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'We can tell them to get lost, but we won't do that'

"We can tell them to get lost, but we won't do that": Cultural control and resistance in voluntary work

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Abstract

Although cultural control and resistance in organizations have been widely researched, this has invariably been within the context of paid work. This paper examines how they operate within voluntary work, using the case of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI). Here, volunteers undertake the dangerous work of sea rescues, working for local lifeboat stations. Whilst the RNLI deploys standard techniques of cultural control, the combination of volunteering, localism and dangerous work creates the possibility of complex and ambiguous forms of resistance to cultural control, thereby extending our understanding of these phenomena.

Keywords: Cultural control, Resistance, Voluntary work, Paid work, Dangerous work, Royal National Lifeboat Institution, Identity, Organizational control

Introduction

Extensive as the work on cultural control and worker resistance is (e.g. Kunda, 1992; Parker, 2000; Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004; Fleming and Sturdy, 2011; Prasad and Prasad, 2000; Collinson and Ackroyd, 2005; Contu, 2008), it is notable that it has been conducted within a rather limited range of organizational settings. Early work in industrial sociology and labour process traditions tended to focus on manufacturing sites (e.g. Burawoy, 1979), and cultural control was understood in terms of a particular strategy – 'responsible autonomy' – of labour discipline (Friedman, 1977). More recently, for reasons which are perhaps unsurprising, cultural control and resistance have very often been studied in knowledge-intensive firms, for example high-technology companies (e.g. Kunda, 1992), accountancy firms (e.g. Grey, 1994; Müller et al, 2011) and management consultancies (e.g. Alvesson and Kärreman, 2004, 2007; Costas and Kärreman, 2013; Gill, 2013). Arguably, these and other settings display quite a narrow corporate focus (cf. Rehn, 2008) but they have a more general limitation, too: they are invariably studies of paid work. This entails not just an empirical limitation but a theoretical one as well, because it means that alongside whatever cultural control attempts there may be (and what resistance strategies these encounter), there is also the power dynamic of the dull economic compulsion (Marx, 1967) of the wage-labour relation.

By contrast, in this paper we offer an analysis of what happens to and with cultural control and resistance in the absence of the wage-labour relationship. Specifically, we consider the case of volunteer lifeboat crew at the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI). By doing so, we take up Susanne Ekman's timely invitation to 'generate contextual differentiation and empirical specificity to the question of control and ambiguity in organizations' (Ekman,

2014: 142). Following from la Cour and Højlund's (2008) conceptualization of voluntary work as a paradox, we emphasize tensions at the boundary between volunteers and their overarching management and organization system. Our contribution extends the theoretical and empirical boundaries of cultural control and resistance and enhances current understandings of the functioning of cultural controls by exploring the nature and experiences of these phenomena amongst those who work as volunteers – which is to say they work unpaid and by choice[1]. This, we will argue, is especially revealing because whereas cultural control normally aims at the inculcation of strong, shared values and organizational commitment, in the voluntary context such values and commitment already exist to some degree in the very fact of volunteering. Indeed, in the case study we present, the work volunteered for is intensely demanding and dangerous and thus engaging in it bespeaks of an especially high level of commitment. As we will show, contrary to the typical paradigm which seeks to gain commitment by soliciting the responsible autonomy from workers, managerial strategies in this case were more targeted towards *pulling back* autonomy from highly committed volunteers.

The paper is structured as follows. We commence with an exposition of relevant literature on voluntary organizations and discuss how cultural control may relate to this work setting. We then provide a description of the case and the method employed for the study. The empirical material is presented in four sub-sections. First, we examine the deployment of official values at the RNLI and how they were received by volunteers. Next, by presenting extensive detail on volunteers' interactional logic and the clash at the boundary of this interactional logic and the organizational logic, we show the divide, tensions and contestations between volunteers and their management. We then examine how practices of resistance and cultural division

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[1] Elsewhere (Authors, 2015) we take up the issue of the extent to which this choice can be regarded as a matter of individual decisions, as opposed to various structural and communal norms.

were organized around the issue of how the meaning of volunteering and the expectations of volunteers should inform autonomy. In the discussion and conclusion we draw out the nuances, complexities and ambiguities of cultural control and resistance in this setting, and consider how this relates to the more familiar cases of paid work.

Voluntary organizations and cultural control

According to la Cour and Højlund:

'An adequate concept of voluntary social work can only be developed if one takes into the consideration the fundamental boundary between, on the one hand, the interaction system of the persons involved and, on the other, the administrative system or the organization behind it. We presume that this boundary cannot be crossed, but it can be approached from either side.' (2008: 44)

Our focus in this article is in how the managers of voluntary organizations seek to develop shared values, shape beliefs and encourage conformance to managerial rules in pursuit of organizational control. This is not to say, of course, that this operates only as a one-way form of communication, and our research shows that volunteers also exercise control (cf. Ekman, 2014) by exploiting the ambiguities and potential for heightened autonomy which arise at the boundaries between the volunteer interactional logic and the administrative organization logic. Drawing on la Cour and Højlund (2008), we have borrowed the 'interaction' and 'organization' distinction from Luhmann (1995) who posits three different forms of communication structures (interaction, organization and society) arising from contrasting modes of expectation and stability. Briefly, interaction 'stabilizes itself through a distinction of who is present and who is absent' (la Cour and Højlund, 2008: 46) in any given communication, where the possibilities of what might be communicated are based on the

openness of the participating individuals. By contrast, when an individual joins an organization, s/he 'is made an addressee of communication, and the organizational decisions in relation to membership, roles and programmes tie certain expectations to this participation' (Luhmann, 2000: 279-302, cited in la Cour and Højlund, 2008: 47). For the purpose of our examination of organizational control, these distinctions become analytically important – what happens at the point where expectations collide?

