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Freebies, freedom and fundamental change: Resistance to neoliberal environmentalism in large ‘green’ corporations

Despite the professed concern of many governments, businesses and individuals – and the recent publication of another alarming report from the IPCC – inaction on climate change remains a significant concern. For many, the problem is rooted in a neoliberal account of social change. Neoliberal environmentalism is the dominant approach to environmental issues but it is often blamed for the continuing failure of climate change policy in general and behaviour change initiatives in particular. This paper explores the dynamics of this dominant discourse through an examination of environmentalism in the large ‘green’ corporation. Specifically, it uses discourse analysis to investigate so called ‘climate champion’ schemes (a network of volunteers who are tasked with the promotion of climate-protecting behaviour throughout the business) and considers examples of resistance to the dominant neoliberal discourse. The paper finds that many of the champions did resist the basic components of neoliberal environmentalism. They challenged the principles of self-interest, self-rule and incremental change and they talked about the possibility of enforced action and a fundamental restructuring of society. However, this resistance was limited in a number of different ways. The paper suggests that the workplace does play a role in restricting resistance but that there are more fundamental issues that need to be addressed if we hope to pursue an alternative approach to environmental problems such as climate change.

Keywords: climate champion; climate change; discourse; neoliberal environmentalism; resistance

Introduction

For almost twenty-five years the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has warned about the dangers of anthropogenic global warming and the consequent changes to the climate. Its most recent assessment report points to the ‘unequivocal’ warming of the climate system and the ‘unprecedented’ rise in temperature and sea levels (IPCC 2013, p.4). Political and public concern has simultaneously increased over time and climate change is now considered to be a ‘mainstream part of the international politics agenda’ (Harris 2009,

p.1). However, there is a great deal of concern about the dominant approach to climate change policy. Environmental governance is fundamentally shaped by the ‘neoliberal imperative to deregulate, liberalize trade and investment, marketize, and privatize’ (Mansfield 2004, p.313) and, for many, this ‘introduces a pernicious logic of the market’ (Bakker 2007, p.437). According to McCarthy and Prudham (2004, p.281) ‘market signals alone are necessarily insufficient in governing the allocation of nature to meet economic and competing social demands (e.g. for clean drinking water) because nature in its various forms is not a commodity, that is, not produced for sale’. The very nature of neoliberalism makes it incapable of dealing with a problem like climate change. This paper takes one significant aspect of neoliberal environmentalism – the ‘green’ corporation – and uses it as a starting point to investigate the dynamics of this dominant discourse.

Multinational corporations, especially those in the energy sector, are responsible for a large proportion of CO² emissions (Sæverud and Skjærseth 2007) and businesses have come under pressure to reduce their impact on the planet (Jeswani *et al.* 2008, p.47). Most large corporations are now making a concerted effort to implement climate-protecting production processes and/or invest in environmental products and services (Rhee and Lee 2003). In addition, a number of businesses have introduced internal climate (or environment) champion schemes, which ‘establish a network of individuals to lead on environmental initiatives throughout the business’ (anonymous business’s CSR report). Employees volunteer for the role and, alongside their regular job, they are expected to promote climate-protecting behaviour in the workplace. The paper will focus on the analysis of ‘climate champion’ schemes in four large ‘green’ corporations in the UK.

Over the past fifteen years, this kind of initiative has been researched in a number of different companies and from a number of different angles. Studies have considered the techniques of effective championing (Andersson and Bateman 2000) and its potential success

as a strategy for change (Alexander *et al.* 2005). It has been examined through the lenses of ‘emotionology’ (Wright and Nyberg 2012), identity work (Wright *et al.* 2012) and practice theory (Hargreaves 2011) and it has been analysed as a site of discursive contention (Lewis and Juravle 2010, self-reference, self-reference). Starting from the premise that approaches to behaviour change are heavily influenced by neoliberal discourse, the current paper uses discursive analysis to investigate the champion schemes in the context of neoliberal environmentalism. Specifically, it analyses particular examples of resistance to this dominant discourse and considers the potential impact of these challenges. **How do the champions resist neoliberal environmentalism? Where does resistance occur? And does any form of resistance pose a significant challenge to neoliberal discourse in the workplace or beyond?** If neoliberal environmentalism is not an effective way to deal with the environmental problems that we are facing then we need to investigate the potential for change. Understanding how and where resistance occurs may be an important first step in this endeavour.

The paper is divided into six sections. Following on from the introduction, Section two locates the study in existing literature on climate champion schemes, neoliberal discourse and discursive resistance. Section three outlines the process of data collection and the methods of analysis. Section four presents the main analysis. It identifies three specific components of neoliberal discourse (self-interest, self-rule and incremental change) and analyses corresponding examples of resistance (i.e., instances when the champions rejected or questioned these neoliberal values or principles). **It also considers contradictions and qualifications in the champions’ accounts. Section five follows with a discussion about the limitations to resistance, the significance of the workplace and the pervasiveness of neoliberalism. Section six provides a brief conclusion.**

Overall, the study finds that there were examples of resistance to neoliberal discourse throughout the champions’ accounts. During the interview, they challenged many of the

fundamental premises of neoliberal environmentalism. However, this resistance was limited in a number of important ways. The champions often contradicted themselves, challenging a particular component of neoliberalism only to reinforce it later in the conversation. The champions who did resist the dominant discourse were surrounded by those who did not and resistance was often isolated to one particular example. Many of them challenged one aspect of neoliberal environmentalism while unquestioningly accepting others. The paper argues that the workplace itself might have an important influence on the champions' capacity to resist but it suggests that there are more fundamental issues to consider if we wish to challenge the dominance of neoliberalism environmental beyond the large (green) corporation.

