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# **Fitting In: The Double-Sided Work of Intermediating Social Innovation in Local Governance**

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## **Abstract**

Front-line workers have received much praise over the past decades for their unique position and skills for making a difference in complex, changing and power-ridden local governance systems. The recent upsurge of social innovation forces us to critically rethink their double-sided work of intermediating between informal, creative and subversive practices and the existing institutional order. Social innovations seek to address unmet local needs in ways that local governance organisations do not have the capacities or resources for and, more fundamentally, strive to transform hegemonic relationships and values. Intermediaries are tasked with 'fitting in': supporting social innovations to sustain themselves in local governance as well as adapting the existing institutional order to innovative forms of thinking, acting and organising. Illustrated by empirical findings from research in Liverpool, the chapter demonstrates how intermediaries tread a fine line between cooptation and transformation. The chapter argues that a relational approach helps to reimagine how practices of intermediating can enable social innovation to transform local governance.

**Key words:** intermediaries, social innovation, local governance, transformation, practice

## Introduction

Front-line workers have received much praise over the past decades in the context of decentralisation, citizen participation and interactive governance (Forester 1999; Durose 2007, 2011; Van Hulst et al. 2011; Durose et al. 2015; Escobar 2015; Laws and Forester 2015). Local governance has been changing rapidly, with ambitious policy goals and rhetoric mediated by complex situations, dense webs of power relationships, and intransigent institutions (Durose et al. 2009). Amongst the many front-line workers in charge of navigating this intricate landscape, there are ‘exemplary practitioners’ (Van Hulst et al. 2011) able to ‘make a difference’ in this challenging interface of citizens and local governance organisations. A rapidly expanding literature on exemplary practitioners has been developing typologies and profiles that acclaim the flexible, creative and improvised practices with which they ‘intermediate’ in complex local contexts to enhance relationships, problem-solving and democracy. This is a remarkable departure from the problematic mould of the street-level bureaucracy literature, which initially emphasized the double-sided nature of coping with the discretion to interpret policies in encounters with citizens (Bartels 2013).

While it seems like a logical step to extend the analysis of exemplary practitioners to the newly emerging context of social innovation, we need to critically rethink the double-sided work involved with intermediating between community-driven innovations and the institutional order of local governance. Social innovations provide new ways of thinking, acting and organizing to address unmet local needs (Seyfang and Smith 2007; Moulaert et al. 2013). This is often interpreted as a welcome development because, especially due to austerity, local governance organisations tend to lack the capacities or resources for developing effective and sustainable solutions. However, social innovation should not be reduced to stepping into a public service gap, as it strives to transform the hegemonic relationships and values that created and maintained the problems in the first place. And as it turns out, it is this hegemonic institutional order that actively inhibits social innovations to have a sustainable and transformative impact on local governance (Bartels 2017). This renders the work of ‘social innovation intermediaries’ (Heales 2017; SUI 2018a) so crucial.

Therefore, this chapter seeks to answer the following research question: *how does the work of intermediaries support social innovation in local governance?* By focusing on the work intermediaries do, the aim is to map their everyday practices and critically interpret these in relation to hegemonic discourses and power relationships that underpin local governance. Taking a critical, performative and relational approach, ‘practices’ are understood not merely as what intermediaries do, but as a holistic set of capacities, identities

and values they negotiate and sustain in interaction with others, concrete situations and wider institutional settings (Griggs et al. 2014). Drawing on original empirical research conducted in Liverpool, a city of stark contrasts when it comes to community-driven innovation, the chapter consolidates existing knowledge on social innovation intermediaries and suggests a relational reimagining of future research and practice.