Whilst recognising that cultural and bureaucratic forms of control often work simultaneously, supplementing and reinforcing each other (tending towards 'cages in tandem' as identified by Kärreman and Alvesson (2004)), in this paper we focus on 'forms of control that target employee minds through norms, emotions, beliefs and values and are therefore intended to affect behaviour indirectly' (Costas and Kärreman, 2013: 398). In one of the most influential pieces of scholarship in this area, Hugh Willmott contends that:

'In the name of expanded practical autonomy [e.g. empowerment, self-management etc.] corporate culturalism aspires to extend management control by colonizing the affective domain.' (Willmott, 1993: 517)

By effectively defining autonomy as obedience to prescribed organizational values, and manipulating the symbolic aspects of meaning, corporate culture 'invites employees to understand that identification with its values ensures their autonomy' (Willmott, 1993: 526). By this shaping of the internal world, of the very identity of employees, through the manipulation of symbols, habit-inducing rituals, and privileging particular discourses and narratives at the expense of others, management effectively seeks to override any potential contestations, struggle or conflicts of interest. In this way, akin to the totalitarian system of

Orwell's dystopian *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 'strength is ignorance and slavery is freedom' as corporate culture produces a 'normalizing, self-disciplining kind of oppression' (Willmott, 1993: 544). If autonomy means the opportunity for self-management, then cultural control ensures that it also means self-discipline by defining the very parameters of how employees can think, feel and act.

So what could all this mean for volunteering and organizations that rely on voluntary labour in order to achieve their mission and in which, therefore, autonomy has a particular, indeed central, place? Surprisingly little research in either organization studies or the specialist volunteering literature investigates the extent to which voluntary organizations seek to control their members through culture management. The nature of the social interaction between volunteers and their co-workers and leaders is, however, an area of growing interest which is primarily focused on volunteer management (Connors, 1999; Stallings, 2007). The 'conflictual nature of the relationship between volunteers and paid staff' (Studer and Von Schnurbein, 2013: 414) informs most analysis, with a variety of organizational pathologies (high turnover, confusion and ambiguity, lack of communication etc.) theorized as being the consequences of poor social relations stemming from lack of understanding and attendance to the differences between volunteers and paid staff (Perlmutter, 1982; Netting et al., 2004).

In the main however, this literature does not particularly engage with how these interactions create and shape meaning for actors, nor does it analyse volunteers' resistive practices vis-à-vis their management. One partial exception is Jakimow (2010), who shows that contestations over the meanings of values - in her research the value of 'volunteerism' - are productive mechanisms whereby narratives and counter-narratives shape the very meaning of volunteerism for actors. This is understandable - given that they are not usually instrumental

or (by definition) economic, the reasons that individuals engage in voluntary work are mainly symbolic (Farmer and Fedor, 1999). Indeed, Haski-Leventhal and Bargal's (2008) study convincingly claims that individuals volunteer in order to express their deeply held personal values and shows how, in the practice of volunteering, a 'meaningful event' (2008:83) can capture volunteers' emotions and force their affective involvement and commitment. We suggest that volunteering to 'live ones values' may be even more salient in the case of dangerous volunteering situations such as the RNLI, as it makes little sense for individuals to routinely place their life in jeopardy for a cause which they do not feel strongly connected to. When volunteers feel deeply connected to the cause of the organization, contestations arise as to how the organization should conduct its affairs (Kreutzer and Jäger, 2011; Grönlund, 2011). This might suggest that volunteers will embrace organizational control if it is congruent with their values and resist it if the organization seems not to live up to their expectations. To investigate this further we now move on to the empirical detail of the study.

The case organization

This study was carried out in the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI), a charity registered in the UK and Ireland with the mission of saving lives at sea (RNLI Purpose, vision and values, 2014) which operates a twenty-four hour per day, 365-days a year lifeboat search and rescue service in 236 stations dotted around the coasts of the UK and Ireland. The organization depends on a network of over 31,500 volunteers, of which 4,600 are lifeboat operational crew members (RNLI About Us, 2014). A permanent paid staff of about 1,282 employees support and oversee operations (RNLI Annual Report and Accounts, 2013: 28), the majority of whom are based at headquarters in Poole, England, which is also the site of the Lifeboat Training College, a purpose built state-of-the art training facility for lifeboat crew. Overall, lifeboats were launched 8,346 times in 2012, rescuing 7,964 people and saving

328 lives (RNLI Operational Statistics Report, 2012: 8). The typical all-weather lifeboat going on a rescue service is staffed with five or six crew, one coxswain (captain) and a mechanic.

Research methods

The main research method was a programme of forty semi-structured interviews with individuals at all levels of the organisation. Thirteen of these were waged and twenty seven unwaged. Interviews were semi-structured and open-ended in order to allow respondents to expand on those issues which they felt were most significant and meaningful. Interviews lasted from fifteen minutes to three hours in length, with an average of fifty minutes per interview. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed.

Data were also derived from approximately 850 pages of organizational documents and analysed for meanings and moral positioning. These texts were taken as discourses which 'construct organizational reality in distinct ways' (Cederström and Spicer, 2014: 180). Further data were collected through participant observation (undertaking an exercise in the simulator) and non-participant observation (sitting-in on a five day 'Management Communications and Command' training course aimed at station management personnel) at the Lifeboat Training College co-located with RNLI headquarters in Poole. These research visits were used as 'an opportunity to see the organization at work and to 'feel' the organization' (Parker, 2000: 238), and observations were recorded in a research diary.

The process of analysis followed neither a strictly deductive nor a grounded approach. The data was coded firstly without trying to fit it in to any analytic preconceptions about organizational control. Particular attention was paid to the types of language, narrative and

story-telling devices (Gabriel, 2000; Alvesson, 2003) which respondents used when explaining their life worlds. In this sense, data analysis was initially exploratory in nature, with memoing, mindmaps and context charts used extensively in order to build up analytical summaries which were then taken back to the data and crosschecked again. The analysis became more deductive as, following increased engagement with the literature (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2007) codes were generated alongside research questions. Broadly following Braun & Clarke (2006) codes were collated into clusters, and finally overarching themes. We now turn to exploring what the study revealed about cultural control and resistance.