Climate champions in large corporations

Despite the variety of approaches, many of the studies of 'climate (or environment) champions' have reported similar findings. Successful championing was most often associated with 'competitive benefits' (Andersson and Bateman 2000, p.551), 'cost savings' (Hargreaves 2011, p.89) or the importance of a 'business case' (Lewis and Juravle 2010, p.487, Wright *et al.* 2012, p.1463). Champions talked about the importance of 'professional status' (Hargreaves 2011, p.89), 'choice' (Hargreaves 2011, p.91) and framing action as an 'opportunity' (Andersson and Bateman 2000, p.551, Wright *et al.* 2012, p.1459) Several studies also talked about the perception that the champions were 'hippies' (Wright *et al.* 2012, p.1462) or 'tree huggy saps' (Hargreaves 2011, p.89). In addition, and importantly for the purpose of this paper, almost all of these studies highlighted the ability of the champions to challenge dominant institutional paradigms and tailor their efforts to different situations. Lewis and Juravle (2010, p.492) conclude that the dominant discourse in their study was linked to financial success but note that a small minority did question this motivation. Andersson and Bateman (2000, p.551) argue that champions make choices about the issues

that they emphasize or downplay and, according to Wright *et al.* (2012, p.1461), individuals often take on different roles or characters (e.g., ‘Rational Manager’, ‘Committed Activist’) depending on the particular circumstances and audience.

Climate champions and neoliberal environmentalism

(Self-reference) reported similar themes in their analysis of designated climate champion schemes. In the context of behaviour change, they noted the importance of ‘economic imperatives’ (SR) and ‘saving money’ (SR). The champions were keen to highlight the ‘co-benefits’ of climate-protecting behaviour (SR) and they believed that these factors would help people to ‘choose’ an environmentally friendly lifestyle (SR). In addition, they also acknowledged that the champions could draw on different discourses in different situations. Their analysis identified a clear distinction between the champions’ own motivations for action (e.g., responsibility) and the motivations they used to encourage behaviour change (e.g., saving money). The distinguishing feature of (self-reference) is that they specifically focused on how the champions’ behaviour was influenced by a dominant neoliberal discourse.

Neoliberalism is commonly accepted as *the* political and economic ideology for the modern world (Harvey 2007). Since the 1970s it has enjoyed an unprecedented ascent to global dominance and, as such, it plays an important role in many current issues, including climate change. Indeed, Andrew *et al.* (2010, p.611) argue that neoliberal approaches have emerged as the ‘prevailing response to climate change by developed countries’. Whilst undoubtedly a contested concept, Turner (2008, p.6) claims that the various schools of neoliberalism ‘meet on common ground in terms of their aims, arguments and assumptions, which makes them constitute a coherent and distinctive ideology’. Fundamentally, neoliberalism advocates ‘unencumbered markets and free trade’ (Harvey 2007, p.22) with a minimal role for the state. The key values centre on growth, profit and accumulation

underpinned by the assumption that ‘human nature is essentially selfish’ (Walker 2006, p.140). Individuals have the right to freedom and property (Kirk 2008) and neoliberal accounts of social change are rooted in progress and incremental modifications to the current system (Reitan 1998). These components of neoliberalism have important implications for the construction of responses to climate change.

The (self-reference) paper focused on four specific components of a neoliberal discourse (i.e., business as usual, individual sovereignty, economic rationality, and the subjectivity of ethics) and considered how each of these components influenced the ways in which the champions encouraged behaviour change.¹ Where there was disparity in the champions’ accounts (e.g., appealing to anti-neoliberal notions such as justice) this was identified as resistance to the dominant discourse. In the context of the interview itself, the champions resisted neoliberal environmentalism by drawing on alternative environmental discourses. The current paper draws on the same empirical data as (self-reference) but specifically focuses its attention on this process of resistance. It provides a more detailed account of the different ways in which the champions appeared to challenge neoliberal environmentalism.

Resisting neoliberal environmentalism

According to many theorists discourse is not immutable. By its very nature, a dominant discourse is difficult to resist but this does not make resistance impossible. Carabine (2001, p.279) claims that ‘individuals are active agents and discourses are themselves in a state of constant reconstitution and contestation’. In every interaction, individuals have some capacity to alter that which they communicate, however limited this may be. In her analysis of the Cities for Climate Protection Campaign (CCPC) Slocum (2004, p.779) argues that ‘multiple publics bring different discourses to the fore...potentially changing the terms of political discourse’. Bäckstrand and Lövbrand (2006, p.52) make similar claims in their discursive

account of climate policy, specifically subscribing to a 'notion of agency'. Indeed, although McCarthy and Prudham (2004, p.279) talk at length about the neoliberal adoption of environmentalism (and vice versa) they also note that environmentalism can be a 'potent source of resistance to neoliberalism'. Environmental discourses of sufficiency, justice and deep ecology provide important counter-points to the principles of neoliberal environmentalism, focusing on issues of 'well-being', 'fairness' and the 'intrinsic value' of the natural world.²

As noted earlier, we can identify this kind of resistance in the majority of the climate champion studies. Although Wright *et al.* (2012) do not focus on the influence of neoliberalism, they do highlight the role of 'agency' through which champions have the 'potential to alter, challenge, as well as reproduce existing discourses' (p.1455). Similarly, Lewis and Juravle (2010, p.493) note the importance of 'human agency' in pushing forward change. Moreover, in their analysis of the champions' personal motivations for action, (Self-reference) identify an 'important challenge to the dominance of neoliberalism' (SR). They do note the limitations of this resistance (because it was only found in the context of the interview) but they suggest that the champions might be capable of more 'radical forms of environmental citizenship' (SR).

