Improvement and Public Service Relationships: Cultural Theory and Institutional Work

Abstract

This article examines the influence of cultural-institutional factors on user-provider relationships in public services. In particular, it considers the extent to which public services are attuned to users' relational concerns. Using Grid-Group Cultural Theory (CT) as a way to structure the complexity of public service relationships, the article examines whether the cultural-institutional arrangements in different empirical settings are congruent or dissonant with the patterns of social relations that matter most to service users. This analysis shows users to be in considerable agreement in each setting about how the service 'should be'; yet there are clear differences in how they think the service 'actually is'. Additional study evidence is used to assess these findings. In response, opportunities for 'cultural innovation' are identified (within the institutional work done by public service organizations), and the implications for the value of CT analysis and for user-provider relationships in the public services are discussed.

Introduction

This article considers how more positive and productive relationships might be constructed between the users and providers of public services. It argues that such relationships are an important, but currently under-emphasised feature of public administration. Using Grid-Group Cultural Theory (CT) as a way to structure the complexity of public service relationships, the article examines whether the cultural-institutional arrangements in different empirical settings are congruent or dissonant with the patterns of social relations that matter most to service users.

At a broad level, the nature of public service relationships is defined by the prevailing 'political culture' and the particular varieties of public service reform they promote. For some time there have been indications of a sense of disconnection and disengagement in this public sphere (e.g. Marquand, 2004; Power Inquiry, 2006; Lee & Young, 2013). However, this article focuses on how similar issues are experienced at a more immediate level in the organizational domain. Here, it is claimed, the sometimes impersonalised or even depersonalised services associated with the bureaucratic paternalism of the 1960s and 1970s have been exacerbated by NPM reforms; for example, by the replacement of 'principle and ideas' (where space is provided for ideational concerns) with 'managerialism and public relations' (which seek to technicise or massage them away) (Power Inquiry, 2006). Even trends towards the 'personalisation' of public services have, in practice, been assessed as focusing more on the transfer of risk to individuals than on the quality of personal interactions (Needham, 2011). This is despite long-standing pressures on UK public service leaders to engage more effectively with users (Stoker, 1997; Newman, 2001).

Recently, this has led to calls for a more 'relational state' that prioritises 'deeper' service relationships rather than 'shallow transactions' (Clark et al, 2014; Muir & Parker, 2014). This resonates with the increasing pursuit, particularly but not exclusively in health and social care, of a more *'person-centred'* approach to public services (e.g. Entwistle & Watt, 2013; Murphy et al, 2013), with concomitant prescriptions for change in service values, systems and practices (e.g. Francis, 2013; Kings Fund, 2013). From notions of enhanced accountability and co-production to those of 'disruptive' innovation and even self-determination, these processes generally require a greater focus on 'relational' as well as technical issues - leaving an important question over how more positive and productive relationships might be constructed between service users and providers (Simmons, 2011).

Relationships and the Role of 'Voice'

Notions of a more 'relational state' link with others, such as relational justice (and injustice), relational satisfaction and relational morality. *Relational justice* is a well-established concept, referring to the quality of the interpersonal treatment associated with decision-making (e.g. Greenberg, 1990; Bies & Shapiro, 1988). *Relational satisfaction* follows through on this:

> *'People expect to be listened to, to be respected, to be taken seriously and to have the opportunity to correct relational injustices when they occur… [Their] experiences of emotional tranquillity and <u>relational satisfaction</u> are constructed in part from a history of conformity with these informal agreements…[while] accounts of <u>relational betrayal</u> are typically related using language that is both colourful and bitter'* (Waldron, 2000: 71; emphasis added)

This takes the discussion into the more difficult normative territory of *relational morality*, whereby such factors as close proximity, forced interdependence and potential vulnerability to abuses of power may require service users to develop with providers an unwritten code of *relational ethics* to supplement formal rules (Waldron, 2000). This has particular resonance for public services with relatively frequent human interactions and inter-dependencies, such as those examined in this article.

In "repairing or perhaps improving the relationship" between users and providers (Hirschman, 1992: 77), it has been widely argued that processes of involvement and representation ('voice') are of considerable importance. After nearly five decades of research about responsiveness to users' voice in the face of service decline and 'disorder' (Hirschman, 1970; 1992; cf. Dowding & John, 2012), and user empowerment and partnership, rather than tokenistic or manipulative relationships (Arnstein, 1969; cf. Tritter & McCallum, 2006), user voice ostensibly remains much sought-after in many public services as a way of tapping a range of valuable inputs: knowledges, ideas and individual/collective sentiment.

Yet the place of voice in public service 'fields of relationships' remains ambiguous, contested and dynamic (Newman & Clarke, 2009). There are several different, sometimes competing ways for users' views to be represented, and their interaction is not well understood (Simmons et al, 2012). As service users are not a homogenous group, and their interactions with public services are complex and diverse, this is to be expected. However, these circumstances are not always recognised or dealt with effectively.

Patterns of Social Relations

This article examines the extent to which public services are attuned to the users of the service, and whether the patterns of social relations that matter most to service users are supported in the public service cultures they encounter. In this, the article acknowledges the importance of exchanges at the intersection of ideas and institutions. Institutional theories can help to explain why public service organisations act as they do, and why these organisations are more or less susceptible to user voice. However, they are less helpful in determining the substantive nature of service users' demands, or the projects that connect these demands with their particular preferred solutions (Lieberman, 2002). Ideational perspectives provide a way to frame these issues and distil the key ideas of concern to different actors (Suddaby, 2010).

This article seeks to establish the extent to which there is compatibility between users' perspectives about what patterns of social relations are present within public service fields of relationships, and what patterns are desired. It asks what happens when these patterns settle in ways that create relational conditions of relative consent and congruence, rather than those of relative dissent and dissonance (Simmons, 2011). Are more positive and productive contexts created, for example? Incompatibilities can frustrate users' 'projects' as they work against the grain of dominant norms, beliefs and practices (Archer, 2000). Yet where users' perspectives offer a successful challenge to these phenomena, they may also help rejuvenate and increase the viability of the system (Albury, 2005; Bason, 2010). Hence, rather than eliminating conflict altogether, it may be that a key task for the governance and delivery of public services is to successfully 'manage these contradictions and incongruences' (Cameron and Freeman, 1991: 53).