Cultural control and resistance at the RNLI

The RNLI's official vision and values

In line with a more general move in the charity and public sectors towards 'communicating who and what they are' (Wæraas, 2010: 527), the RNLI use a vision and values statement as a way of presenting their (espoused) formal organizational identity and values (Aust, 2004) both to internal and external audiences. The most recent statement is that which was released in 2010, shortly after the arrival of a new CEO:

RNLI Purpose: *To save lives at sea*

RNLI Vision: *To end preventable loss of life at sea*

RNLI Values: *Our work is founded upon and driven by our values. Our volunteers and staff strive for excellence and are…*

- *Selfless ...willing to put the requirements of others before our own and the needs of the team before the individual, able to see the bigger picture and act in the best interests of the RNLI. Prepared to share our expertise with organisations that share our aims.*

- *Dependable…always available, committed to doing our part in saving lives with professionalism and expertise, continuously developing and improving. Working in and for the community and delivering on our promises.*

- *Trustworthy…responsible, accountable and efficient in the use of the donations entrusted to us by our supporters, managing our affairs with transparency, integrity and impartiality.*

- *Courageous…prepared to achieve our aims in changing and challenging environments. We are innovative, adaptable and determined in our mission to save more lives at sea.*

(Abridged RNLI Statement of Purpose, Vision and Values, 2014)

The official values are supplemented with a policy known as the 'volunteer commitment', which each volunteer must sign before they can formally be accepted into the organization. This document proceeds with the dominant, legitimating voice (Fournier, 1998) of the Operations Director:

> 'The relationship between the RNLI and its volunteers is a voluntary, two-way commitment, not a legally binding contract. However, for this relationship to work well, it is important for us all to understand what roles and responsibilities each other expects. That is why we have decided to draw up a clear set of policies covering the role of volunteers and their relationship with the RNLI'. (RNLI Volunteer commitment, in Operational Volunteers at Lifeboat Stations booklet, 2006: 2-3)

Here there is an explicit acknowledgement that, unlike an employment contract specifying rights and duties, the 'volunteer commitment' has no legal force. Yet it does seek to initiate a delineation of rights and responsibilities. Specifically:

'The RNLI will:

- *Welcome you as a volunteer and provide appropriate opportunities to those who can help us achieve the RNLI's purpose*

- *Provide you with appropriate training and equipment for the task*

- *Give guidance and support your development in your volunteer role*

- *Ensure you have a safe working environment so far as is reasonably practicable*

- *Listen to your concerns if things aren't going right*

- *Recognise that you are a volunteer and have other commitments*

- *Treat you and all volunteers equally and fairly*

In return, we ask you to:

- *Commit to necessary training and give us your time*

- *Comply with agreed standards*

- *Be professional and loyal to the RNLI*

- *Be fair to those around you*

- *Talk to your RNLI colleagues (volunteers or staff) first if you have a problem'*

(RNLI Volunteer commitment, in Operational Volunteers at Lifeboat Stations booklet, 2006: 2-3)

In our interpretation, these documents attempt to discursively construct particular meanings in order to enact value and cultural realities for volunteers. The value of selflessness, and the attempted acculturation of a 'willing[ness] to put the requirements of others before our own

and the needs of the team before the individual, able to see the bigger picture and act in the best interests of the RNLI' seeks to legitimate an understanding, and indeed, set up an expectation, that volunteers will have to relinquish some autonomy, both individually and at station-level. The statement also implies that managerial decisions may be sounder on account of their overall view of the service ('the bigger picture'). The content of the volunteer commitment leads to a prescription of the type of person who management see as fit for the service – one that will be committed, speak well of the RNLI and, crucially, comply with management direction.

However, unlike in numerous paid-work examples typical of the culture management literature, volunteers invariably agreed that they generally shared these stated values of the RNLI. For example:

> Anyone here that has been here in this station for a while … believes in this [points to value statement]. Anyone that stays with the RNLI agrees that the values are the same, no matter if you are in Poole[2], or Dublin or on the West coast. The values are the values. (George[3], Crew member)

The complexity of the relation between volunteers and their formal organization was not, then, found in a chasm between managerially-espoused and enforced values and those found in the daily life of the organization. It was not at all the familiar situation of external compliance with, but internal rejection of, organizationally sought values (e.g. Ogbonna and Wilkinson, 1990). Rather, there was a much more subtle and ambiguous contestation over values and meanings played out in practice which, in order to be understandable, requires us

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[2] All place names except for Poole and Dublin have been changed.
[3] Individuals' names have been changed to protect anonymity.

firstly to demonstrate the embeddedness of RNLI volunteering within local areas and communities and the influence of this fact on volunteers' localized interactional logic.

Volunteers' interactional logic

What has to be understood here is how deeply RNLI volunteering was embedded within local areas, communities and families (Authors, 2015). Along with the dangerous aspects of the work, community acted as a repository of meaning for volunteers (Cohen, 1985) and partly explained dynamics such as the depth of commitment to the provision of a local lifeboat service and the resultant sense of ownership of that service (which we will later detail). Many stations employed numerous members of the same family (typically a mix of fathers, sons, brothers, cousins and in-laws), and when asked how they first got into lifeboating, most respondents emphasised how it was a family tradition, explaining that their fathers, uncles, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers had been involved in the local lifeboat of their day: 'Well it's been in my family going back, my father was a lifeboat man and his father was' (Mick, Training coordinator). These kin relationships wove together family and work ties and volunteering was often a tradition in which generation after generation of family members had served (and sometimes died) on the same stretch of coastline, where those rescued were typically members of that same community:

> I'll give you an instance, I brought my daughter and her two friends to the pub
> one Saturday night and I brought them home and the third girl didn't come home.
> I got a phone call the next morning she was missing, and I picked her [dead body]
> out of the water myself. (Ben, Station chairman)

In particular, life in the local stations revolved around the 'family' of volunteers, drawing on a discourse of community spirit:

> The RNLI has always been run at a local level, and a part of the community in every community and if that is lost then the heart goes out of it … I think the spirit is that one it's local and two it's voluntary. (Conor, Mechanic)

Bonds of trust and solidarity were built up amongst the station team over many years and volunteers spoke of the satisfaction and increased personal development which arose from their voluntary work, even in the face of significant danger: 'You go out to sea, and you are risking your life, but at the same time you are happy at it' (Peter, Second coxswain). Another volunteer expressed it thus:

> We are a family like. When you are out there [at sea] you are relying on who is out there, who is coming behind you, who is near you. You are watching out for him, and he is watching out for you. Everyone looks after each other. (Ross, Mechanic)

Volunteers exhibited a deep commitment to this time consuming, dangerous work:

> … I suppose it's been a big part of my life really, you know, it's bred into you. It's part of who you are and what you do. You'd revolve a lot around it, even though you're not paid full-time to be here it's always on your mind if you're going anywhere or doing anything. (Christy, Coxswain).

Each RNLI station was deeply integrated into their local community, and the emotional and subjective attachment volunteers had to particular locales was clear in this account: 'I have been all over, and home is always home. And I'd always identify with the people and the people that went before me' (Pat, Mechanic).