The current paper looks more closely at other examples of resistance in this data. **Where else does resistance occur? And *could* it prove to be a fundamental challenge to the dominant discourse?** According to Alvesson and Kärreman (2000, p1132) many discursive accounts attribute too much importance to the dominant discourse without giving enough credence to the individuals who reproduce this discourse:

The idea of fragile subjects constituted by and/or within strong discourse may ascribe too much power to the latter...the ways in which subjects relate to discourse may be Teflon-like; the language they are exposed to or use may not 'stick'. Rather than the discourse-driven subject, the subject may be a politically conscious language user, telling the right kind of stories to the right audiences at the right moment.

Resistance to neoliberal discourse may appear limited in the context of the workplace or within the artificial setting of the interview. However, it might also be the case that the champions are simply telling the ‘right kind of stories’ while being fully capable of resisting the dominant discourse at a different time or in a different place. In addition, if we can identify multiple sites of resistance in the data, the culmination of these examples could prove to be an effective challenge to neoliberal environmentalism. In any case it is worth looking more closely at the resistance of discourse in order to assess how the process works and what exactly is happening. This may provide some insight into the *capacity* of the champions to resist the dominant discourse and challenge neoliberal environmentalism.

Studying climate champions

The corporations in the study were identified through web-based research and selected on the basis of environmental credentials (e.g., evidence of environmental concern in CSR reports, links to environmental organisations and placement in published league tables of ‘green’ companies). Interviews were conducted with eight environmental/CSR managers (five men, three women) and four of these individuals agreed to arrange access to champions in their company. These managers provided a list of all registered climate champions and potential participants were selected at random. Interviews were then conducted with 36 champions (21 women, 15 men), some on the telephone and the majority in person. These individuals were located across the UK and represented different job roles and levels of seniority. Overall, the 44 interviews covered five different sectors: energy, construction, consultancy, finance and retail.³ The interviews were semi-structured and included questions about the role itself (daily tasks, successes, obstacles) and general views on climate change (What should be done? Who is responsible? Do we need to change the way we live?). All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed for the purpose of carrying out a detailed discursive analysis.

According to Hajer (1995, p.3), ‘social constructivism and discourse analysis add

essential insights to our analysis of contemporary environmental problems'. By looking at the construction of climate change we can question the knowledge that we currently have about causes, consequences and solutions. This approach advocates analysis at the micro level, investigating the construction of meaning through language and interaction. For proponents of a discursive approach, this level of understanding is a pre-condition for effective research. If we can understand how meaning is formed, reproduced and/or challenged in everyday interaction we can produce a more comprehensive account of the social world. At its most basic level, a discourse is 'a shared way of apprehending the world' which is 'embedded in language' (Dryzek 1997, p.8) and discourse analysis is 'the close study of language in use' (Taylor 2001, p.6). Thus, by looking carefully at the way language is used (discourse analysis) we can understand how meaning (discourse) is constructed. In the context of environmentalism, discourse analysis has already been widely used. Some studies have considered the general relationship between discourse and the environment (e.g., Feindt and Oels 2005, Hajer and Versteeg 2005), while others have focused on specific problems and policy issues such as planning (Sharp and Richardson 2001), flooding (Penning-Roswell *et al.* 2006) and climate change (Slocum 2004, Bäckstrand and Lövbrand 2006).

The current paper uses discourse analysis to investigate the process of resistance to neoliberal environmentalism. Specifically it draws on the work of Dryzek (1997) and contends that 'in order to see why and how these discourses have developed, and to what effect, it is necessary to pin down their content more precisely' (p.15). Analysis requires a close examination of the basic components that make up a discourse. Dryzek identifies nine environmental discourses and analyses each one of them on the basis of four fundamental features (p.18). This paper conducts a similar exercise with the dominant discourse of neoliberal environmentalism. It identifies three of the components that make up a neoliberal discourse – self-interest, the sovereignty of individual choice and incremental change – and

identifies specific instances when a champion questioned or challenged the appropriateness of these components for the purposes of behaviour change.⁴ If the champions are challenging the basic components of a discourse then it is fair to assume that they are resisting that discourse to some degree⁵. The purpose of the analysis is to understand how and where this is happening as well as the significance of any such challenge.

Analysis

There was evidence of resistance throughout the transcripts. When they talked about the climate champion project and their promotion of climate protecting behaviour, many of the champions were able to question and challenge some of the most basic principles of neoliberalism. However, this resistance was limited in several fundamental ways. The champions often contradicted themselves and their position was almost always a minority view. The analysis will consider resistance in the context of three specific neoliberal components: self-interest; the right to self-rule; and incremental change. The final section will then go on to consider evidence of contradictions and the reinforcement of the dominant neoliberal discourse.