In doing so, notions of 'institutional work' and/or 'cultural innovation' may be important. *Institutional work* has been defined as "the purposive action of individuals and organizations aimed at creating, maintaining and disrupting institutions" (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006: 215). Cloutier et al (2015) develop these ideas for public administration, showing how institutional work in public service organizations comprises structural, conceptual, operational and relational components (see Figure 1). Specifically, they identify an important integrative role for *relational work* in 'gluing together' the other three forms, and helping public service organisations navigate pluralism and contradiction in the social relations between stakeholder groups (Cloutier et al, 2015: 21).

[FIGURE 1 about here]

Institutional work may take the form of 'mundane, day-to-day adjustments, adaptations, and compromises' (Lawrence et al, 2013: 1). It may also link with notions of *cultural innovation*, involving a reprioritisation or rebalancing within organisational value systems that can help reframe the conceptual or emotional view of a situation, customize new strategies and promote new behaviours (Van Ess Coeling & Simms, 1993). A good example is the promotion of dignity, compassion and respect found in such person-centred strategies as 'experience-based co-design' (Bate & Robert, 2007).

Lawrence & Suddaby (2006: 219) view institutional work as 'intelligent, situated institutional action', in which it is important to recognise the role of power relations. Work on power continues to provide an important contribution to the understanding of public service relationships. Another considerable body of academic work emphasises the role of power in conditioning the agency of public service users, including their propensity to express their views (e.g. Skelcher, 1993; Barnes et al, 2003). However, much less research has been directed toward the influence of broader *cultural* factors on how key relational issues are constructed and negotiated within public service organisations. This article suggests there is a need also to better understand these issues if people are going to feel listened to, respected, and able to correct relational injustices when they occur.

The Role of Culture

The study of *values* such as relational justice, *norms* such as relational morality and *practices* that lead to relational satisfaction (or at least avoid 'relational betrayal') bring the discussion on to the territory of cultural issues. Culture consists in institutions, which preserve cultural values and norms, give them authority, and provide a context for social interaction (Brett, 2000; cf. Douglas, 1987). A general interest in optimising public service cultures for such matters as 'service quality', 'performance' and 'employee motivation' has been the focus of another considerable body of public administration research (e.g. Boyne, 2003; Mannion et al, 2005; Christensen et al, 2007). While these *technical* aspects of service performance are clearly important, this article argues that *relational* issues also require attention.

The article starts from a common set of assertions about the interaction of culture and social relations, and possible ways of understanding such interactions. The first assertion is that patterns of social relations shape people's preferences and justifications so that 'everything human beings do or want is culturally biased' (Mamadouh, 1999: 396). A second assertion concerns the need for 'simplifying models and practices which reduce the complexity of the world but are still congruent with real world processes and relevant to actors' objectives' (Jessop, 2003: 104). This leads to a third

assertion, which is that Grid-Group Cultural Theory (CT), which distinguishes a limited number of cultural biases, provides just such a model because the theory's two dimensions of 'grid' and 'group' 'grasp the fundamental nature of sociality' (Mamadouh, 1999: 396).

In what follows, the role and potential of CT will be examined in interrogating these concerns. In general, the article considers whether CT can provide a useful way to structure and understand the complexity in public service 'fields of relationships'. It reports on research operationalising CT as a tool for measuring the relative difference between users' perceptions of how public services 'should be' and how they 'actually are'. Findings from this research are presented, and other evidence for their validity and reliability is examined. Finally, conclusions are drawn on both the utility of operationalising CT in this way, and on the implications for public services that might follow from this analysis.

Understanding Cultural Diversity in Public Service Contexts

The CT framework and public services

Grid-group cultural theory (Douglas, 1970; 1982; 1992; Thompson et al, 1990) was developed as a tool for understanding cultural diversity. Originally conceived as a theoretical framework/heuristic device, it has since been promoted by some as a full explanatory theory (Mamadouh, 1999). This section introduces key elements of the framework and some key propositions of the theory, before briefly examining its distinctiveness with regard to other relational perspectives in the public administration literature.

CT has its roots in Durkheim's (1951[1897]; 1961[1925]) two basic dimensions of forms of social organization: social regulation (corresponding with 'grid') and social integration (corresponding with 'group') (see Figure 2). 'High grid' cultures are heavily constrained by rules and ascribed behaviour, 'low grid' cultures much less so. Meanwhile, in 'high group' cultures, group membership is strong. In 'low group' cultures it is much weaker.

[FIGURE 2 about here]

CT serves as a means of framing the context for observation, allowing us to construct an analysis of the public service environment. Hood (1998) uses the grid-group heuristic to describe four cultural biases in public administration, each of which describe different ideal-typical patterns of relations. *Hierarchy* (strong social regulation, strong social integration) sums up a bureau-professional relationship in which service users are dependent on experts to define their needs, and administrators to make sure the service is delivered according to strict rules of eligibility. The service is overseen by local or central government politicians, through which individuals can seek accountability and redress. *Individualism* (weak social regulation, weak social integration) is represented by relationships in which service users are constructed as rational, utility-maximising individuals, negotiating the role in the ways that best support their private needs and wants. The provider role is to match supply to this demand, and to respond directly to feedback from individuals. *Egalitarianism* (weak social regulation, strong social integration) is represented by 'mutualistic' forms of relationship, in which a sense of membership/ownership confers rights (but also responsibilities) on users to co-produce services through more collective processes.

The final position is *fatalism* (strong social regulation, weak social integration). Fatalists see social relations as imposed by external structures, and the pressures on them to conform with any social group are weak. They consider the expression of voice as pointless – 'it's never going to change anything,' they reason, 'so why bother?'. Fatalism therefore tends to leave individuals isolated and withdrawn within the public service system. However, this cultural bias can have important effects on user-provider relationships. As Hood (1998: 9) observes, fatalist approaches arise in conditions where co-operation is rejected, distrust widespread, and apathy reigns – 'a state of affairs which will be far from unfamiliar to many readers'.