In the face of such powerful local identifications and coupled with the dangerous nature of the work which acted to increase psychological and affective team bonding (Lyndon and Zanna, 1990; Lois, 1999), at stake was the issue of legitimate 'moral ownership' of the RNLI. To the extent that ownership confers assumed control (Pierce et al., 2001), the contestation which arose between volunteers and their management became essentially about the tension between the volunteers' autonomy to enact rescues as they saw 'fit on the night' (Ben, Station chairman) versus management's concern with control, efficiency and predictability. As we will now show, our research suggests that, in contrast with cultural control attempts in waged organizations, managerial efforts in this case were more targeted at pulling back autonomy from (over)committed volunteers.

The clash at the boundary – tensions between volunteers' interactional logic and organization logic

Two play-outs of culture, the business model and the volunteerism model were evident at the RNLI. This duality has been previously recognised in the literature – in political sociology, la Cour and Højlund (2008: 46) note the tensions between 'the [voluntary] effort's character of spontaneity and flexibility' and '[the explicit call for] regulation and control'. Similarly, in her review of volunteer involvement and management Zimmeck (2001:15) finds only two predominant models of volunteer management, the 'modern', which is closely based on bureaucratic principles, and the 'home grown' where authority is informal and ad hoc.

The different expectation structures and their resultant communication types are clear in this juxtaposition which shows the contestations over legitimate ownership of the lifeboat:

> [Volunteers] view that lifeboat as their boat, as far as they are concerned it's 'our' lifeboat. They talk about our lifeboat not RNLI lifeboat. RNLI in Poole is alien to the community here, in the sense of 'that's our lifeboat'. So it is something that was given to them and they have taken ownership of it. (Seán, Coxswain)

Whereas for management:

> Because we are providing the basic equipment, the basic training, the infrastructure and the maintenance, it gives us a duty of care over those people and so we sign up into the [local] organisation and say "if you want to, as part of the community, if you want to deliver this life saving service, we will really help you to do that, but you are going to have to do it *on the institution's terms* because we reckon we can look after you better than if you were just doing it in an ad-hoc way". (Dennis, RNLI Senior Manager, *emphasis added*).

To put this at the most fundamental level, the lifeboat was legally owned by the RNLI yet was to a great extent seen by the volunteer crew as 'belonging' to them, and in a more diffuse sense to the local community both past and present. Ownership in this latter sense was socially, historically and morally defined, rather than economically or legally defined. This dynamic was crucially about the meaning of the boat and lifesaving service for different actors, a meaning which had deep consequences for the nature of organizing (Gergen et al., 2004) and significantly, for expectations about how various actors should think, feel and act.

The business model at the RNLI privileged a bureaucratic structure, exuded an ethos often described as militaristic 'command and control' and relied on coercive control and variations of punishment centred bureaucracy[4] (Gouldner, 1954). HQ was highly concerned with risk management and duty of care (for example corporate manslaughter legislation was prominently displayed on a staff notice board) and believed that HQ was the rightful and legitimate experts with regards to the provision of the service:

> We control them [the volunteers], I'm fine with the word control as long as it's not taken to the Nth degree … well there is a balance to be struck isn't there? But we control them in the sense that if you want to do this job, this volunteer role, you have to do it *on our terms*. And in that respect, we are going to control you in what you do. You can't just go out there at sea and do what you want. You have to follow the rules and the structure, and if you don't then we will, depending on the seriousness of what you haven't or have done, we will take that role away from you. We will sack you.
> (Dennis, RNLI Senior Manager*, emphasis added*)

Underlying this senior managers' argument is the expectation that volunteers' *should* acquiesce to managerial control, and he draws on the organizational logic of instilling trust and predictability into organizational routines in order to guide actions, thoughts and feelings (Grey and Garsten, 2001). To this end, HQ developed an elaborate system of standardized controls in the form of standard operating procedures (SOPs) as a way of codifying expert knowledge. SOPs formed the basis of almost all training programs and were, at times,

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[4] In Gouldners' analysis (1954), punishment centred bureaucracy was initiated by management and generated many tensions with those subjected to it.

experienced as forms of 'representative bureaucracy[5]' (Gouldner, 1954). That is to say that SOPs were embraced when seen as valuable: 'the systems they use are good, and they are beneficial to us…the training kicks in out there at sea' (Mick, Second Mechanic).

Training was a fundamental feature of volunteers' experience of the RNLI and weekly training rituals were used to impart skills and gauge the interest and commitment of volunteers. SOPs were the focal point of most exercises, and the positive value judgement attached to them by local coxswains legitimated and normalized their existence and practical use. In these instances, volunteers expected and enforced the rules, which generated little tensions. Conversely, if a coxswain did not accept the practical value of a particular SOP, alternative or hybrid local procedures were put in place and trained to. In this way, the training exercise became a mechanism through which certain organizational members influenced how other members were to think and feel (Kunda, 1992). The institutionally correct set-up and use of each piece of equipment on the boat was, as volunteers put it 'SOP-ed to the last':

> For the fire drill, people on the port side get out and shut off the fire valves, and the guys on the starboard side do the same and then we do a cross-check to make sure … and then the person at the back in the right-hand seat will take out the salvage pump and the spare person will come out and help them rig it up and get the water flowing out the deck. That's all SOPs. I couldn't see it any other way because that is the way we are trained. (Rory, Crewmember)

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[5] In representative bureaucracy rules are enforced by both management and workers as they are seen as important and legitmate by both groups (Gouldner, 1954).

What is most interesting in this account is Rory's disclosure that SOPs were so institutionalised within station-level cognition that he *could not even envisage* an alternative to the prescribed one best way of working. However, at times outright resistance of SOPs routinely occurred offshore when volunteers felt that HQ was attempting to overly determine rescue behaviour on the boat and thereby negate the true meaning of the service:

> Ok well let's say there was a boat going up on the rocks and it was a force seven [wind] and the [all weather] boat can't get in towards the rocks and there are four lads on the boat and you knew they were going to drown and get bashed into the rocks, and you have the daughter boat on top and it's only allowed to go out in a force four … you are not going to say "I am going to leave them there and get bashed on the rocks" … but that would be a [SOP] governed thing. (Ciaran, Crew Member).

