and competition reflected in governmental priorities (those
419 that create policy), and their use in practice (those that implement policy) constitutes a break of these
420 moral bonds which would connect them to those who work in FE (the subject of policy). The act of
421 severing these bonds creates an environment in which reparation becomes difficult. If we can
422 understand the decision to trust as requiring the *trustor* to be vulnerable, then it is possible to
423 understand why trust is so much more difficult to repair than it is to lose, as it is the willingness to be
424 vulnerable that makes trust such an elusive concept (Sztompka 2008; Rothstein 2005; Lewicki et al
425 2016).

426 Neoliberal policy and NPM therefore represent the antithesis of the bonds of solidarity, respect and
427 reciprocity which according to Sztompka (2017) are so crucial in the creation of trusting relationships.
428 In such an unstable and hostile policy environment (Lucas and Crowther 2016), where the stakes are
429 high, all bets are off. Instead, it has been argued that in FE, risk is 'passed down the social structure so
430 that the costs are often carried by those who are placed at the base of organisational hierarchies' (Avis
431 2003: 329). This risk is organisational, as well as individual due to the 'high stakes' environment in
432 which teaching currently takes place (O'Leary 2015).

433 In a context where institutional trust is low, and the risks are high, it makes more sense to distrust than
434 to trust. In this way, conditional outputs are filtered through the structure from the top of the
435 hierarchy, starting with Government policy. Simply put, controlling those subject to policy is easier
436 than trusting them. Control 'reduces complexity by regulating the number of possible outcomes'
437 (Vallentin and Thygesin (2017: 154). This is compatible with a neoliberal mind-set, as Lazzarato
438 (2009: 120) argues that while the entrepreneur is free, 'the freedom of the worker and consumer… are
439 made subordinate'.

440 ***Control and resistance in the construction of Distrust***

441 So far, this article has conceptualised how neoliberalism could influence the design of policy and the
442 creation of distrust. Such distrust fundamentally shapes relationships between various actors in the FE

443 sector. This has led to a leadership approach which has permeated the sector, characterised primarily
444 by the 'deliberate control of professionals, the introduction of business models… and the development
445 of a managerial caste with its own value system' (Gleeson and Shain 1999, cited in Stoten 2014: 512).
446 The following section will attempt to explain how a high-distrust environment has legitimised and
447 perpetuated the need to control individuals, but also how distrust can allow individuals to express
448 their refusal of the status quo. The established norm of creating policy without consultation with any
449 stakeholders serves to isolate those who are supposed to implement and carry out the policy (Keep
450 2006, 2015). In such circumstances, new networks have emerged in response to, and often in
451 ideological opposition to, those that create policy (Stoten 2014; Lewicki et al 2016). Therefore, it is
452 necessary to conceptualise trust and distrust as a reciprocal process; in this case through the
453 imposition of, and resistance to power.

454 ***The distrust dilemma in the mitigation of risk***

455 The pressure on school and college leaders to exercise control over their staff has been eloquently
456 demonstrated in Coffield's (2017) work on the role and impact of Ofsted upon teaching practice on
457 the English education system. Buoyed by the oft-quoted assertion from the inspectorate that '*the* most
458 important factor in improving standards is leadership (Coffield 2017: 11), leaders use the
459 responsibility they are charged with the deliver 'standards' to shape teaching practice. We can
460 perceive the act of distrusting not only increases control, but in the worst cases uses fear to support it
461 (ibid). Distrust effectively permits the legitimate pursuit of excessive control of those further down the
462 power structure, an approach which was found to be prominent in Stoten's (2014) research into
463 leadership style in FE.

464 Further, the logic of individualism and competition inherent within a neoliberal environment allows
465 those in positions of power to account for problems in the education system to an individual, or set of
466 individuals. The workings of this logic can be seen in practice through the activity of the FE
467 Commissioner, 'intervening' in colleges who have failed to meet the required standard. This logic
468 dictates that those who succeed within the neoliberal environment are 'virtuous' (De Lissovoy 2018),
469 whilst those who fail or object are without virtue.