The chapter starts by tracing key developments and features of studies of exemplary practitioners at the front line of local governance. It then turns to social innovation and review the role of intermediaries and conceptualizations of their double-sided work. The third section outlines the research project on which this chapter is based and explains data collection and analysis methods. Set within the local governance context in Liverpool, the next section discusses the main findings: intermediaries are tasked with ‘fitting in’, ‘treading a fine line’ between instrumentalization of community-based innovations and transformation of local governance. The analysis shows that intermediaries in Liverpool are predominantly ‘guiding’ social innovations within the existing system, to the detriment of those with a transformative ‘driving force’. The final discussion considers how a more transformative approach can be advanced by reimagining practices of intermediating based on a relational approach geared to fitting local governance institutions in with the values, needs and dynamics of community-based innovations.

### **Exemplary practitioners at the front line**

The well-known trope that street-level bureaucrats, or front-line workers, have an important influence on policy needs no rehearsing here. What this section draws attention to is the double-sided nature of their work and the influence this has on relationships between citizens and the state and on socio-economic outcomes. The role of front-line workers is traditionally considered to be rather problematic: their discretion to interpret policies, rules and procedures in concrete situations drives them, under conditions of limited resources, capacities and monitoring, to develop coping mechanisms that lead to undesirable treatment of citizens and sustain socio-economic inequalities (Lipsky 1980). Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003, 2012) offered an important corrective to this view by revealing that front-line workers are not merely ‘state agents’ responsible for upholding formal rules and working within policy mandates but also ‘citizen agents’ endeavouring to respond flexibly and ethically to complex social situations and client needs. Having to go back and forth between both these identities (Dubois 2010), front-line workers engage in practices of pragmatic improvisation in the

process of interacting with citizens to negotiate dilemmas of social equity and the complexities of institutional arrangements, political discourses and governance relationships.

In this light, front line workers have received strong appraisal. Over the past decade, their encounters with citizens started to be understood in terms of their possibilities and value for realising policy ambitions for decentralisation, citizen participation and interactive governance (Bartels 2013). The extent and nature of interaction between front line workers and citizens at a local level has significantly changed, becoming a critical venue for giving shape to shifting citizen-state relationships. “Reform is difficult, however, and governance stakeholders, particularly at the local level, do not have the capacity or resources to redress many of the biases in the system.” (Durose et al. 2009, 211). Local governance organisations tend to enact standardised ways of engaging with citizens that render the substance and sustainability of their commitment to structural changes in relationships and outcomes dubious (Bartels, 2016). Front line workers are therefore key to navigating the inherent dilemmas and structural difficulties of local encounters (Forester 1999; Durose 2007, 2011; Van Hulst et al. 2011; Needham and Mangan 2014; Laws and Forester 2015). Their unique position and skills for problem-solving, communication and relationship building have been found crucial for making a difference in complex, changing and power-ridden local governance systems.

Hence, after the initial interest in the challenges facing street level bureaucrats in general, we have seen the emergence of “a substantive research focus on particular [outstanding] individuals and the need to label their practices, skills and themselves” (SUI 2018a, 4). For instance, Durose (2007, 2011) traced how front-line workers, operating at the boundary of crumbling conventional structures and still emerging new practices, were not so much concerned with reconciling policies with complex realities as with creative and flexible practices of civic entrepreneurship in the communities they work in. Such ‘exemplary practitioners’ (Van Hulst et al. 2011) have unique sets of capacities for ‘making a difference’ (Durose et al. 2015) in deprived neighbourhoods, ‘boundary spanning’ (Van Meerkerk and Edelenbos 2018) in complex institutional settings, and building durable relationships of urban democracy (Laws and Forester 2015). Without pretending to comprehensively review this literature, three key features and limitations can be highlighted.