Clearly in this instance, the claim against the self was too heavy and the instrumental rationality of the SOP was trumped by the community identity held locally. Indeed, the interpretation of their own actions as resistance affirmed volunteers' own identities as autonomous individuals capable of making good decisions (Prasad and Prasad, 2000). If the control exerted by HQ through SOPs and other mechanisms was considered in ideological collision with the value rationality of saving lives at sea, then volunteers dis-identified with HQs rules through evasion or subversion.

Yet the organization logic was reluctantly welcomed in other regards:

… the equipment supplied, the boats they give, the survival equipment and the training is second-to-none. So while I'm giving out about them, the fact that they can provide this stuff probably turns them into the arseholes that they are! ... Yeah, but you know what I'm saying … it's really a double edged thing. (Frank, Second Coxswain)

A superficial analysis of relations would suggest that because of volunteers' steadfastness and practical action in saving lives at sea through immersing themselves in the line of danger, they occupied *all* the moral ground. But we do not seek to imply that or to romanticise or sentimentalise them. A deeper explanation includes the quite remarkable work of HQ and the institution of the RNLI, in their provision of *sine qua non* the most excellent equipment, boats and backup service possible. Indeed, management's self-considered position of legitimate control through their cumulative expertise and knowledge concerning maritime activities, coupled with their actual legal ownership of the lifeboat provided the moral firepower behind *their* claim to ownership of the organization. This is what second coxswain Frank meant when he spoke of the 'double edged thing', that 'the fact that they can provide this stuff probably turns them into the arseholes that they are!', a point not lost on Pat, a Mechanic, as he explains the very extensive support service at his disposal:

If I need extra help to put that [part] on or fix it, they [the institution] are there on twenty-four hour standby cover. We have technicians that can come and help me if I need it. So there is back up after back up after back up. Sometimes it's frightening to see the amount of backup you have. You can literally call in the 151st airborne, they will move heaven and earth to get you. Even boats, to get you a replacement for that boat they will have it for you tomorrow if necessary, and the logistics of that would

be to put it on the back of a lorry and ship it to Wales and we would have a crew

mustered the next day to go over and get it. It's unbelievable what they will do just

to get it here. (Pat, Mechanic).

Yet contrary to the business culture, identity and expectation, and for all the practical resources and assistance it provided, the volunteer identity continually emphasised the values of the family, the team and the local community. The clashing expectation structures are clear in this account:

I don't think Poole understand what it is we do here and I think that's a good point to

pick up on because I think very strongly on this … They don't really realize what

effort goes into it at local level. And I'm talking about every station, I'm not only

talking about ours, I'm talking about in general. If they knew what time people were

putting into it, they would see it in a different light. I don't know why they can't see

it because the returns of service every year tells them what you do in a station, you

have to record everything you know … we are volunteers, we get nothing and we

don't want nothing for it, we do it because we love what we do … them people

would be on serious money and they come down once in a blue moon and they have

a whole lot of rules for us … you couldn't … it's local knowledge, you have to do

what you think [is right] on the night, move on, get into it, get the job done. (Ben,

Station chairman)

For this station chairman, being at the 'sharp end' of the rescue served to back the credibility of his argument. Moreover, the tensions in the relationship pivoted not only on the mechanisms of control, for example the aforementioned ubiquitous SOPs which governed

what and how things should be done, but also the management of control – in this emotionally charged, dangerous setting who had the moral entitlement to tell whom what to do and how to do it? We suggest that this is a consequence of inserting people who already hold strong values into a particular managerially-espoused type of corporate culture. Thus:

> For me, ah it's very much for the [local] lifeboat. Oh absolutely yeah. I would not … I …I would cut me left testicle off, I absolutely could not … they're a horrible shower! … they're gone so corporate now … they've lost the personal touch, you know … it's a different philosophy. We are volunteers … these guys are professional, that's their job and they get paid to do it, so we both have different interests in the organization … see the other thing is we do this because we like it. And you couldn't harness that sort of enthusiasm by paying people. Because you couldn't, you couldn't … there isn't an amount of money, if you wanted me to do this for money you would get me for all the wrong reasons … and you wouldn't get the enthusiasm that a volunteer would give. Because they want to be here.
> (Dave, Second coxswain)

Yet for all that they were unpaid, volunteers were also economically controlled by their requirement for expensive resources. The larger boats cost £2.7M to design and build and the overall service costs £385,000 per day to run, equating to approximately £500,000 per annum per lifeboat station (RNLI Running costs, 2014). Accepting finances, however, did not equate to unquestioningly accepting managerially espoused methods of work, control and acculturation, as the bi-annual inspection of stations by RNLI management interestingly showed. The following passage from an interview with a volunteer coxswain illustrates a central issue here: who was controlling whom?

Respondent: They [RNLI management] do it good, there are a few things [in] their rules and regulations [that] are a load of shit, it can't be done that way … still we usually just do it our way and then when the inspector comes down go back to the way the book is, then we go back for six months doing our own way. I think every station does it. And all our bits and pieces that we are not meant to have in the station; everything gets hid away into the boots of cars and gone for three days every six months. They [the inspectors] know it …

Researcher: Like what?

Respondent: Like our own stretchers and own tow ropes that we use which the RNLI doesn't issue you with. They only have a big tow rope, so for a small boat you can't tie a small boat up with it. Every station has their own small personal kit, and then that just goes missing for a few days … [i.e. during and inspection]

Researcher: And you think they know that?

Respondent: Yes they do, they give you warnings get your stuff [out]! They [RNLI inspectors] all know who has what

Researcher: And would they turn a blind eye to it?

Respondent: They just tell you 'don't let it be there when I come down', that kind of way. It's like our towing bridle that we have been using, they know that it's better than their one, and now they have come back and said that our one is better than theirs and they took photographs of it working and I think now it's in the process of getting redesigned and sending it out to the other stations. But that's the RNLI though, just steamroll in and say 'we're using that rope', they don't go around to the Tyne [particular type of lifeboat] stations and say 'what do you

use?' they say 'there's a piece of rope and you have to use that'. (Daragh, Coxswain)

This interaction provides an almost textbook example of 'mock bureaucracy'[6] (Gouldner, 1954) – sometimes the volunteers followed the rules which were implemented officially, and sometimes they pretended to. The respondent also perhaps asserts the type of communication that volunteers had come to expect from management and acknowledges the colliding logics. The obvious resistance to managerial control not only underlined that this *was* experienced as controlling (local stations hide their personal kit because they fear they will be punished), but also highlighted a dynamic akin to the factory games analysed by Roy (1953) and Burawoy (1979; 1985) in the pre-visit negotiation with RNLI management. By passing the word 'don't let it be there when I come down', RNLI inspectors revealed how loose their overall grip of control actually was and connived in the bending of rules (in exactly the way that defines mock bureaucracy). In an obvious respect, this turned the ritual of inspection into a two way process.