470 In such an environment, leadership within individual FE institutions are presented with a dilemma. As
471 Boocock (2011: 417) notes, for example:

472 > 'an overemphasis on self-governance and open systems would allow productive potential…
473 > but might also lead to free-riding and to a lack of regard for the goals of government.
474 > Conversely an over focus on the hierarchy… might direct self-interested college agents to the
475 > goals of governance at the expense of innovation…'

476 This conundrum provides us with a link back to Page's (2017) assertion at the start of this paper that
477 the external environment forces the hand of college governors and leadership teams when making
478 decisions. While the effect of distrust is to curb creativity, autonomy and agency (Boocock 2011;
479 O'Leary and Wood 2017; Thompson and Wolstencroft 2018), trusting represents much higher
480 perceived risks which threaten intervention and observation by various arms of government.
481 Conversely, policies of distrust are risk-averse, safe, and do not tolerate deviance (Hill 2000; Coffield
482 2017; Boocock 2011). A study by Thompson and Wolstencroft (2018) found that various 'control
483 mechanisms' were utilised such as micro management, interference, constant judgement,
484 unreasonable demands and excessive monitoring by senior leaders in order to establish conformity.
485 As such, it was control that allowed leaders to better predict the likely positive outcome in an
486 environment which faces the constant threat of audit. In the act of withdrawing trust, or threatening to
487 withdraw trust, the 'threat of removal is used as a sanction and a control mechanism' (Skinner, Dietz,
488 and Weibel 2014: 216).

489 Control is required when risk is high, reflecting Page's (2017b: 2-3) understanding that 'the
490 proliferation of teacher surveillance, from learning walks to parental networks is driven by a
491 preoccupation with risk… [the need to] know the future as if it has already passed'. O'Leary and
492 Wood (2017) have further observed that even though OFSTED no longer grade individual teachers
493 (Ofsted 2018), college leadership teams in many cases continue to grade individuals due to the
494 'deeply engrained practice' of observation. This demonstrates how difficult rebuilding trust can be,
495 once it has been lost. As a result, policies of distrust successfully control behaviour through fear of
496 consequences (Gleeson, Davies, and Wheeler 2005).

497 The instruments used by leadership teams such as audit, observation and performance management
498 work to undermine the values of individual actors in the system by encouraging them to work towards
499 extrinsic rather than intrinsic goals (Boocock 2017). Boocock (2017: 301) has further argued that the
500 apparatus of distrust also shapes the behaviour of leadership teams, as the pressure to 'conform to
501 central policy diktats' has been at the expense of 'senior manager agency and local decision making'.
502 He concluded that this has effectively shut down the availability of critical spaces for effective
503 reflection on quality (Boocock 2011) and open governance (Boocock 2017). The insecurity inherent
504 in the competitive environment therefore induces anxiety into both institutions and individuals as they
505 are made 'responsible for the conditions they confront and for their ultimate destinies in this context'
506 (De Lissovoy 2018: 23). Anxiety, as expressed by De Lissovoy (2018) names the tension inherent in
507 the system and the potential crises of institutions within a free-market environment, which exists to
508 create winners and losers.

509 ***Reciprocal Distrust as a form of ideological resistance***

510 The palpable lack of trust has led some educationalists to seek solace in those who share the same

511 values as they do. The perceived 'logic' of incorporation as a means of control has neglected the
512 values which many teaching staff hold dear (Lucas and Crowther 2016). The response has been in
513 some cases to reciprocate the distrust they experience based on a lack of mutually shared values.
514 Smith (2007) has argued that commonly shared goals and values associated with their practice such as
515 social justice and community empowerment (often centred around localised knowledge) is
516 inconsistent with the values of NPM. Therefore, the desire to form cross-institutional networks such
517 as 'Tutor Voices' (a network of further education college lecturers who founded a forum in which
518 best practice could be debated and shared) in resistance to 'untrustworthy' leadership and government
519 functions as a symbolic refusal to trust the system in which they find themselves. In doing so they
520 can, to some extent, reclaim their identity and exercise their agency to believe and act differently to
521 the status quo (Petrie 2015). This reflects what (Ball 2016: 1139) might refer to as the 'politics of
522 refusal' in which 'speaking plainly when there is a difference in power between the speaker and the
523 listener [and] speaking frankly even when it flies in the face of the prevailing discourse' becomes
524 paramount in the assertion of an identity (individual or collective) which reflects an outright
525 opposition to the accepted practices of NPM in public education.