Understanding cultural tensions

Beyond the above heuristic framework, CT has been developed to include a further set of theoretical propositions. Figure 3 summarises the characteristics of three of these propositions, and their relevance for this article. Importantly, this suggests we should expect to find elements of all four cultural biases in the public service contexts under investigation, that 'inter-cultural communication' between them is important in successfully managing contradictions and incongruences, and that the dominance of overly-narrow cultural narratives should be challenged if system failures are to be avoided (Thompson et al, 1990; Jensen, 1999; 6, 2013).

[FIGURE 3 about here]

Why CT? Relational Issues in Public Administration Research

Some might argue that the study of relational issues in public service organizations is an already-crowded theoretical field. While theoretical triangulation lies beyond the data collected for this study, this variety does raise some interesting questions. Well-known alternative frameworks include public service motivation (PSM), street-level bureaucracy (SLB) and co-production (CP). With their respective focus on: public service professionals' compassion, self-sacrifice and commitment to public interest (Perry, 1996)[1]; professionals who interact directly with citizens and have substantial discretion in the execution of their work (Lipsky, 1980); and how 'professionals and citizens make better use of each other's assets, resources and contributions to achieve better outcomes or improved efficiency' (Bovaird et al, 2015), each of these frameworks has important insights and perspectives to contribute. First, each provides a way of understanding the construction of professionals' relationships with users. Second, each shares the current article's concerns with the importance of institutions (e.g. Meyer et al, 2013; Hupe & Buffat, 2014; Joshi & Moore, 2004) and whether actors experience these institutions as more or less congruent or dissonant with their expectations (e.g. Wright et al, 2012; Hupe & Hill, 2007; Alford & Yates, 2015). Nevertheless, despite their recognition of the importance of incorporating users' views into current and future research (Andersen & Kjeldsen, 2013; Tummers & Bekkers, 2014; Bovaird et al, 2015), rarely yet have these research traditions asked users what matters to *them* and listened carefully to what they have to say.

Moreover, if they did, they might find they lack a sufficiently precise account of the variations in cultural bias found in CT. For example, in its development as a counterweight to the assumption of self-interest posited by the public choice tradition (Perry & Wise, 1990; Vandenabeele, 2007), the

---

[1] Perry (1996) originally suggested a fourth element, 'attraction to policy-making', but this is not supported in recent attempts to validate the PSM instrument (Coursey et al, 2008).

PSM literature did not offer, or seek to offer, any more nuanced account of variations within the patterns of relations between individual professionals and service users that might be cultivated within (but also constrained by) the institutions of *hierarchy* (e.g. in relation to 'mission valence'; Wright et al, 2012) or *egalitarianism* (e.g. in relation to 'person-team fit'; Peng & Pandey, 2013). Similarly, the SLB literature has not fully distinguished between *fatalistic* notions of the highly constrained, but weakly integrated individual staffer, trying to cope under huge pressures and adopting a series of makeshift practices (e.g. Tummers, 2012) and the more *individualistic* deployment of discretion by street-level bureaucrats as, for example, 'agents' (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2012) or 'civic entrepreneurs' (Durose, 2011). In this way, going back to in Figure 2, while PSM theory speaks to the two worlds of *strong social integration* but without distinguishing them clearly, SLB theory does the same in the two worlds of *weak social integration*. More precision may also be required in distinguishing between those strands of co-production that use professional and public authority to pursue the compliance of service users through behaviour change (Brudney & England, 1983; Alford, 2009), which involves *strong social regulation*, and those which align services with users' voluntary individual and/or collective co-productive activity in order to achieve better outcomes or improve efficiency (Brudney & England, 1983; Bovaird et al, 2015), which are more *weakly regulated*.

In sum, then, while PSM and SLB address but do not distinguish the two sides of the *horizontal dimension* in Figure 2, CP addresses but does not clearly distinguish the upper and lower parts of the *vertical dimension*. CT is therefore offered here, not just as a way of accessing users' perspectives, but as a means to more clearly define this institutional variety and the relationships that are created.

Research Methodology and Operationalisation of CT

General Research Approach

The research upon which this article is based involved two phases of data collection. In the *first phase*, semi-structured interviews with service users were used to capture the key dimensions of user voice in public service relationships. A 'major' and 'minor' case was conducted in each of three public service areas: social care, leisure services and housing. In the *second phase*, a face-to-face survey was conducted in each 'major' case (N=543; see Figure 4).

In the *first phase* of data collection, the sample was purposively selected on the basis of their experiences of actual direct interaction with the service provider, to establish the *range* of these experiences from a group guaranteed to be able to speak authoritatively on the subject. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with service users known to have expressed their views through different mechanisms (e.g. contacting elected officials, ombudsmen, using complaints procedures, direct personal communications with service managers, participation in user groups/forums) (N=80), and with provider representatives (N=30). In the *second phase*, samples were drawn randomly from the user population (with no pre-selection criterion of having previously contacted the provider organisation), in order to establish a representative *distribution* of people's views amongst the user population as a whole. Response rates varied between 45-55%. A range of descriptive and paired-samples statistics were used to analyse this data.

[FIGURE 4 about here]

Case Selection and Characteristics

Figure 5 provides a detailed description of each major and minor case. In the absence of national registers of these kinds of public service organisations, cases were identified via desk research and relevant UK databases (e.g. Leisure Management Contractors Association, National Federation of Tenant Management Organisations), with follow-up telephone contact to ensure each case met the selection criteria. Some key characteristics of these cases are shown. The study did not seek to investigate the urban-rural distinction; all cases were in urban locations. Study locations were also similar in their mix of poverty and affluence; sometimes with a little more of one or the other, and generally with one in close proximity with the other. Within each service area, the workforce and services provided were also broadly similar in both major and minor cases. Variations in organisational size *were* incorporated (within the normal range for a typical UK local authority). However, the study found no discernible patterns in differently-sized organizations that suggest significantly different relational experiences; perhaps because even the largest of them was still not particularly large.

[FIGURE 5 about here]

Services were also selected on the basis of their similarity in certain key task-related and demand-related characteristics. First, the 'transaction intensity' or depth of user-provider interactions is greater than services with more limited contact (e.g. passport administration, refuse collection). Second, these are 'wanted', rather than 'unwanted' services (e.g. prison services). Third, these services also tend to have a significant number of medium/long-term, rather than short-term or 'one-shot' users. In each of these respects, relational concerns might be predicted to be important (Simmons & Birchall, 2005). Due to resource constraints, it was decided to control (as far as possible) for these aspects in this research, although future studies might also seek to use them as a basis for comparison.