Although volunteers' voice may have been formally silent, the informal 'heads up' was explained as a way of demonstrating mutual respect and seeking to solve the tensions by treating the issue as a paradox, in an effort consciously designed not, so to speak, to 'rock the boat':

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[6] In mock bureaucracy, official organizational rules are subverted or ignored by employees with the connivance of managers. For example, in Gouldner's (1954) gypsum mine study some groups of employees ignored safety rules such as not smoking with the collusion of their managers; in other groups, characterised by representative bureaucracy, they co-enforced the same rules.

Respondent: I suppose if he [the operations director] came to our station he would probably blow his top, because it wouldn't be done by the green book[7]. We do it our own way

Researcher: When the inspector comes down to do his six-monthly inspection what way do you do it then?

Respondent: We do it his way then! We do it his way then!

Researcher: Somebody in a lifeboat station told me that when they know the inspector is coming down there is boots of cars filled up with stuff, hidden in attics …

Respondent: You shine the boat up and you do everything first class by the book, and then when he goes you do everything back to normality again … but by saying that it's good that they are coming down because it keeps everybody on their toes. Everybody says 'here's the fucking inspector coming' … we do dread it even though *we are volunteers and we can tell them to get lost, but we won't do that*. So we do have it right for him. And of course they have responsibility and they have to come down and show their responsibility because that's their job, so they have to do their job as well as we have to do our job, so we have to respect that, you know what I mean. (Ben, Station Chairman, *emphasis added*)

The above passage perhaps archetypically demonstrates how cultures can be fractured between head office and branch in all kinds of organizational settings (cf. Parker, 2000; 2002). The tension in the RNLI seems to be similar, with different cultural systems, identities and expectation structures mobilized to claim ownership of the organization. The point is that sometimes volunteers followed the rules, because they matter and are seen as enabling (Adler

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[7] Colloquial term for the divisional working practices handbook, a HQ-issued manual which sets out the rules and SOPs.

and Borys, 1996) and sometimes they pretended to. In this case however, the autonomy problem was not that volunteers were slackers, but that they were too motivated and committed, and ignored rules which HQ thought mattered. HQ's efforts at cultural control, contrary to much research carried out in paid work, suggests a desire to (re)establish legitimate expectations and stabilize the boundaries of volunteers' autonomy. There were also obvious limits to volunteer tolerance of managerial controls and these were clearly expressed in the resistance evidenced above. The next section will examine these practices of resistance in detail.

Volunteer resistance

One significant insight facilitated by the study of this particular empirical setting, unhampered as it was by the power dynamics inherent in typical waged relationships, was the constant negotiation of who was managing who and who was in control. HQ's attempt at culture management was certainly not without local resistance. Uniforms and flags, although standard-issue at HQ, were customized at local stations, often giving precedence to the local name over the generic RNLI branding. Stations strove to maintain local identities regarding their own expertise and although volunteers spoke of their agreement with the formal values of the organization, the ongoing negotiation of reality, expectations, boundaries and autonomy led to tensions as each group sought to interpret who was trying to speak for what and for whom.

The discursive mobilization of the value 'community' was a case in point. For HQ, community was a crucial asset that provided a constant flow of willing volunteers, funding

and impetus for the service. Without any prompting, many HQ staff emphasized the organization as a family (in its idealized version) and abstract notions of 'community' and 'family' were used to solve problems, to gather the organization together and to anchor the formal RNLI narrative to local stations. By abstract, we mean that HQ's use of community was different to that of local stations in that it was not concrete and embodied. In this storytelling narrative of the organizational identity, HQ played on the nostalgic, sentimental sense of belonging to a community, in order to 'manipulate the present by romanticizing the past' (Mills et al., 2001: 131). The use-value in this imagery was not lost on operational volunteers or indeed general staff who wittily developed rhetoric of their own. HQ in Poole was called 'the Kremlin' or 'Disneyland', and divisional HQ in Dublin was termed 'Eurodisney, the cheap Disney' (Karen, Trainer assessor). These very different metaphors were used for different occasions. Signifying a place of total power, the Kremlin metonym was used in situations where local stations perceived their autonomy to be unfairly limited by the 'fortress' in Poole. The Disney analogy, representative of a place of complete fantasy, was used by volunteers in response to seemingly ridiculous requests from HQ where volunteers felt they were being asked to do too much with too little. This colourful passage from a volunteer lifeboat operations manager sums up the situation:

You are going to hear some savagely critical comments about them [RNLI management], and I hear them here, there is people come to me and I could say to them, "if you are feeling that way, what are you doing here?" They say "because I want to, I want to go out on that boat and I want to help people", and I say "so there is an organization that is providing you with that boat and all that equipment, do you not see that?" And they say "no, no [they're] fucking clowns!" So to answer your question what keeps it together? I don't know! I really don't. And you'll find these

views all over the place, there is people who could take you off at the knees pretty quickly, but when the pager goes off at three o' clock on a shitty morning they will be the first ones out there [on that lifeboat]. (Finn, Lifeboat operations manager)

Discussion

Our presentation of the empirical material has shown how contestations arose at the boundary between volunteers' interactional logic and the organizational logic. The differing sets of cultural logic, expectation structures (Luhmann, 2000), meaning and identity provided each group with a set of resources to draw on, but also created tensions which were manifested in the question of practical autonomy.

Recognising the limits of deploying bureaucratic controls alone, and perhaps driven by mimetic institutional pressures as something 'an HQ ought to do' particularly in light of the arrival of a new CEO in 2009, HQ employed a set of normative controls in an attempt to control the subjective experience of organizational members. Direct bureaucratic controls and indirect cultural controls were used in tandem at the RNLI and espoused norms, beliefs and values were communicated in many forms - interpersonally, through documentation and in SOPs framing how volunteers ought to behave (a selection of which we have reproduced).