Self-interest

The primacy of self-interest is one of the most basic tenets of neoliberalism. Human nature is ‘essentially selfish’ (Walker 2006, p.140) and the profit-driven imperatives of neoliberalism are the most ‘appropriate’ system for society. In the context of neoliberal environmentalism, self-interest can be variously identified in the ‘positive-sum’ construction of climate-protecting activities (Hajer 1995, p.3) and the portrayal of climate mitigation projects as ‘market opportunities’ (Gibbs 2003, p.4). It is in our interest to deal with climate change because we can protect the planet *and* profit from our activities. Indeed, participants frequently highlighted the co-benefits of climate-protecting behaviour. There was a ‘business case’ for action (D-1)⁶ and individuals could save money by turning off lights or turning

down their heating (C-10). In addition, many champions distributed ‘freebies’ as an incentive for climate-protecting behaviour (B-5, C-6, C-Manager).⁷

There were, however, some notable examples of resistance. Several participants recognised that, in the absence of any co-benefits, self-interest could in fact be a barrier to action. One champion talked about an occasion when she had received a very low response rate to a questionnaire about the climate champion project. Many of her colleagues had cited lack of time as the reason for this. As she relayed the story during the interview, she pointed out that time was not really the issue: ‘you’re like “hang on, you’ve been talking about your new perfume to your mates for 20 minutes, you have time to fill in the questionnaire that lasts two minutes”’ (A-1). This champion felt that her colleagues had prioritised other things over her request. There was no particular incentive for them to fill out the questionnaire; it was not in their interest to do so. This meant that they did not engage in an activity that was intended to contribute to the work of the champions.

Another champion explained that he often encountered difficulty performing his role because his line manager was reluctant to give him time away from his regular job to work on the project. He also talked about the problems associated with self-interest and prioritisation. Climate change ‘wasn’t something high on the agenda’ because the manager was ‘only interested in figures’ (C-6). The champion felt that his manager’s sole concern was maximising the profits of the business. If the champion project did not contribute to this objective then the manager was not willing to engage with it. Both champions A-1 and C-6 recognised that, in the absence of clear co-benefits – a ‘freebie’ in exchange for filling out the questionnaire or the prospect of saving or making money – it was difficult to encourage climate protecting behaviour in the workplace.

Other participants talked about the problem of self-interest in the context of the project itself. In many cases the champion schemes had been advertised as a good career

opportunity, which would help employees to develop ‘transferable skills’ (B-manager). Some participants claimed that these self-interested motivations had led to high attrition rates.

Many people had joined the champion scheme but then failed to contribute to any of the activities:

Some people...joined because there was...personal objectives to try and do something above and beyond your own your normal business as usual role and then when you tried to get them to give up their lunch hour or actually go a little bit further and commit a bit more...they don't show up (D-3).

The general perception of this was that individuals were keen to receive credit for being a champion but were reluctant to actually perform the role. In addition, several participants talked about internal tensions amongst champions who were keen to be credited with the success of particular projects. If an individual had implemented climate-protecting practices outside of their assigned remit, they were ‘accused of stepping on people’s toes’ (C-8). These internal problems with the network and high attrition levels were explicitly linked to the egoistic motivations of certain volunteers. Champions D-3 and C-8 also made a connection between self-interest and inaction on climate change. They acknowledged that self-interested concerns such as career advancement or recognition could interfere with the fundamental aim of the champion project (promoting climate protecting behaviour in the workplace) and they were annoyed by people who had joined the project for self-interested reasons. Indeed, earlier work suggests that many of the champions in the study were motivated by more altruistic concerns (e.g., future generations, issues of climate justice and a sense of responsibility) (self-reference).

These examples represent clear resistance to the dominant neoliberal discourse. Champions A-1 and C-6 questioned the neoliberal logic that self-interest will naturally lead to positive environmental outcomes (Hajer 1995, Bäckstrand and Lövbrand 2006). If there was a co-benefit to offer then appealing to self-interest was an effective way to bring about

climate-protecting behaviour but, when this was not the case, self-interest could in fact produce the opposite effect. Through their recognition of this problem the champions challenged the ‘tyranny of common sense’ (Downing 2008, p.10). They rejected the dominant neoliberal notion that self-interest is the most effective way to bring about behaviour change. In the second set of examples, champions D-3 and C-8 challenged the primacy of self-interest through their assessment of other people’s actions and motivations and the expression of their own. They were questioning the premise that ‘human nature is essentially selfish’ (Walker 2006, p.140) and suggesting that action on climate change could and should transcend this dominant way of thinking.

The right to self-rule

The second component of neoliberalism to be examined is the sovereignty of individual choice. Neoliberal discourse emphasises the right to ‘self-rule’ (Turner 2008, p.118) and this is evident in current policy on climate change. In the context of large corporations we see a move away from ‘command and control’ (Young 2000, p.12), while individual behaviour change is encouraged through ‘voluntary eco-consumerism, rather than the use of regulatory tools such as tax incentives’ (Kirk 2008, p.161). The importance of self-rule was clear in the way the champions delivered their message. They talked about their role as one of ‘raising awareness’ (C-4) and ‘trying to educate people’ (C-5). The champions believed that by providing information about climate change they might encourage individuals and the business to ‘choose’ climate-protecting options.