To distinguish between cases, a combination of service type and organisational form was used. In this way, it was predicted that the cultural-institutional conditions for user-provider relationships might vary in a social care service with a long tradition of being delivered directly by local government; a leisure service with a long tradition of being delivered by a private sector contractor; and a housing service with a long tradition of being delivered by a tenant management organisation. Cases were not selected for their representativeness, but in a purposive sample designed to cover a variety of experiences. Therefore, the study did not set out to investigate such things as organisational form directly. This is not to say that this sample variety was not considered as a potential interpretive resource to understand any possible relationship between structure and user-provider relationships, particularly during the qualitative phases of the study. The findings here were at best inconclusive, however. This is consistent with previous research (6, 1998; Andrews & Beynon, 2011). It is further supported by Cloutier et al's (2015) findings that institutional work in public service organizations has structural, conceptual, operational and relational components – whereby structural influences emerge as perhaps a necessary but insufficient condition for institutional development.

It is not intended, therefore, to generalise about either organisational forms or service sectors on the basis of the single cases in this study. Instead, each sample represents itself, showing what is going on internally within each case (Cohen et al, 2011). This has allowed consideration of the

applicability of a similar methodological approach across a range of organisational contexts (Patton, 2015). The results provide support for its application in at least three such contexts. This may, in turn, inform future research to compare such things as service type and/or organisational form.

Operationalising Cultural Theory

Transcripts from Phase One were analysed (i) by individual respondent ('summaries'), (ii) by question ('cross-sectional analysis'), and (iii) according to selected 'thematic codes'. Transcripts were first read carefully to identify descriptive and inferential codes for classifying concepts and themes in participants' statements. The aim was to let the "voices" of the respondents guide the development of our coding schemes. They were then re-read to code each statement according to these schemes. Finally, the coded statements were subjected to pattern analysis to identify common themes. Importantly, detailed analysis of this data elicited four key themes in the patterns of social relations that mattered most to service users, namely:

- 'courtesy and respect'
- 'how knowledge is valued'
- 'how fairness and equity issues are resolved'
- 'how rules are set and policed'

This data was essential in defining users' intersubjective understandings of the key elements of social relations that could be evaluated using CT. Accordingly, each of these themes was applied in each corner of the CT framework to produce two sets of sixteen attitude statements for the Phase Two survey: first, about how the service *actually is,* then, repeating the exact same criteria, how the service *should be* (see Figure 6). Respondents were given a show card with a five-point Likert-type scale to prompt their responses to each statement as it was read out by the interviewer. The statements were grounded directly in the kinds of language and perspectives that users had articulated themselves in the Phase One interviews. To avoid response bias, statements were mixed up by both theme and cultural bias, reverse polarities were applied to some statements, and respondents were unable to refer to their previous answers.

[FIGURE 6 about here]

The findings from the analysis of this data are presented in the next section. Further data from the study will then be examined to consider the relative reliability and validity of these results. Before moving on, however, it should be noted that the Phase Two survey within each major case also explored potential differences within the service user populations. Variables included standard items such as gender, ethnicity, age, income and educational qualifications, as well as other characteristics such as their perceived personal importance of the service, the availability to them of alternatives, how well-informed they felt about the service in question, and the frequency and duration of their service use as individuals. Importantly, however, cross-tabulations showed no significant patterns of mediating effects from these variables on the cultural analysis presented below.

Cultural Theory: Research Findings and Discussion

Findings from the Cultural Attitude Statements

Users' scores against each of the statements in Figure 6 were combined to calculate a mean aggregate score for each statement in each of the three major cases. It should be noted that it was not intended here to combine the four statements associated with each ideal-type into a single indicator, as the statements are intended to capture the nature of a specific set of social relations rather than the essence of each cultural bias. In this way, users' scores against these statements can only be used in relative, rather than absolute, terms. The mean aggregate scores on each statement were plotted on a concentric graph to enable a visual representation of the tension-bound nature of the cultural context in each of the three major cases (NB. Figure 7 provides a key for the data plots in Figures 8 and 9 below).

[FIGURE 7 about here]

Patterns in the way users felt the service relationship *actually is* were found in each case to be quite idiosyncratic. In this way, the visual 'shapes' formed by these scores on the radial plot display a greater degree of development or attenuation of particular cultural biases despite the common themes employed in operationalising each of them (see Figure 8). This suggests the instrument was capable of picking up nuances and variation in users' perceptions of what were known from the other research evidence to be quite different public service contexts.

[FIGURE 8 about here]

The inconsistencies in these patterns stood in some contrast with the way users felt the service relationship *should be.* Here the data showed a good degree of agreement amongst users across all three cases (see shaded areas in Figure 9), consistent with support for a movement 'down grid' (Dunleavy & Hood, 1994); users tended to agree that their relationships with the service should be no more hierarchical, less fatalistic and more individualistic and egalitarian.

[FIGURE 9 about here]

The above patterns indicate a number of key differences between users' perceptions of how the service 'actually is' and how it 'should be' that suggest certain cultural 'blind spots'. Gaps are least evident in our day care case, where the shapes formed by the 'is' and the 'should be' statements are the most similar. In our leisure case there appears to be a particular blind spot in relation to egalitarianism (and to a lesser extent individualism). Meanwhile, our housing case has work to do to close the gap on at least three dimensions – individualism, egalitarianism and fatalism. Figure 10 provides the results of a paired-samples t-test analysis for each service, showing the variations between users' perceptions of what 'actually is' and what 'should be' on each indicator.

[FIGURE 10 about here]

In themselves these results are intriguing. They appear to illuminate users' expectations and experiences on a range of factors, regarding patterns of social relations that would otherwise be hidden from view. In relation to the propositions of CT in Figure 3, the following might be observed. First, the radial plots exhibit the nature of the 'requisite variety' of cultural biases in these public

service settings. No cultural bias is absent in any setting, however attenuated it might be in particular cases (for example, egalitarianism in the housing case, or fatalism in the leisure services case). This suggests it is possible to map the constituent cultural biases present within the system in these organisations. Second, the compatibility between users' perspectives about what patterns of social relations are present and what patterns are desired is examined. This suggests there is greater compatibility in some aspects than in others. The question that remains is whether this is important. The 'theory of surprise' might suggest that it is, in that public service organisations may leave themselves open to unforeseen difficulties if they proceed to ignore the points of friction, irregularities, and discontinuities that emerge from this form of analysis. However, such claims require further support. Further indications of their reliability and validity were therefore sought from the other research data.