Whilst bureaucratic frameworks were used to mitigate risk, alleviate health and safety concerns, aid in best practice training and support the coordination of the organization, the management of culture, driven by the organization logic, was a principal target of managerial efforts to impart a particular set of expectations. Management sought to control both the relationship between HQ and the station (for example espousing the restraint of autonomy in committed workers), and to control the ways that station personnel were to think and

crucially, act, away from the direct supervision of HQ. This led to tensions at the boundary when committed volunteers felt that their moral ownership was being unfairly invaded.

Resistance to managerial control took the form of volunteer scepticism and cynical readings of managements' communications and intent (Llewellyn and Harrison, 2006). Emotion played a role when volunteers' sense of justice was injured by the 'penny-wise pound-foolish' (Christy, Coxswain) administrators (cf. Gabriel, 1999). The perceived ideological encroachment on volunteers' 'family' turf opened up a space to further challenge (but, interestingly, only between themselves), HQ's actual prowess at business, with volunteers citing HQ's actions as often wasteful, and engaging together in sceptical rhetoric about the true effectiveness of HQ's decision-making vis-à-vis money.

What was fundamentally at stake within these cultural control efforts was the existential meaning of volunteering – what it meant to *be* a volunteer – in particular in the prescriptive terms of how volunteers should think and act, not necessarily towards the beneficiaries of their rescue service but towards the RNLI as an administrative institution. It is in this way that normative control was used in an effort to manage the relationship between HQ and stations, which is a contrast with the more commonly researched cases where normative control is aimed at managing employees' interactions with their customers or clients (e.g. Ployhart et al., 2009, 2011; Aryee et al., 2012, 2013). In this case, RNLI HQ strongly encouraged volunteers to identify with them and their version of the organizational identity - business, efficient, rule-based and money orientated.

As demonstrated in the example of the inspection, a level of compliance was produced ('when the inspector comes down [we] go back to the way the book is'), and dissent was

muted ('even though we are volunteers and we can tell [the inspector] to get lost, we won't do that'). But cultural control did not construct conviction or belief in the minds of volunteers ('there are a few things in their rules and regulations that are a load of shit'). Although they still practiced the ritual of the inspection and performed for the inspector, volunteers privately resisted the imposition of managerial logic. In other words they dis-identified with their prescribed roles of obedient volunteers even though they still performed them (Fleming and Spicer, 2003). The play-out of the inspection also shows how volunteers used distance through the 'devaluation of social referents' (Helin and Sandström, 2010: 595) to place themselves outside power relations. Their approach of 'as soon as they're gone, we'll go back to our own way' was the volunteers' way of reinforcing their control over what they understood as *their* organization. However, by conforming to the demands of the inspection, volunteers arguably inadvertently legitimized it. It may have been that balking at the inspection would have been interpreted as outright defiance.

The irony inherent in management's culturalism project was that volunteers were *already* completely committed to the provision of an outstanding local lifeboat service. The meaning and significance attached to their volunteering led to individuals understanding volunteering as identity work, a major part of who they were and this engendered a sense of local moral ownership of the lifeboat and the service it provided (cf. Authors, 2015). Most prescriptive culture management literature (e.g. Peters and Waterman, 1982) stresses a lack of dedication and commitment on behalf of front-line employees as the grounds for establishing 'strong' cultural control: that is the *raison d'etre* of culture management. In the RNLI case, culture was quite clearly something that management did not want to deconstruct – management's target was instead to mould volunteers into more acquiescent subjects who would behave according to HQ's version of responsible autonomy. Unlike much culture management

literature in paid employment relationships (e.g. Ogbonna and Wilkinson, 1990; Kunda, 1992; Hales, 1993; Willmott, 1993; Casey, 1995; Parker, 2000) our research finds that managerial efforts were targeted more towards pulling back autonomy from committed volunteers than pursuing the desire to trust volunteers with responsible autonomy. For managers of volunteer organizations, can *too much* commitment be a bad thing? In some ways the situation at the RNLI resembled the familiar pattern of conflicts between professional and organizational identities, with commitment to the profession providing a different set of imperatives and a distinctive ethical basis as compared with those of the organization (e.g. Bloor & Dawson, 1994; Kitchener, 2002). The RNLI case differed, though, not just because of the issue of payment but because the contestation here was between commitment to two different versions of the organization rather than between an organizational and an extra-organizational (i.e. professional) version of work.

For their part, volunteers largely recognised deliberate managerial interventions into their identities. Instead of submitting the self to the formal organization, their commitment was, first and foremost, to each other. Given the potential consequences of engaging in this dangerous form of volunteering, adversity bonded volunteers together psychologically and affectively, in ways which have been well-described in other studies of dangerous work (e.g. Lyndon and Zanna, 1990; Thornborrow and Brown, 2009). Commitment to the family of the station, driven also by emotional proximity to the cause, guided and regulated volunteers' actions, thoughts and behaviours. To have experienced the 'sharp end' (a rough rescue at sea) was particularly significant. Thus management's attempts to symbolically lever culture by fostering a particular type of identity and 'colonising the affective domain' (Willmott, 1993: 517) were recognised as more overtly 'the act of management' than in other accounts (e.g. Willmott, 1993; Hales, 1993; Casey, 1995), and in the main were largely withstood. Although

they were reluctant to candidly voice their resistance, volunteers certainly did not act as cultural dopes (Hill, 1995) and managerial discourses, particularly the business narrative of the organization's culture, were challenged, signifying that volunteers did achieve personal agency away from their administrators power practices (Gabriel, 1999). Those engaged in this very deep form of volunteering proved that their cultural space was certainly not 'a vacuum into which management could pour whatever attributes and emotions it desired' (Grugulis et al., 2000: 98).

The gendered nature of the organization is also worth mentioning here. Of the 4,500 operational volunteers of the RNLI only eight percent are female (thirty seven of the forty respondents interviewed were male). It might be thought that resistance could be interpreted as a masculine identity performance in a type of work that is historically, and still, highly masculinised, and that volunteers were resisting the 'feminized' efforts of HQ bureaucrats to interfere in their work (cf. Ferguson, 1984). Against this, it should be noted that both HQ and local stations were masculinised environments, with many managers having a prior background in the Navy. In dangerous working environments, especially, some research has shown how safety rules may be flouted as an expression of machismo, for example on oil rigs (Collinson, 1999; 2003) and in mining (Somerville and Abrahamsson, 2003). Yet this cannot be assumed to be the case, and other studies have shown that strong safety regimes in the oil industry can shift conventional understandings of masculinity (Ely and Meyerson, 2010). In any case, we did not find in this study any particular resistance to safety regulations. For that matter, we did not find, perhaps surprisingly, overt expressions of machismo. Thornborrow and Brown (2009: 365) found that 'talk about machismo-ism — aggressive behaviour, war, conflict situations and combat — was the most frequently occurring resource for identity work. Paratroopers said that they craved combat'. That was rather different in the RNLI case.