There was, however, resistance to this notion of choice. First, many of the champions referred to the idea of responsibility^[51]. Champions talked about ‘having a duty to do something’ (C-10) and a ‘responsibility for future generations’ (C-3) or ‘as temporary tenants of the earth’ (B-5). Engaging in climate-protecting behaviour was not a choice they were making; it was something they were obliged to do.

Indeed, when the champions were asked general questions about the problem of climate change many of them talked about the kinds of actions we *should* be undertaking. When asked about the difference (if any) between small changes (e.g., recycling) and radical changes (e.g., giving up cars), champion C-9 said that ‘everybody *should* be doing the former’. He did not go so far as to prescribe the radical changes but he was clear that easy actions such as recycling should not be a matter of choice. This sentiment was also evident in the way other champions talked about the recycling facilities. Their colleagues would often fail to put waste material in the ‘correct bins’ (A-7) or the ‘right place’ (C-2). In these examples the champions are talking about the failure of their colleagues to use the recycling facilities. However, they did not refer to ‘recycling’ bins and ‘landfill’ bins; they talked about the ‘right’ and the ‘wrong’ bins respectively. In addition, one of the managers talked about the failure of the UK to implement widespread recycling. He compared this to the success in Germany where ‘everything’s done correctly’ (B-manager). The system in Germany was not different; it was better. They were addressing climate change in the ‘correct’ way. These things were not a matter of choice because there are certain actions that we should and should not be carrying out. In these examples the champions were resisting the notions of choice and freedom by making evaluative judgements about their own behaviour, the actions of their colleagues and how we should deal with inaction on climate change.

In addition, several champions entertained the possibility of enforced change. They talked about the need for ‘fines’ in the context of recycling (A-10) and enforced water charges so that people would ‘take it seriously’ (C-4). One champion advocated a strong government ‘that will stand there and say we are going to limit what you do’ (D-4), while his colleague agreed that enforced change ‘would actually make a difference to people’ (D-3, 980). A manager reflected on progress so far and said, with some resignation, ‘if the carrot doesn’t work then it’s time for the stick...it really is’ (B-manager). This certainly appears to

challenge neoliberal responses to climate change, which will ‘at all stages emphasise free-market solutions while at the same time attempt to avoid infringing negative liberties [i.e., freedom from interference]’ (Kirk 2008, p.161).

Moreover, the majority of participants agreed that enforced environmental legislation was very important in the business context. One champion said that a business case was useful but that ‘ultimately you know it should be law that these things happen’ (A-4).

Another champion talked about enforced reporting:

I think that business leaders should be made to feel responsible for the impact that that company’s having. I actually think that this social report responsibility reporting thing should, should be mandatory. Businesses should be forced to report on the impact that they’re having (C-7).

For neoliberals, ‘markets are supposed to work through the dynamics of individual decision making in competitive settings’ and ‘political involvement in economic activity (e.g., regulation of corporations...) is just interference in an otherwise natural process’ (Mansfield 2004, p.566). Many participants rejected these twin tenets of individual choice and market freedom. In the context of climate change, they felt that interference was necessary.

Individual action should be enforced by the state rather than directed through market incentives and business should be subject to state regulation. They resisted the freedom of individuals and, in some cases, the freedom of the market itself.

Incremental change

The final area of resistance is the idea of incremental change or business as usual. Young (2000, p.20) argues that neoliberal approaches seek to address environmental problems ‘without introducing the need for fundamental structural change’. This suggests that action on climate change should avoid radical actions and doing anything out of the ordinary. Climate-

protecting behaviour should entail small activities that do not challenge the status quo. In general, the climate champion project worked within these boundaries. The project was time-limited and required individuals to engage in small, incremental actions (e.g., turning off monitors, recycling waste material). Neither the champions nor their colleagues were asked or expected to do anything to challenge business as usual.

Resistance to this component was evident when the champions talked about perceptions of their role and how people responded to the work they were doing. According to McCarthy and Prudham (2004, p.279) environmental issues such as climate change have already been ‘assimilated’ into modern society and the promotion of climate protecting behaviour is evident in many different contexts (e.g., in local councils, businesses, schools, etc.). The champion scheme did not represent anything particularly radical. However, participants made some interesting observations about how they were perceived by their colleagues, referring to labels such as ‘tree hugger’ (A-manager, B-8, D-3), ‘greenie’ (C-8), ‘swampy’ (B-4, B-8), ‘pansy-ish’ (A-5) and ‘defender of the earth’ (A-3). Many felt that they were seen as traditional – or indeed ‘radical’ – environmentalists (C-2), the kind of people who might demand an ‘overhaul’ of the current system (Curran 2009, p.203)

There are two potential points of resistance here. First, the champions who had identified these, sometimes negative, responses continued to encourage behaviour change. They were aware that they were perceived to be challenging business as usual and rejecting the idea of incremental change but this did not stop them encouraging climate-protecting behaviour. Every time they asked someone who considered them to be a ‘radical’ to engage in climate-protecting behaviour, however small that behaviour may be, they were challenging the neoliberal notion of incremental change.