First, its main concern is appraisal of the relational and communicative practices through which exemplary practitioners manage to make a difference in the face of deep-seated conflict, wicked problems and lacking resources and abilities to collaborate (Forester 1999). While extremely insightful, this focus tends to ignore people and cases failing to make

a positive, transformative difference as well as those who enact ‘exemplary’ capacities to sustain hegemonic powers and interests (Heidelberg 2016). Second, the focus is placed on individual practices in order to develop typologies and profiles of roles (e.g. Durose et al. 2015). Even though multiple roles and relationships with other key actors are emphasised (Bartlett and Dibben 2002), this individualist focus tends to downplay the relational nature of front-line practices, identities, capacities and values (Bussu and Bartels 2014; Mangan et al. 2018). Third, most studies take an interpretive approach to capture the situated agency of front-line workers (e.g. Durose 2007). This enables analysis of the constraints, dilemmas and ingenuity of their practices in complex contexts, but does not always translate into critical, transformative arguments for how to challenge hegemonic discourses and power relations.

Therefore, the focus should not be on exemplary practitioners at the front line in and of themselves but as a lens on practices of *intermediating* between informal, creative and subversive activities and the hegemonic institutional order of local governance. This can be done by taking an approach that is critical, relational and performative (Forester 1993; Hajer and Wagenaar 2003; Barnes and Prior 2009; Griggs et al. 2014). By looking at what front-line workers do to *perform* interactive modes of local governance, we can get a fine grasp of the micro-political work, backstage scripting and responsive improvisation they do to create in-between spaces in which officials, politicians and citizens reshape their relationships (Escobar 2015). By understanding these practices as *relational* (interactional and situated) processes, we can “chart how individuals seek to persuade, defend and legitimate positions in collaborative situations, drawing on a range of competing discourses.” (Mangan et al. 2018, 1367). Their role, capacities, identities and values are not self-contained but always sustained and negotiated in relation to others and the (direct and wider) situation (Bartels 2017). In this vein, a *critical* approach does not imply a regressive dichotomy between co-optation by and subversion of hegemonic institutions, but leads us to analyse the contingency and struggle that characterise the ways in which front-line practices preserve, challenge or transform existing practices of governance.

### **Social innovation intermediaries**

The recent upsurge of social innovation forces us to critically rethink the double-sided work of intermediating. Social innovation refers to new ways of thinking, acting and organising that address unmet social needs, empower marginalised groups, and transform underling social relationships (Seyfang and Smith 2007; Moulaert et al. 2013; Addarii and Lipparini 2017). Especially since the financial and economic crisis, there has been widespread

recognition that existing governance systems do not have the capacities or resources for generating effective and sustainable responses to the social, political, economic and environmental crises that we face. Local, national and international policies therefore actively stimulate alternative, grass-roots ways of enhancing local wellbeing and sustainability. However, “[a]ll too often, (local) governments do not provide conditions conducive for innovations to emerge, thrive and have a sustainable impact” (Bartels 2017, 3791). In practice, social innovations are constantly resisted, challenged and contested by those invested in the status quo. This raises critical questions about the ways in which ‘intermediaries’ are or could be supporting social innovations to enable fundamental transformations of local governance.

The double sided nature of their work is such that, despite increasing calls for and occurrences of social innovation, intermediaries face a tall order in the austerity-struck desert of local governance in which policy commitment to social innovation can quickly evaporate. As Taylor (2011, 263) put it:

“Will local authorities that have been put on the defensive, that are struggling to live with huge cuts and that may well have lost many of the posts and post holders with the experience to fill this role be open to experimenting, taking risks and sharing power?”

Fast-forward several years and this seems almost a rhetorical question. How are intermediaries supposed to facilitate innovation when local governments lack the resources and capacities? How can they support social innovations to emerge and thrive in communities struggling to survive because of strongly diminished income, services and resources? How can they avoid that initiatives are co-opted into replacing the state and legitimising the withdrawal of public funding and services? And how can they ensure that grass-roots initiatives are empowered to make structural differences to local wellbeing and sustainability?