(i) Additional Analysis from the Qualitative Data

Another iteration of qualitative data analysis was conducted in relation to the above findings. This demonstrated a good degree of fit with users' responses to the 'is' statements. The *day care case study* provided the most 'rounded' levels of support to service users, with a mix of 'benign hierarchy' from managerial staff and personalised support from individually-allocated 'keyworkers', alongside a sense of 'groupness' from both group activities and group representation (although this was variably-developed amongst users). This led to a generally positive user outlook, or at least the sense that things could be quickly sorted out if there was a problem.

> *"We have the right to express what we feel. If the staff can't help, more often than not they are able to point someone in the direction of someone else that might be able to...There's a common bond. We're not in a state that controls what we think and do"* (Day Care Service User, M, 40s)

Yet this general sense of congruence did not mean users were prepared to simply sit back and take a passive role in the service relationship; the importance of ongoing vigilance was emphasised. As one service user put it:

> *"You've got to challenge the staff to make the service better because if they think it's OK they're just going to sit back and on their laurels… sometimes they think they know better than us. And that's not always the case"* (Day Care Service User, M, 30s)

In the *leisure case study*, the private company running the service was certainly alert to the requirements of its hierarchical relationship with the council as client. It was also relatively receptive to the demands of individual users, although these forms of relationship were often quite 'thin' and transactional, which users often considered insensitive. This view was further supported in provider interviews:

> *"Customer care? Well, you need to try and keep the customers happy and make sure they come back. That's my view on the matter… Whereas you would really like to say 'piss-off' - excuse me on tape… (Contract Manager, M, 30s)*

However, negativity here was particularly evident about more egalitarian forms of relationship. *First*, there was a lack of recognition for users who had deliberately grouped together. This included early-morning swimmers and badminton players, who share the facilities on a regular basis and so tend to

interact about matters of common interest. Requests for changes and improvements from such seemingly legitimate groups were often considered challenging, and managers preferred to treat them as separate individuals. In one case it was requested that a letter of complaint with more than twenty signatories be withdrawn, and individual letters sent instead. *Second*, notions of users being empowered alongside professionals in decision-making were also anathema:

> *"One customer said that in the Centre he used to go to, instead of the Steering Group being chaired by the centre management, he actually chaired the committee, which was the user group. And he felt it was a good idea that should be the process here. And I thought, 'I don't like the sound of that'. You have got the possibility of a quango being generated, a little tight knit club that seems to have a lot of power. There was no way I was going to let that happen"*
> (Leisure Services Manager, M, 30s)

Meanwhile, in our *housing case study* we were regaled with stories of broken promises, lack of access to senior staff and opaque decision-making. Combined with other indicators of marginalisation amongst residents of the estate, the sense of fatalism was tangible.

> **Interviewer: We are interested about how people are able to feed their own views into things and to let people know what they think about things…**
>
> Interviewee 1: Well, if you're an ordinary tenant you can't. The most you can do is go up to counter in the housing office and get no further, I should imagine.
>
> --
>
> Interviewee 2: 'There have been occasions when they've been putting on a show, but the thing is you can tell. They're backing away from you all the time. They're not going to stand there and tell you what's going on… I'll wait for the day when all my problems are over. But now I'm just waiting for the day when I next sit and put pen to paper again, go over the same old ground, the same old requests and the same old non-acknowledgement'
>
> **'Interviewer: That must make you feel a little bit….'**
>
> Interviewee 2: 'Despondent to say the least.'

In short, in each of the above settings, service relationships were configured in ways that fit well with the insights from the CT framework. Individually, there were always exceptions to this - specific members of staff or service users who were able to negotiate the cultural terrain in ways that compensated for any organisational blind spots. However, overall, the qualitative data broadly confirms the extent to which the different cultural biases are recognised and contained in different public service settings.

(ii) Additional Analysis from the Survey Data

The survey data was also interrogated further with regard to public service relationships. First, it was examined in relation to the 'compatibility condition'. This condition hypothesises *that viable patterns arise when social relations and cultural biases are mutually supportive of each other*. Therefore we should expect users to be most positive about the relationship in the day care case study, where the CT analysis suggests the greatest level of compatibility, followed next by the leisure case study and finally by the housing case study. This hypothesis is broadly confirmed (see Figure 11). Users were asked on a five-point Likert-type scale: *'On balance, how positive or negative is your*

relationship with the people responsible for providing the service?'. 89% of day care users, 60% of leisure service users, but only 32% of tenants perceived this relationship to be positive.

[FIGURE 11 about here]

Second, an extension of this hypothesis was examined: namely, *that a relational component to service provision adds value beyond that of simple technical competence*. Support for this hypothesis would require users who were more positive about the service relationship to also be more positive in their evaluations of service performance. Again, this seems to be the case (see Figure 11). Users were asked on a five-point Likert-type scale: *'On balance, how good a service do you think you get?'*. Chi-square tests confirmed a clear relationship between the 'relationship quality' and 'service performance' variables in each of the above service settings.

User assessments of both service relationships and service performance therefore appear to support the patterns found in the CT analysis. While it remains difficult to generalise from a single study about the role of cultural compatibility within a tension-bound cultural context in producing these results, there appears to be scope for these issues to be explored in further research. Such an endeavour might hope to build a model from which general working assumptions can be developed and tested to deduce specific predictions about likely outcomes of particular cultural innovations in the public services.

[FIGURES 12a and 12b about here]

A final extension of the above hypothesis - *that user voice is important in promoting relational justice* – was also examined. Factors relating to the culture of public service organisations are important for the 'possibility spaces' or 'opportunity structures' they are felt to either open up or close off (Simmons et al, 2012). This was investigated in two ways. First, a positive role for voice would require an association between users' perceptions of both relational quality and service performance and the question: "*Are there are good opportunities available to express your views about the service?*". Chi-square tests again confirmed clear relationships in cross-tabulations of these variables (see Figures 12a and b). In other words, the more likely users were also to say there were good 'voice opportunities', the more positive their perceptions of both relational quality and service performance.