Second, some champions were very passionate about their commitment to the role. One participant talked enthusiastically about her involvement in the project: I couldn’t have

not volunteered for it...because that's me and that's what I'm about so to have not volunteered I wouldn't have been true to what I believe in' (A-2). Another champion explained that he had always been 'one of those types that's kind of into environmental things' (B-2). Other champions claimed that their commitment to preserving the planet had been part of their values from a young age (B-4, C-8). The champions in this second example did not report any negative reactions to their role. Rather, they constructed themselves as being a little out of the ordinary. Presumably, if environmentalism was 'normal' there would be no need to qualify oneself as an 'environmental type' (B-2) or be 'true' to this particular belief system. The fact that they identified very strongly with something they considered to be out of the ordinary does suggest some resistance to the status quo.

In addition, a number of champions entertained the possibility of more fundamental changes to the current system. According to Reitan (1998, p.15) neoliberal discourses have a 'strong bias in favour of consensus and conflict avoidance... [they] seek to avoid addressing basic social contradictions'. Some champions expressly rejected this principle and responded positively to the suggestion of a different way of approaching climate change. Champion A-2 was asked if she thought we could fundamentally change the way that we live. Her response was: 'yes... absolutely' (A-2). She argued that 'it's got to be intrinsic to people's everyday thinking... it's got to be part of what they wake up in the morning and it's part of their thought process in terms of everything they do'. Champion C-5 conceded that change 'is not easy, but it's not impossible' (C-5). Another champion expressed similar sentiments: 'it could be done...it would take a huge shift in attitudes' (C-7). These champions resisted the neoliberal notion of business as usual by simply acknowledging that things could be different. They did not underestimate the enormity of the challenge, but they did entertain the possibility of fundamental change.

More specifically, some champions talked about their willingness to engage in

alternative activities and ways of living. They countered the neoliberal values of growth and ‘progress’ – ‘indefinitely increasing material consumption’ (Pepper 1999, p.28) – with reference to reduced consumption (C-2), local consumption (C-5) and localisation more generally (A-7). Champion C-2 talked about ‘making do’ instead of buying new, champion C-5 explained that he bought local produce and that he had seriously considered the possibility of giving up his car and champion A-7 was a big proponent of a smaller way of living: ‘eat local, stay local, travel local’. These actions were not piecemeal, incremental changes; they were a challenge to accepted climate-protecting behaviours and they represented another form of resistance to the dominant neoliberal discourse.

Diluting resistance?

It is possible to identify many different examples of resistance. However, in the overall accounts, the champions often contradicted, reconsidered or qualified their initial position.

This process placed significant limitations on any form of resistance.

In the context of self-interest, champion A-1 complained about her colleagues’ preoccupation with ‘trivial’ concerns (a new perfume) and their consequent reluctance to complete her questionnaire. They had prioritised other things over climate-protecting activities. However, despite her frustration with their egoistic concerns, she still relied on self-interest to promote climate-protecting behaviour in the workplace. When she was asked about the ways in which she encouraged behaviour change champion A-1 said that she would explain the environmental impact of certain behaviours first but usually ‘start talking about saving money and things like that’. The other champions worked in similar ways. Champions C-6 and C-8 had complained about self-interested managers and fellow champions while giving away ‘freebies’ such as reusable shopping bags and energy efficient light bulbs, champion D-3 talked about the ‘financial implications of using loads of paper and ink’. These individuals acknowledged that self-interest was often inimical to action on climate change but

it was still assumed to be the most effective way to encourage people to act.

Similar contradictions were evident in the context of the champions who had resisted the notion of self-rule. Champion B-3 claimed that ‘individually...we have to take our own responsibility’ but he followed this with the argument that ‘everybody needs to be given freedom of choice’. The champion who had talked about ‘having a duty to do something’ later said that, although she would not drive a 4x4, ‘you can’t expect other people to share the same views’ (C-10). Similarly, the champion who had talked about the ‘correct’ bins said of her colleagues, ‘you know, we’re all different, we’re not all going to do things the same way’ (A-7). In the context of regulation, champions A-10 and D-4 had advocated fines and stronger government but later in their interviews they both talked about the importance of individual freedom and choice. Champion A-10 reconsidered the notion of forcing people to engage in climate-protecting behaviour: ‘I don’t think it would be right’. Champion D-4 stated that: ‘every man’s house is his castle so why shouldn’t I be able to do whatever I want in my castle?’ This was a stark contrast to his earlier contention that action on climate change required a strong government that would ‘limit what you do’.

In addition, some of the champions who had appeared to embrace the perception that they were ‘radical’ (C-2) still felt the need to qualify their position later in the interview: ‘I try not to appear too saintly’ (C-2). Champion A-5 seemed unconcerned about the perception that his work was ‘pansy-ish’ and said he was ‘proud’ of his project. However, he wanted to be clear that he was not ‘gona go all green and grow dreadlocks’. The neoliberal opposition to ‘traditional’ environmentalism was difficult to consistently resist.

More broadly, resistance was diluted by the champions who did not challenge the neoliberal components in the first place. For example, champion A-1’s critique of self-interest was weakened by her own contradictions and the fact that the majority of her fellow champions did not acknowledge that there was a problem in the first place. We are living in a

culture of ‘individualised, egoistical, self-interest’ (Clarke *et al.* 2007, p.232) and appealing to this sentiment was the most obvious way to encourage climate-protecting behaviour. It was a ‘no brainer’ (C-manager) because ‘almost everyone in Western society cares about their pennies’ (C-10). Similarly, most champions did not question the importance of individual freedom. In accordance with the dominant discourse they placed great importance on the right to non-interference and the freedom of individuals to pursue their own private ends, however disparate these may be (Plant 2010). The advocacy of a ‘strong government’ was an important example of resistance (D-4) but generally the promotion of climate protecting behaviour was about ‘choice’ (A-6, B-3, D-1). The role of the champion was to help people to make ‘more informed choices’ (C-5).