An emerging literature on social innovation intermediaries is starting to grapple with these questions (Heales 2017). Intermediaries are defined as individuals, organisations and networks which support innovations by connecting them to people and resources, creating incubation spaces in which they can experiment and grow, and helping them to spread and sustain themselves. This is done via a wide variety of formats, roles and practices, including innovation platforms, social innovation venture labs, social impact bond providers, micro-

funding, impact measurement consultancies, and commissioning advisors. As there is still little consensus on how to understand and appraise these intermediaries, an important aim of this chapter is to conduct a preliminary exploration of the work intermediaries do in order to sketch the contours of this emerging profession, similar to Escobar's (2015) identification of 'participation professionals'.

Conceptual understanding of intermediaries can be refined by drawing on working papers of the 'Smart Urban Intermediaries' (SUI) project<sup>1</sup> that is currently being conducted and promises to greatly expand our understanding of their work and impact (SUI 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c). In contrast to the wide-ranging definition above, this chapter defines intermediaries as front-line workers from local governments, public services and voluntary sector organisations who offer support to community organisations and mediate between them and their own and/or other governance organisations. In line with the critical, relational and performative approach outlined in the preceding section, depth is added to the definition by understanding intermediating "as an in-between practice of transforming, translating or transcending knowledge" (SUI 2018a, 7), "of changing, linking and transferring resources, relationships and people[,] ... of adding and changing in interaction" (ibidem, 6). It is a double-sided role, that is easily approached in an overly positive fashion (SUI 2018b), of trying not to act "as 'form-givers' who dictate forms with little variation possible, but instead as 'enablers' who construct systems that allow user adaptations to deal with complexity and spectrums of needs" (SUI 2018c, 6). Finally, the work of intermediaries is not so much aiming for the evocative yet rather vague aspiration of 'making a difference' but for fundamental transformations in relationships, values and socio-economic outcomes (SUI 2017).

### **Research project: social innovation in Liverpool**

The empirical exploration of the nature and impact of the practices of social innovation intermediaries in this chapter is based on findings from a three-year action research project on grass-roots social innovation in Liverpool (October 2015-2018). The researcher collaborated with Tree House Liverpool CIC, an innovative community organisation with unprecedented impact in their community (Tuebrook) yet struggling to sustain themselves in the local governance system (Bartels 2019). Action research involves academic researchers and their 'co-inquirers' in a collaborative process of coproducing knowledge and action that generate change in the situation at hand and wider system (Greenwood and Levin 2007). This can be done via a wide range of critical and relational approaches aimed at empowering



marginalised groups to galvanise interdependencies and challenge the status quo (Bartels and Wittmayer 2018). In this case, the goal was to improve external understanding of Tree House's approach and impact and develop their internal capacities and resources for sustaining themselves and having a transformative impact.

The project consisted of three phases. In the first phase, the researcher produced a report about Tree House's approach and impact based on 16 unstructured qualitative interviews (Weiss 1994), participant-observation in Tree House activities and community life, online material, and 16 interviews conducted by Tree House members with participants in their activities. In the second phase, the researcher and 'co-inquirers' built the capacities and resources of six key members by coproducing an experiential learning process that included a knowledge exchange visit to Amsterdam, creation of an animated movie, and a community organising event. This learning process sadly did not manage to avert that Tree House did not survive in the face of an incessant lack of external funding, support and understanding.

In the third phase, it was therefore decided that the researcher would critically examine the local governance system in Liverpool. The researcher conducted 12 additional unstructured qualitative interviews with relevant local actors, selected based on a mix of purposive sampling and snowballing to obtain a diversity of views and experiences. While the sample offers a relatively small cross-section of the local governance system, findings from the interviews were triangulated with an analysis of 57 newspaper articles and a range of local policy documents, reports and websites. All interviews lasted about one hour and were transcribed ad verbatim. Grounded theory analysis (Charmaz 2006) was used to code the transcripts, write memos and identify emergent themes and patterns. Following the popular approach of narrative analysis in front-line studies (Forester 1999; Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003, 2012), the next section explains these themes and patterns by unpicking six detailed narratives about the everyday practice of intermediating social innovation—which proved to play an important role in the wider findings. Overall findings have been written up in a research report that was shared with Tree House, research participants and wider stakeholders.