Harrowing stories of danger, risk, tragedy and heartbreak abounded but these were not relayed with anything akin to boastfulness, pride or self-aggrandizing heroism. Rather they were told in quietly wistful, regretful, ways, sometimes very emotionally. This may in part be explained by the fact that, of course, RNLI work does not involve combat. Even so, to the extent that it involved danger and physical toughness it might have been expected that some machismo would have been in evidence. Yet, if anything, there was a degree of rejection of machismo: 'we don't want people who are here just to have an RNLI badge, I mean to get the chicks' as one interviewee put it. It may be the case that because the interviews were conducted by a woman this aspect did not surface in the way it might otherwise have done, but that could be argued the other way, too: a female interviewer might be more likely to elicit macho boasting. Nor did the interviews reveal any obvious divergence of opinion between male and female respondents. So far as we can judge resistance is better understood as an occurrence at the point of colliding logics and expectation structures – volunteers' will for autonomy coming up against the organization's requirements for stability and predictability – and was not understood or articulated in terms of masculinity.

Conclusion

The roots of critical organizational theory accounts of cultural control lie in Marxist and labour process analysis (Marx, 1976; Friedman, 1977) with control being explained in terms of the distinction between labour power and labour, and the conflict over surplus value expropriation. Of course, much critical organization theory has moved away from such an approach. As Edwards et al. (1995) and more recently Fleming and Sewell (2002) have asserted, not all resistance takes place between the class-warriors and the capitalists, and resistance is understood as 'more than just an expression of a subaltern or antagonistic class position' (Courpasson et al., 2012: 801). However, even though it departs from class analysis,

the primacy of the context of paid employment means that the literature retains, at least, waged labour as the backdrop to the way control and resistance are understood.

The RNLI case presented here offers an interesting contrast. The deployment of culture management techniques, such as visions and values statements, cannot be understood in terms of trying to get more surplus value, or even commitment, out of the staff. In part, it may reflect a managerialist ideology in which it is assumed that cultural control is simply one of the ways that 'management is done'. If so, that is ironic since without the need for any such techniques RNLI volunteers displayed a level of commitment and devotion to their work, without even the need to pay them, which would be the envy of the most optimistic proselytiser for culture management. Yet ironic as it may have been, the attempt at cultural control in unpaid settings exhibited similar dynamics to that reported in studies of paid work. It may have been conducive to compliance but it did not construct conviction or belief in the minds of volunteers. For example in the ritual of the inspection, volunteers played the role of cooperative subjects whilst the inspector did his rounds, but once the inspector left, things went back to normal.

However, whilst in that way similar to paid employment, in other ways control and resistance played out rather differently. In one very obvious way, the power dynamics were different because volunteers are always able to withdraw their services. Of course that is true in paid work as well, and high skill workers in particular may have many different employment options, but, still, they will have to work for someone. Volunteers might well, by withdrawing, lose something symbolically valuable to themselves, especially given the strong communal value of working for the RNLI, but they would not suffer any material loss. In this context, the fact of being volunteers created a kind of moral economy. The sense of having

special status by virtue of being at the sharp end is of course not unique, but the physical danger of the work allied to altruism of doing it by choice gave a kind of moral weight to the RNLI volunteers that is unusual in 'normal' settings. It was significantly bolstered by the fact that it drew upon and was anchored within a sense of community, place and history all of which meant that legitimate ownership of both material resources and symbolic meaning could plausibly be held to reside with the local volunteers. The study shows that contestations over cultural control can be understood as a consequence of what happens at the nexus where the different expectation structures of interaction and organization collide (la Cour and Højlund, 2008; Luhmann, 2000). In this case, the local stations, drawing on their resource of legitimate moral autonomy resisted becoming merely 'an addressee of communication' (Luhmann, 2000: 279) by RNLI administration.

Relatedly, as compared with paid employment, the primary axes of resistance were between HQ and local stations and, overlaid on that, between paid managers (at HQ) and local volunteers. Again, HQ and outpost conflicts are by no means unknown in paid work (e.g. Parker, 2002). The difference here was that for the reasons given above, the fact that managers were paid actually reduced their legitimacy, whilst localism meant that what constituted the organizational 'centre' was the lifeboat station rather than HQ. In this way, again, control of organizational meaning – what 'is' the organization – could quite plausibly be seen to be the station. Ekman (2014: 142) notes that research rarely considers 'how employees draw on ambiguities to exercise control or discipline towards their managers', which in the RNLI case was quite evident. The situation was indeed ambiguous. Although one of the managers quoted above referred to 'sacking' people who did not conform to RNLI rules it is not clear what it might mean to sack someone who was not employed in the first place. Moreover, unlike a paid work situation, volunteers could not be replaced at will by the

managers since a replacement would have to volunteer for the work. Similarly, it was ambiguous as to whether the RNLI's legal ownership of boats and other resources constituted meaningful ownership. Taken together, these ambiguities opened up multiple discursive spaces which could not readily be subsumed within the prescribed or official discourse of cultural control. It should be re-iterated that there was in no sense a wholesale rejection of or divergence from RNLI values on the part of the volunteers: the contestations and resistances we are discussing were quite fine-grained, specific and subtle. But this too might be attributed to the volunteer context. After all, had there been such a wholesale rejection it is likely that the volunteers would simply have withdrawn their labour (Pearse, 1993).

In summary, it may therefore be concluded that cultural control and resistance can be present within organizations regardless of whether work is paid for or not, and that in aspects its dynamics are similar in either case. However these dynamics are differently inflected in voluntary situations and potentially weighted towards volunteers. It is not, though, our intention to make a general claim about what is likely to be highly context-specific: the RNLI volunteers had a set of resources to draw on, not the least of which was the evident danger of their work: in other voluntary settings a different dynamic might emerge, just as there are variations amongst cases in paid work settings. Instead, our claim is that by taking away one of the dominant features of existing studies − payment − new aspects of the complex dynamics of cultural control and resistance become visible.

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