Finally, the vast majority of champions worked within the boundaries of the status quo. Many of them explicitly rejected the connotations of traditional environmentalism (‘I’m definitely not like one of those protester type people’ – A-10) and the suggestion that we could fundamentally change the way that we live (‘I don’t believe that we’re anywhere near that’ – B-3). In fact, many champions were amused by the suggestion that we could live smaller, more localised lives: ‘Blackpool would probably get more crowded at this time of year (laughs)’ (C-9). They could not comprehend the possibility of going ‘backwards’ in terms of ‘progress’ and growth and they equated this with a form of regression.⁸ Overall, the transcripts presented some interesting examples of resistance but the champions who challenged dominant components of neoliberalism were certainly in the minority. When it came to the promotion of climate-protecting behaviour, the majority of champions appealed to self-interest and choice and they did not challenge business as usual. In addition, there were only a small number of champions who consistently resisted the dominant discourse (e.g., A-2, B-2). **The influence of this resistance is therefore questionable and will be discussed in detail in the following section.**

Resistance in the 'green' corporation

Cus2]aldwell (2007, p.776) argues that 'all discourses begin to unravel once we begin to question claims of self-certainty, truth, power or knowledge'. The champions in the study were questioning the central tenets of neoliberalism and thereby challenging the authority of the dominant discourse. However, the analysis suggests that there were significant limitations to this resistance. First, although there was evidence of resistance to each of the components, this was often from different champions. The resistance from each individual was usually limited to one or two instances. For example, champion C-3 challenged the notion of choice when she talked about responsibility but she did not identify any problems with self-interest. In contrast, champion D-3 complained that individuals who had joined the project for self-interested reasons were unwilling to commit any time to it. However, she felt that people should have the right to choose where they went on holiday and what they purchased with the money they earned. These individuals resisted one particular component of neoliberalism without questioning others. Intuitively, they recognised a problem in a particular area (e.g., self-interest) but they were unable to connect this to a broader critique of neoliberal environmentalism. As Downing (2008, p.39) would claim, their broader thinking was 'radically limited by the pre-existing field of the "thinkable"'. In addition, these small examples of resistance were identified amongst an overwhelming commitment to neoliberal discourse from the other champions.

Second, the champions often resisted a particular component and then contradicted themselves. For example, some of the champions who were perceived as 'traditional' environmentalists felt the need to qualify their position (e.g., I'm not a hippy!). Taylor and Carroll (2009, p.53) refer to this kind of qualification as a process of 'naturalization' and discuss its role in the reproduction of dominant discourses:

Naturalization effectively promotes acceptance and conformity with prevailing norms on both an individual and societal level. Moreover, the norm provides the grounds...for sanctioning intervention into both in order to ensure conformity or bring into conformity, to keep or make normal, and also to effectively eliminate the threat posed by resisting individuals and populations.

By qualifying their role and their potentially ‘inappropriate’ statements, the champions reinforced the normalising effects of the dominant discourse. They effectively ‘eliminated’ any threat that their actions and language may have posed to the ‘normal’ ways and reasons for acting.

Finally, as identified in the (self-reference) paper, resistance mainly occurred during one specific interaction (the conversation with the interviewer). When they talked to their colleagues they promoted behaviour change by appealing to self-interest, incremental actions and choice. They appealed to the dominant discourse because this was the most ‘credible’ way of being green (Hajer 1995, p.30). These factors significantly reduced the influence of any resistance.

The significance of the workplace

Other^[53] studies of climate champions have suggested that the workplace itself plays an important role in the (non)communication of climate-protecting behaviour. **If resistance is only limited by the large corporation then we might surmise that the challenge to the dominant discourse will be more effective in other contexts.** In their 2012 study, Wright *et al.* included questions about ‘how the issue of climate change impacted in non-work settings such as at home, as well as leisure and social activities’ (p.1457). They note that ‘some individuals who expressed strong environmental values at home or among like-minded colleagues consciously played down these concerns where they encountered climate change scepticism at work’ (p.1465).

The current study does not specifically compare the behaviour of the champions

inside and outside of work. However, the fact that the majority of resistance was found in the context of the interview might suggest that the champions intentionally ‘played down’ any such resistance in the workplace. Indeed, Wright and Nyberg (2015) contend that those who are responsible for the promotion of environmental values in corporations are involved in a ‘delicate balancing act’, negotiating between shareholders, employers and the planet (p.99). Champions are expected to compromise between the environmental critique of business and their commitment to the business itself. Arguably, resistance is limited because ‘irrespective of a determination to do right’ (e.g., promoting a ‘genuine’ concern for the planet), ‘other factors hold sway’ (e.g., highlighting the ‘business case’ for environmental protection) (Wright and Nyberg 2015, p.110). The champions who were able to resist neoliberal discourse during the interview were not able to pose the same challenge in the workplace. This would suggest that there is little scope for change in the context of the large corporation but that the champions may be able to exert a more effective challenge in other situations (e.g., amongst friends and family).