### **Fitting in**

Liverpool offers an exceptionally germane context to explore how social innovation is supported to have a transformative impact on local governance, and what work intermediaries do to this effect. The city famously boasts a long and proud history of civic activism and

community organisation, with an exceptionally high level of voluntary sector organisations and some of the most innovative initiatives in the country (Jones and Meegan 2015; Thompson 2015). At the same time, relationships between communities and local authorities is characterised by conflict and mistrust ever since the soaring unemployment and civil unrest in the 1980s and 1990s (Sykes et al. 2013). Over the past two decades, this tense relationship has not improved due to highly contested and unevenly distributed major urban regeneration schemes (Boland 2010). A further complication is the above average impact of austerity and cutbacks on the city as a whole and deprived areas and groups especially (Kennett et al. 2015).

On the face of it, austerity seems to have created a situation in which communities and local authorities can strengthen their relationship by letting social innovation thrive. The research report identified the emergence of a public sector reform agenda focused on facilitating community-based solutions that both save money and create better outcomes. The distinct ability of community-based innovations to make a difference had become increasingly recognised in gloomy times in which the adverse effects of austerity became painfully visible and felt. But that does not mean that social innovations had it easy; in fact, they struggled to sustain themselves in a rapidly shifting and increasingly desolate funding landscape. Yet, they were not alone in their struggle to survive and have an impact. All kinds of ‘intermediaries’ were concerned with *fitting in*: on the one hand trying to get community-based innovations to fit in with organisational goals, policies and funding criteria, while on the other hand trying to get local governance organisations to better fit their goals, procedures and funding in with the needs and dynamics of communities and innovative initiatives.

### *Treading a fine line*

Intermediaries were treading a fine line when it came to fitting in. They found themselves in a difficult position pulling them in different directions. Local governance organisations wanted community-based innovations to do things that helped them to better achieve organisational goals and save money. Therefore, they expected them to fit in with their funding criteria and organisational procedures. In turn, community-based innovations wanted to be understood on their own terms, treated on an equal and respectful basis, and supported based on their (and their community’s) needs and ways of doing things. Leaning in the latter direction meant that intermediaries endeavoured to transform local governance organisations to be more flexible, supportive and innovative. Leaning in the former direction meant they ended up co-opting community organisations to work within policy frameworks and

organisational structures that went against their practices, purpose and values. In practice, it was usually not easy to immediately tell what the intentions of intermediaries were or which way their efforts at fitting in would go. Let's for instance compare how this public service manager and intermediary tried to tread this fine line.

*“we've done, um, things like, um, um, food hygiene qualifications for community organisations, so that then they can start to, um, serve food within their local places. We're talking with, um, um, an organisation that works with homeless people, um, and they want to set up a mobile catering van that goes round various places in the city centre. And they, um, so they, they're, we're working on a new course with them which will have bits of confidence building and bits of basic cooking, bits of, um, food hygiene, so that they can get people who are homeless and get them to start working in this, this, um, caravan thing, van thing. So that's a project that they wanted to do, so **we're trying to find out what courses we can put together with them to, um, to make that work for their people.** ... So, um, finding out what it is that people would want to do, what can we do that would help them, and how can we design and fund courses that will, um... Because we are still, if we're doing qualifications, they have to be on a list, **we can't just do any qualifications, there's a list of what we can fund.** So, um, we have to find things that, um, that are government funded. But we can be quite, um, imaginative. So we've got two sources of funding, one of them is for qualifications, one's for non-qualifications. So the non-qualifications, the non-accredited courses we can be more, um, flexible with and we can design, **so maybe the first step, much more exactly what people want and then see what qualifications might help them later.** ... With some organisations we might go out to places first because it's difficult to, um, to persuade the local people to come into centres, into learning centres, people are a bit scared of that. So **it may be that we put something on in a neighbourhood and then that will move people on into the learning centres.**” (interviewee N, public service manager)*