[FIGURE 13 about here]

Second, in relation to CT, it might be assumed that the more users feel *unable* to engage effectively in public service relationships, the more likely they might be to feel isolated and fatalistic. Again, this assumption is supported. Those who said 'no' were significantly more likely to exhibit more fatalistic perceptions (see Figure 13). In promoting greater relational justice in public services, it would therefore seem advantageous for greater efforts to be made to listen, engage and respond to user perspectives (Simmons, 2011).

Conclusions

This article draws together a series of inter-connected themes and evidence with regard to user-provider relationships in the public services. In concluding this analysis, three seem worthy of note:

- the value of the CT framework in helping to understand the influence of the cultural-institutional context on public service relationships;

- the extent to which public services are attuned to service users' relational concerns (and the role of 'voice' in the construction and negotiation of these concerns);

- whether cultural innovation can help manage emergent contradictions and incongruences within the service system.

The Value of the CT Framework

First, the article assesses the value of the CT framework in helping to understand the influence of the cultural-institutional context on public service relationships. Using a set of four empirically-derived, intersubjective concerns, CT is operationalised here as a tool for measuring the relative difference between users' perceptions of how public services 'should be' and how they 'actually are'. The mapping of these elements in Figure 9 seeks to capture the extent to which the different cultural biases are 'recognised' and 'contained' within three different public service settings. This evidence indicates a desired movement 'down grid' towards more individualistic and egalitarian patterns of social relations - although not necessarily at the expense of the cultural bias of hierarchy. This re-emphasises the need for 'intercultural communication' between all four cultural biases (cf. Jensen, 1999), rather than the abandonment of one in favour of others.

With regard to individualism, the items concerning 'fairness and equity' and 'how knowledge is valued' were statistically significant in the survey data. There is a lingering sense here, perhaps, of people's personal agency being denied (LeGrand, 2007; Boyle, 2013). Yet, even more clearly, the data calls attention to egalitarian patterns of social relations, where all four sets of user concerns were statistically significant ('courtesy and respect'; 'fairness and equity'; 'how knowledge is valued'; and 'how rules are set and policed'). Ensuring relational opportunities that acknowledge people's collective identity and give power to collective voice requires a different, more inclusive approach (Simmons et al, 2009; Bovaird et al, 2015). This article suggests the CT framework as a suitable candidate for better understanding such issues.

As stated above, it is difficult to generalise from a single study about the role of cultural compatibility within a tension-bound cultural context in producing these results. However, as CT suggests that public service organizations leave themselves exposed if they proceed to ignore the points of friction, irregularities, and discontinuities that emerge from this form of analysis, an early warning system that serves to challenge the dominance of overly-narrow cultural narratives, and therefore manage cultural-institutional contradictions and incongruences, would seem advantageous. The CT instrument in this study was capable of picking up nuances and variation in users' perceptions that were consistent with the other research evidence in the above public service settings. There remains a need to continue to develop such tools through further research that make these issues more manifest, illuminating users' expectations and experiences and showing something of the relative tensions present in public service relationships.

Are Public Services Attuned to Service Users' Relational Concerns?

Second, this article assesses the extent to which public services are attuned to service users' relational concerns, and the role of 'voice' in the construction and negotiation of these concerns. As

this article demonstrates, there is variation in the extent that public services are attuned to the patterns of social relations that matter most to service users. The question is whether such variation is important. The evidence suggests it is, and *that viable patterns arise when social relations and cultural biases are mutually supportive of each other*. In other words, more positive and productive contexts seem to be created under relational conditions of relative consent and congruence, rather than those of relative dissent and dissonance. Calls have been made for a more 'relational state' that prioritises 'deeper' service relationships rather than 'shallow transactions' - particularly in services with a relatively high level of human interaction between users and providers (Muir & Parker, 2014). This article provides a degree of support for this position; moreover, *that a relational component to service provision adds value beyond that of simple technical competence*.

This makes further investigation of users' relational concerns important. Welcoming user voice and tuning in to its messages is important to this endeavour - even where this fails to positively reinforce dominant cultural-institutional patterns within public service organisations (Simmons, 2011). The role of power is acknowledged in conditioning the agency of public service users. However, even if power is relatively benign, relational compatibilities cannot be taken for granted. Hence, as well as seeking to understand how key relational issues are *constructed*, this article is also interested in how they are *negotiated* within public service organisations. Here, the data suggests *that opening up 'possibility spaces' for user voice remains important in promoting relational justice* (cf. Waldron, 2000). The more likely users were to say there were good 'voice opportunities', the more positive their perceptions of both relational quality *and* service performance. Conversely, the more users feel *unable* to engage effectively, the more likely they were to feel isolated and fatalistic. For these reasons, it would therefore seem advantageous for greater efforts to be made to listen, engage and respond to user perspectives.

Can Cultural Innovation Help Manage Emergent Contradictions and Incongruences?

Finally, a key focus of this article concerns whether cultural innovation can provide a moderating influence and help manage emergent contradictions and incongruences as part of the 'institutional work' done within the service system. As stated above, cultural innovation involves a reprioritisation, recombination or rebalancing within organisational value systems that can help reframe the conceptual or emotional view of a situation, customize new strategies and promote new behaviours (Van Ess Coeling & Simms, 1993).

In the context of this study, cultural innovation might entail consideration of what is required to produce movements on the 'map' to a more congruent position. However, while congruence can produce a relatively 'compatible' pattern of social relations that may be widely valued, it should be noted that user perspectives on points of friction, irregularities, and discontinuities are often important in supporting such innovation. There is evidence here of a more prosaic, day-to-day basis upon which managing these contradictions and incongruences - rather than eliminating them altogether – may contribute to successful change. Such management is as much about detail as it is about generalities, and this detail requires careful construction and negotiation. Even in this study's most congruent empirical setting, day care, there was a sense that this was an ongoing activity.