The pervasiveness of neoliberalism

According to the data, however, there were limits to resistance beyond the workplace. First, the qualification of responses and the contradictions in the accounts were also found in the context of the interview. The champions were as aware of the ‘inappropriateness’ of being a ‘radical’ (C-2) in the interview as they were in the workplace. This would suggest that the champions’ responses were being limited by something other than the corporation itself. Second, the levels of resistance were not consistent across the accounts. The champions often resisted one particular component of neoliberalism (e.g., self-interest), without considering others (e.g., choice). If they were intentionally ‘playing down their concerns’ in a particular context (Wright *et al.* 2012, p.1465) then we would expect them to do this consistently.

Finally, in a number of cases, resistance did not appear to be limited by the workplace at all. Champions A-2 and B-2 consistently resisted the dominant discourse despite any pressure they may have faced. Indeed, Wright *et al.* (2012) also talk about ‘committed activists’, individuals who ‘forcefully expressed their environmental commitment often in the face of organizational resistance’ (p.1464).⁹

It therefore seems likely that it is the ‘pervasiveness’ of the neoliberal project itself rather than any particular context that is the root of the problem (Harvey 2007, p.23). The majority of individuals in society are so heavily influenced by neoliberal environmentalism that we find a small selection of ‘radicals’ in most situations alongside limited resistance. As the institution at the ‘heart of the neoliberal project’ (self-reference), the workplace certainly amplifies the effect of the dominant discourse but, given the very limited nature of resistance in the four corporations, the levels of resistance in other contexts seems likely to be marginal.

Conclusion

The climate champions in this study resisted neoliberalism in a number of different ways. They identified problems with self-interest, they constructed climate-protecting behaviour as an obligation rather than a choice and several of them expressed commitments to a more traditional form of environmentalism. However, this resistance mainly occurred in the context of the interview and, although the champions were questioning the central tenets of neoliberalism, there were issues of context, consistency and connections to the wider approach. The discussion considered the possibility that resistance was limited by the context in which the champions were communicating and the workplace did appear to have an important impact on the extent of the champions’ resistance (i.e., we find less resistance in the large corporation than we do in the interview). However, it was argued that resistance is more fundamentally limited by the dominant discourse itself and that we might expect to find the same kinds of limitations in other contexts.

The analysis suggests that it would be very difficult for the champions to pose a significant challenge to the dominant discourse in the workplace or indeed beyond but, given the urgency of the issue, it is important to consider how we might extend or strengthen any existing resistance. First, it may be worth making the champions aware of the connections in their accounts. If they begin to understand the relationship between a particular component and the wider neoliberal approach this may lead to further resistance. For example, a champion who questions the principle of self-interest certainly has the capacity to think more carefully about issues of freedom and choice. In the same way, if the champions are made aware of the contradictions in their accounts they may begin to reflect on the ways in which they encourage behaviour change.

Second, as suggested by (self-reference), a deliberative approach may be a more effective way to approach the entire climate champion project. If champions are encouraged to ‘engage their colleagues in serious discussions’ (SR) about behaviour change and the limitations and issues that they themselves have recognised then resistance may begin to spread beyond the minority. If the workplace does amplify the effects of the dominant discourse, then it is likely that we can replicate any challenges in other parts of society where the influence of neoliberalism is not so strong.

Finally, there is the need for research outside the workplace. Climate champion initiatives exist in various locations across society (e.g., local authorities, schools) and it would be useful to understand more about the dynamics of neoliberal environmentalism in these contexts. If we wish to challenge the dominance of neoliberal discourse then we need to develop a more complete picture of resistance within and beyond the large ‘green’ corporation.

Word Count: 7992

Notes

1. The dominant themes in the other studies can also be interpreted in this way. For example, the promotion of a ‘business case’ (Lewis and Juravle 2010, p.487) is an effective way to change behaviour because it reflects the neoliberal principle of ‘profit maximisation’ (von Werlhof 2008, p.95^[JS4]).
2. For a more detailed account of these alternative discourses, see (self-reference).
3. This paper focuses on the four corporations that granted access to the champions. The remaining manager interviews have been excluded from the analysis and the data therefore only represents three sectors (energy, finance and consultancy). The interview data is not representative of climate champions in large corporations. However, the paper provides a detailed qualitative analysis of resistance of neoliberal environmentalism and provides some insights into broader debates.
4. (Self-reference) provides a more detailed explanation of this component approach, outlining a ‘typological framework’, which categorises climate discourses into those of reform (neoliberal) and those of revolution (anti-neoliberal). The current paper focuses on resistance to the reformist (neoliberal) discourses but, for purposes of analytical clarity, it does not distinguish between them.
5. Given the context of the project, there is of course the potential for the champions to provide ‘socially desirable responses’ (Devine 2002) but this seems unlikely given the limited nature of the resistance (see analysis).
6. ‘D’ refers to the company and ‘1’ indicates the number of the champion. Managers are referred to as A-manager, B-manager etc.
7. These ‘freebies’ included items such as energy efficient light bulbs (B-5) and reusable shopping bags (C-6).^[JS5]
8. Soper (2008) remarks that this is a common criticism of alternative environmental movements.
9. One such ‘committed activist’ actually resigned from his job when his consultancy was taken over by a multinational energy company.

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¹ Self-references removed for review process

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