526 Counter-narratives of resistance and resilience in the face of significant financial and political
527 challenges are abundant in the literature (see Daley, Orr, and Petrie 2015 for examples of subversion
528 in FE). Indeed, Coffield et al (2007: 728) remind us that 'policy makers are not writing upon a blank
529 slate, but on a page already made up of 'ecologies of practice'…and as such the hereditary values of
530 the adult education movement remain evident in pockets of the sector (Field 2006). Mycroft (2016:
531 419) invites us to consider that 'as neoliberalism tightens its hold, possibly its death grip… as
532 educators we can seize this [opportunity to resist through practice] or let it happen to us'. The
533 somewhat binary nature of Mycroft's proposal is demonstrative of a withdrawn faith from the 'led'
534 towards leadership. This practice of refusal makes explicit the 'unwelcome trust' given to them by
535 those in power. According to Skinner et al (2014: 214), 'unwelcome trust' is 'the reluctance to be
536 trusted' for a variety of reasons including when 'the pressures of obligation may be intolerable…
537 counter to their interests… or personal ethics'. In this way, active distrust towards those in power
538 serves as a form of ideological resistance; making explicit who, and who is not, within the realm of
539 their 'moral space', to borrow from Sztompka (2017).

540 This resistance, or reciprocal distrust, represents the fractured nature of institutional relations. It
541 functions as 'a rejection of comparison and improvement, and indeed of excellence' (Ball 2016:
542 1141). This kind of resistance represents what Lewicki et al (1998: 9) would refer to as a 'low trust-
543 high distrust' disposition towards authority. This involves relationships where negative outcomes are
544 'expected and feared', harmful motives are assumed and as such pre-emptive actions are required.
545 This disposition towards leadership is perpetuated by the perception that those who are not *part of* the
546 resistance are complicit in the oppression. This state of affairs between those that create policy, those

that implement policy and those that are subject to policy diminishes opportunities for trust repair; as each party continues to use strategies based upon distrust to protect their interests. As Page (2015: 157) has reflected in previous work: ‘in the very act of subversiveness we concede the loss of what lies at the heart of being professional: autonomy, authority and trust’.

The impact of reciprocal distrust between the key actors at play has resulted, to a greater or lesser extent, in an ideological stalemate. Lucas and Crowther (2016) have argued that neoliberal marketeering in FE has served to distract everyone in the field, resulting in what they refer to as ‘unorganised social spaces’ where discussion of core values in the FE sector relating professionalism and curriculum have been neglected.

Conclusion: Trust violated

This paper sought to conceptualise the role that trust and distrust could play in the design and implementation of policy in the Further Education sector. In doing so, I have illustrated how Rothstein’s (2005) social trap phenomena can perpetuate policy churn, which manipulates institutions to conform to changing priorities based on a skills agenda; fuelled by national and global competition. Lewicki et al’s (1998) seminal work on the distinction between trust and distrust further aides us to understand how New Public Management practices necessitate a disposition of institutional distrust to verify employee compliance. Stzompka’s (2008) concept of ‘moral space’ allows us to understand how a lack of faith from leadership can lead to violations of trust which diminishes opportunities for organisational trust repair. Whilst this paper did not intend to make categorical statements around the deliberate use of distrust in this process, these theoretical concepts can support us to develop a deeper understanding of the utility of institutional and organisational distrust in manipulating behaviour within a homogenous policy environment; and how resistance to policy hegemony can result in withdrawn faith from leadership. In effect, this paper sought to answer the question ‘*what if* distrust was intentional? from a theoretical perspective. By exploring this question conceptually, this paper can directly address the violation of trust associated with the increased surveillance of teachers; which has reduced the scope for individual autonomy and creativity.

The acceleration of policy initiatives since 1992 demonstrates a lack of trust in institutions to achieve success in the long term. Increased regulation it has, contrary to the rhetoric, reduced financial and curricula autonomy. By conceptualising the role that distrust might play in this process, this paper posits that over time a ‘social trap’ of reciprocal high distrust and conflict has been created; driven by the struggle to establish a sense of control on the part of the institution, or maintain a sense of autonomy on the part of the individual.