In each case reported in this research, it has been possible to sit with managers, staff and user representatives to discuss how gaps might be closed. First, this has helped promote organisational commitments to acknowledging and challenging tacit institutional barriers. Second, it has led to the

'purposive action' beholden of institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006); from the redrafting of standard operating procedures, to the establishment of new mechanisms for user voice, to the training of front-line staff, to new, 'nudge'-type activities in the (re-)phrasing and (re-)presentation of communications. For individual staff members it has promoted the development of new skills (such as 'active listening') and involvement in new structures and outreach activities (such as 'experience-based design' projects). For individual service users, this has provided some new formal opportunities to engage. However, perhaps more importantly, the emergence of more congruent relational conditions may encourage them to contribute, through voice, to the maintenance and/or improvement of the service in ways that are meaningful to them. This includes the seemingly everyday, ad-hoc, informal engagement with providers that represents a large proportion of user-provider interactions, but is often left unrecognised and unrecorded by formal systems (Simmons et al, 2012).

In this way, cultural innovation in public service organisations may not be about grand, sweeping narratives. It is for public service organisations to marshal the above perspectives via intelligent, situated institutional action as they seek to manage the contradictions and incongruences they create. This requires skill and commitment. As cultural-institutional arrangements are continually produced and reproduced in the patterns of social relations in different public service contexts, it is a task that can never be said to be complete. Hence, 6 (2003: 410) asserts that "solutions will only ever be partial, contingent and provisional" and that "the challenge is not an optimisation problem, but a coping problem". In this way, 'customizing new strategies' and 'promoting new behaviours' that respond appropriately to these agendas (or others that emerge at different times or in different service settings) is likely to remain as an important challenge for many public services. For those where there are relatively frequent human interactions and inter-dependencies, such as the services examined in this article, this might reasonably include a focus on building better relationships.

References

Albury, D. (2005) 'Fostering Innovation in Public Services', *Public Money and Management*, 25(1):51-56

Alford, J. (2009) *Engaging Public Sector Clients*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

Alford, J. & Yates, S. (2015) 'Co-Production of Public Services in Australia', *Australian J. Public Administration*, online 27 May: doi: 10.1111/1467-8500.12157

Andersen, L. & Kjeldsen, A. (2013) 'Public Service Motivation, User Orientation, and Job Satisfaction', *International Public Management Journal*, 16(2):252-274

Andrews, R. & Beynon, M. (2011) 'Organizational Form and Strategic Alignment in a Local Authority', *Public Organization Review,* 11(3):201-218

Archer, M. (2000) *Being Human: The Problem of Agency*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Arnstein, S. (1969) 'A Ladder of Citizen Participation', *American Inst. Planners Journal*, July:216–224

Barnes, M., Newman, J., Knops, A. & Sullivan, H. (2003) 'Constituting 'the Public' in Public Participation', *Public Administration*, 81(2):379–399

Bason, C. (2010) *Leading Public Sector Innovation,* Bristol: Policy Press

Bate, P. & Robert, G. (2007) *Bringing user experience to healthcare improvement: experience-based design,* Oxford: Radcliffe

Bies, R. & Shapiro, D. (1988) 'Voice and Justification: their influence on procedural fairness judgments', *Academy of Management Journal*, 31(3):676-685

Bovaird, T., van Ryzin, G., Loeffler, E. & Parrado, S. (2015) 'Activating Citizens to Participate in Collective Co-production of Public Services', *Journal of Social Policy,* 44(1):1-23

Boyle, D. (2013) *The 'Barriers to Choice' Review: how are people using choice in public services?*, London: Cabinet Office

Boyne, G. (2003) 'Sources of Public Service Improvement', *J.Public Administration Research and Theory*, 13(3):367-394

Brett, J. (2000) 'Culture and Negotiation', *International Journal of Psychology,* 35(2):97-104

Brudney, J. & England, R. (1983) 'Toward a Definition of the Coproduction Concept', *Public Administration Review*, 43:59–65.

Cameron, K. & Freeman, S. (1991) 'Cultural Congruence, Strength and Type', *Organizational Change and Development*, 5:23-58

Christensen, T., Laegreid, P., Roness, P. & Rovik, A. (2007) *Organization Theory and the Public Sector*, London: Routledge

Clark, M., Denham-Vaughan, S. & Chidiac, M. (2014) "A relational perspective on public sector leadership and management", *I.J. Leadership in Public Services*, 10(1):4-16

Cloutier, C., Denis, J-L., Langley, A. & Lamothe, L. (2015) 'Agency at the Managerial Interface: Public Sector Reform as Institutional Work', *J. Public Administration Research and Theory*, online June 1: doi:10.1093/jopart/muv009

Cohen, L., Manion, L. & Morrison, K. (2011) *Research Methods in Education*, London: Routledge Falmer

Coursey, D., Perry,J., Brudney, J. & Littlepage, L. (2008) 'Psychometric Verification of Perry's Public Service Motivation Instrument', *Rev.Public Personnel Administration*, 28:79-90

Douglas, M. (1970) *Natural Symbols: explorations in cosmology*, London: Barrie and Rockliff

Douglas, M. (1982) *In the Active Voice*, London: Routledge

Douglas, M. (1987) *How Institututions Think*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul

Douglas, M. (1992) *Risk and Blame: Essays in Cultural Theory*, London: Routledge

Dowding, K. & John, P. (2012) *Exits, Voices and Social Investment: Citizens' Reaction to Public Services*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Dunleavy, P. & Hood, C. (1994) 'From Old Public Administration to New Public Management', *Public Money and Management*, 14(3):9-16

Durkheim, E. (1951[1897]) *Suicide*, tr.Spaulding, J. & Simpson, G., London: Routledge

Durkheim, E. (1961[1925]) *Moral Education*, tr.Wilson, E. & Schnurer, H., New York: Free Press

Durose, C. (2011) 'Front-Line Work in UK Local Governance', *Political Studies* 59(4):978–995

Entwistle, V. & Watt, I. (2013) 'Treating Patients as Persons: A Capabilities Approach to Support Delivery of Person-Centered Care', *American Journal of Bioethics*, 13(8):29-39

Francis, R. (2013) *Report of the Mid-Staffordshire NHS Trust Inquiry*, London: Stationery Office