*“there's gonna be like a free website set up with activity finder and there's gonna be activities on there. ... What they've said is, um, ‘We want free things on the website and offers on the website. So can you email like your contact list?’. ... And I said ‘**I'm not doing that because these are organisations that are struggling anyway.**’ And it gives the **wrong impression** to the organisations to say, you know, ‘We want something from you like free’, you know. ... **It spoils the relationship.** And I think then, again, they're not **listening to the ethos** that I've set initially of how we're gonna work with these people,*

*how we're gonna go out into the community, how we're gonna understand them and what they're doing and try and support them. ... Because essentially working in this way is about relationships, isn't it, with those organisations. If they don't trust us and they don't see us as somebody who can help, and they see us somebody who's trying to get something from them, then it's a problem, isn't it? ... because we're not gonna have that relationship because they think 'They're asking for free things again', you know [chuckles], or 'They're asking for them forms again' or... We're constantly asking them for something. And actually it should be a reciprocal relationship that goes in where I go in and say 'Okay what do you need? Okay. And for that I need this'. You know, it should be reciprocal." (interviewee L, intermediary)*

Both found themselves working in-between organisational interests, criteria and demands on the one hand and the desires, needs and dynamics of community-based innovations on the other hand. On one side, they were pushed toward fitting the latter in with the former because they “have to find things ... that are government funded” (interviewee N) or are asked “to get something from them” (interviewee L). At the same time, they strove to be “somebody who can help” (interviewee L) by trying “to find out what ... [to do] together with them to, um, to make that work for their people” (interviewee N). They trod this fine line by being “imaginative” (interviewee N), , maintaining “a reciprocal relationship” (interviewee L), and, as another intermediary emphasized, showing “skill ... in good communication and trying to find compromise” (interviewee Q).

In other words, *treading the fine line* of fitting in is a sensitive and controversial process that strongly depends on the quality of relationships, communication and improvisation. Fruitful interactions will not emerge by themselves. Intermediaries need to have well-developed relational and communicative capacities to bring governance organisations and community organisations closer together in the face of a multitude of tensions. A crucial issue is whether they “take a different approach” (interviewee Q) than what their colleagues are used to or what organisations and policies prescribe. In contrast to an instrumental approach of, for example, putting “something on in a neighbourhood” as a “first step” to “move people on into the learning centres” (interviewee N), this means being driven by “the ethos ... of how we're gonna ... go out into the community, how we're gonna understand them and what they're doing and try and support them” (interviewee L). The next sections delve deeper into how intermediaries position themselves and what drives them.

## *Guiding*

Most intermediaries were treading the fine line of fitting in by *guiding* community-based innovations. They usually had no or only very little (influence on) funding themselves but could help to guide innovative initiatives through the local governance landscape by identifying funding opportunities, providing feedback on bid writing efforts and giving advice on developing skills and organisational structures. In addition, they organised mutual support networks for coming together with other community organisations and stakeholders. For instance, Liverpool Charity and Voluntary Services (LCVS) provides “support, advice, training, networking and representation for individuals and charitable organisations”<sup>1</sup>, including bid writing support, business planning, diagnostic review of organisational capacity, due diligence, funding searches, and monitoring and evaluation. They also host several fora, such as the Welfare and Wellbeing Organisations Network or the Multiple & Complex Needs Community of Practice.

The following narratives of two intermediaries and one public service manager help to deepen our understanding of guiding:

*“From my point of view, all I’m interested in is the thing happening. And that can be quite difficult for organisations to accept. I have no vested interest in what the thing is. I’m just there as a kind of facilitator between all the various parties. When that doesn’t go well, it can sometimes be perceived that I didn’t want it to happen. And that’s something that I just have to accept as my, like, that’s part of the role I have will always be, to someone I’m the bad guy if it goes wrong. And that’s okay.” (interviewee T, intermediary)*