This social trap increases individualism and reduces cooperation based on the general perception that others will also be uncooperative. The ‘stickiness’ of the problem (Uslaner 2002) is evident in the design and implementation of policy, which is subject to a perpetual sense of uncertainty and

instability. Hence, why the problem is such a 'sticky' one, as neither party has faith that they will work towards the common good, or the best interests of all concerned. Avis (2003) believes that trust is central to creative endeavour, yet it is absent from the organisational hierarchies that are typical of many further education institutions. He argues that risk-taking must take place in high-trust environments as "working conditions marked by hierarchical and segmented relations will fail to…lend themselves to creative endeavour" (Avis 2003: 320)

I have demonstrated in this paper that control-for-predictability is a form of policy-making with deep (intended or unintended) consequences. Within the context of FE, the constant state of flux in the policy environment prevents trust from flourishing. If we can understand that trust has been violated by acts of distrust caused by the 'indominatable power' of the external environment (Page 2017), we can also understand why these acts may be perceived as necessary by leaders within Further Education Colleges. Therefore, distrust constitutes useful mechanism to manipulate behaviour and ensure policy conformity.

However, Sztompka (2017: 8) contends that if '*trust* engenders security, predictability, readiness to initiate interactions and take risks, then *distrust* produces suspiciousness and anxiety which are paralysing for actions and interactions'. Therefore, although the perceived benefits of distrust may result in institutional conformity, the repeated violations of trust described in this paper have served to undermine the moral bonds of respect, solidarity and justice to the extent that an ideological stalemate has been created between those that create policy (government), those that implement policy (FECs), and those that are subject to policy (staff and students). This can be understood as maintained, even strengthened, through Rothstein's (2005) social trap phenomena. These violations of trust threaten an individual's sense of 'existential safety' (Sztompka 2017) and have therefore served to make FECs unsafe spaces to work, necessitating a meaningful resistance in which those involved may feel their 'moral space' will be respected, where their institutions fail to do so.

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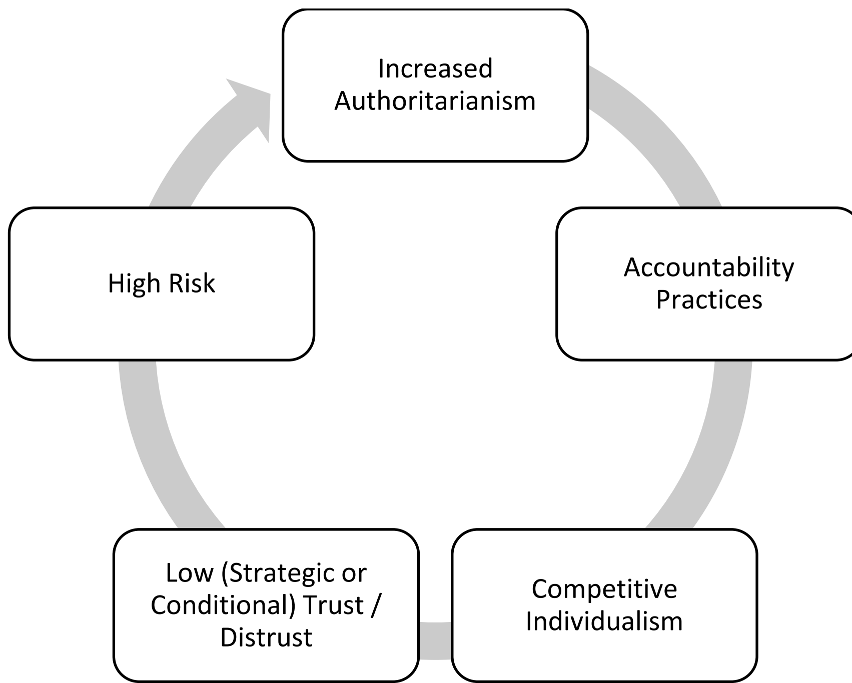
778 **Appendix A: Figures**



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780 *Figure 1: Distrust in the Social Trap of FE Policy (Adapted from Rothstein, 2005*
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