Greenberg, J. (1990) 'Organizational Justice', *J. Management,* 16:399-432

Hirschman, A. (1970) *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press

Hirschman, A. (1992) *Rival Views of Market Society and Other Recent Essays*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

Hood, C. (1998) *The Art of the State*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

Hupe, P. & Buffat, A. (2014) 'A Public Service Gap: Capturing contexts in a comparative approach of street-level bureaucracy', *Public Management Review*, 16(4):548-569

Hupe, P. & Hill, M. (2007) 'Street-level Bureaucracy and Public Accountability', *Public Administration*, 85:279–299

Jensen. L. (1999) 'Images of Democracy in Danish Social Housing', in Thompson, M., Grendstad, G. & Selle, P.(eds.) *Cultural Theory as Political Science*, London: Routledge

Jessop, B. (2003) 'Governance and Meta-governance', in Bang, H.(ed.) *Governance as Social and Political Communication*, Manchester: MUP

Joshi, A. and Moore, M. (2004), 'Institutionalised Co-production: unorthodox public service delivery in challenging environments', *J.Development Studies*, 40(4):31

Kings Fund (2013) *Patient-Centred Leadership*, London: Kings Fund

Lawrence, T. & Suddaby, R. (2006) 'Institutions and Institutional Work', in S. Clegg et al (eds.) *Handbook of Organizational Studies*, London: Sage

Lawrence, T., Suddaby, R. & Leca, B. (2013) *Institutional Work*, Cambridge: CUP

Le Grand, J. (2007) *The Other Invisible Hand: delivering public services through choice and competition*, Princeton: Princeton University Press

Lieberman, R. (2002) 'Ideas, Institutions, and Political Order', *American Political Science Review*, 96(4):697-712

Lee. L. & Young, P. (2013) 'A Disengaged Britain?', *British Social Attitudes: 30th Report*, London: NatCen

Lipsky, M. (1980) *Street-Level Bureaucracy*, New York: Russell Sage Foundation

Mamadouh, V. (1999) 'Grid-Group Cultural Theory: an introduction', *GeoJournal*, 47:395-409

Mannion, R., Davies, H. & Marshall, M. (2005) *Cultures for Performance in Health Care,* Maidenhead: Open University Press

Marquand, D. (2004) *Decline of the Public*, Oxford: Polity

Meyer, R., Egger-Peitler, I., Hollerer, M. & Hammerschmid, G. (2014) 'Of Bureaucrats and Passionate Public Managers: Institutional Logics and Public Service Motivation', *Public Administration,* 92(4):861–885

Maynard-Moody, S. & Musheno, M. (2012) 'Street-Level Workers as Agents and Pragmatists', *Public Administration Review*, 72:S16–S23

Muir, R. & Parker, I. (2014) *How the Relational State Will Transform Public Services*, London: IPPR

Murphy, D., Duggan, M. and Joseph, S. (2013) 'Relationship-based social work and its compatibility with the person-centred approach', *British Journal of Social Work*, 43(4):703–19

Needham, C. (2011) *Personalising Public Services*, Bristol: Policy Press

Newman, J. (2001) *Modernising Governance*, London: Sage

Newman, J. & Clarke, J. (2009) *Publics, Politics and Power*, London: Sage

Patton, M. (2015) *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods*, London: Sage

Peng, S. & Pandey, S. (2013) 'Does Organizational Experience Shape Employees' Public Service Motivation?', *Academy of Management Proceedings*: doi:10.5465/AMBPP.2013.16235

Perry, J. (1996) 'Measuring Public Service Motivation' *J. Public Administration Research and Theory*, 6(1):5–22

Perry, J. & Wise, L. (1990) 'The Motivational Bases of Public Service', *Public Administration Review*, 50:367–373

Power Inquiry (2006) *Power to the People*, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Simmons, R. (2011) 'Leadership and Listening in Public Services', *Social Policy and Administration*, 45(5):539–568

Simmons, R. & Birchall, J. (2005) 'A Joined-Up Approach to User Participation in Public Services', *Social Policy and Administration*, 39(3):260-283

Simmons, R., Birchall J. & Prout, A. (2012) 'User Involvement in Public Services: 'choice about voice'', *Public Policy and Administration,* 27(1):3-29

Simmons, R., Powell, M. & Greener, I. (2009)(eds.) *The Consumer in Public Services: choice, values and difference*, Bristol: Policy Press

6, P. (1998) 'Ownership and the New Politics of the Public Interest Services', *Political Quarterly*, 69(4):404-414

6, P. (2003) 'Institutional Viability: a neo-Durkheimian Theory', *Innovation*, 16(4):395-415

6 P. (2013) 'Anomalies, political judgement and change in informal institutions in government', paper to *Political Studies Association Conference*, Cardiff, 25-27th March

Skelcher, C. (1993) 'Involvement and Empowerment in Local Public Services', *Public Money and Management,* 13(3):13-20

Stoker, G. (1997) 'Local Political Participation', in Hambleton, R.(ed.) *New Perspectives on Local Governance*, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Suddaby, R. (2010) 'Challenges for Institutional Theory', *J. Management Inquiry*, 19(1):14–20

Thompson, M., Ellis, R. & Wildavsky, A. (1990) *Cultural Theory*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press

Tritter, J. & McCallum, A. (2006) 'The Snakes and Ladders of User Involvement', *Health Policy*, 76(2):156-168.

Tummers, L. (2012) 'Policy Alienation of Public Professionals', *Public Administration Review*, 72(4):516–525

Tummers, L. & Bekkers, V. (2014) 'Policy Implementation, Street-level Bureaucracy and the Importance of Discretion', *Public Management Review,* 16(4):527-547

Vandenabeele, W. (2007) 'Toward a Public Administration Theory of Public Service Motivation', *Public Management Review*, 9(4):545-556

Van Ess Coeling, H. & Simms, L. (1993) 'Facilitating Innovation through Cultural Assessment' *Journal of Nursing Administration*, 23(4):46-53

Waldron, V. (2000) 'Relational Experiences and Emotion at Work', in Fineman, S.(ed.) *Emotion in Organizations*, London: Sage

Wright, B., Moynihan, D. & Pandey, S. (2011) 'Transformational Leadership, Public Service Motivation, and Mission Valence', *Public Administration Review*, 72(2):206–215