*“Um, from the organisations’ point of view it’s to be, to, to think a bit more and act in a slightly more diverse way, ... for them not to put all their eggs in one basket and to talk to each other and to share what they do and not work in silos. And it’s easy to say that, much harder to do. But we’ve been trying to get that message out there for a long time. You can’t work in iso[lation?]... Even as a tiny community organisation. Unless you can manage without any... Unless you’re totally self-sustaining, then you need to be part of something bigger, you need to be, you need to be talking to other people, other organisations. Um, and from our perspective, it’s about facilitating that, it’s about, our role is very much to try and make that happen. And to keep, to keep [them] aware of*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.lcvs.org.uk/about-us/> (accessed 26-09-2018)

*opportunities, such as the social investment agenda now, that's coming into play, making them aware of those opportunities. ... Um, [sighs] and being the honest, critical friend, from our perspective, is what we're trying to be. And we try to be that to everyone, we try to be that to the statutory organisations as well.” (interviewee S, intermediary)*

Both positioned themselves in the role of “facilitator between all the various parties” (interviewee T). For interviewee S, “it’s about facilitating” community organisations to become “part of something bigger”, while interviewee V sought to “empower that ... service provider to work with others to get more money”. By using the term ‘facilitator’, the interviewees employ the general, colloquial meaning of the verb and ‘facilitate’, rather than its professional meaning (see e.g. Forester, 1999), that obscures the hidden intent of what they are doing. By *guiding* community-based innovations, they provided an overview of the desolate funding landscape, helped them to talk with funders, commissioners and other public officials, and gave advice on what (not) to do and where (not) to go. Since their organisations were suffering from cuts, they had no funding to distribute themselves. Therefore, as one public service manager put it, “we need to be much more creative about how we can help others get access to it” (interviewee V). While these intermediaries expressed their commitment to helping communities and community organisations, they “have no vested interest in what the thing is” (interviewee T) and act as an “honest, critical friend” (interviewee S).

At first glance, guiding seems like an appropriate, or even the only way to support community-based innovations. However, probing deeper into this seemingly benign and neutral position raises doubts about whether it is really driven by what community-based innovations are doing and need. Is guiding not just a pragmatic, instrumental way of working within the constraints of an austerity-ridden, gloomy situation? Does facilitating community-based innovations in sustaining themselves lead to more than marginal changes in the ways in which local governance organisations approach them? Or does it end up in nudging them towards abiding by existing policy goals, structures and power relationships? Is it possible to prevent this from happening? The next section explores the experiences of intermediaries who were strongly driven to transform the existing system.

### *Driving force*

As demonstrated in the ‘treading a fine line’ section, there were intermediaries who took a different approach based on a distinct *driving force*. These intermediaries were driven to

honour the values and ethos of community-based innovations and tried to find ways to support rather than compromise what they did, needed and aspired to. But by doing so, they ran the risk of not ‘fitting in’ with their own organisation. They were bound to run into barriers thrown up by their organisations and the local governance system. And they were confronted with organisational dysfunctions and undesirable outcomes experienced by community-based innovations. As already explained, all intermediaries certainly toiled to guide community-based innovations through these barriers, promote organisational flexibility and facilitate compromise. But hardly any of them challenged their colleagues and managers to fundamentally transform their habitual ways of thinking, acting and organising as to not compromise the needs, dynamics and ethos of community organisations. Of all those in positions of power who participated in the research, only these two intermediaries expressed such a critical, principled and transformative *driving force*:

*“You’ve got to continually challenge back. So you feel like you’re going ‘No, not doing it that way’ and being awkward sometimes. But I’m used to that, I’ve done those sort of roles in the past. And I think when you’re doing anything different, that’s what happens, you end up continually repeating and challenging over and over and over.”* (interviewee L, intermediary)

*“So I was seen almost as the enemy within. I was seen as someone who had to be tolerated or played or managed. So what I would try and do, if not dispel that, at least, um, I would try, and where possible, give my bosses, whether that be my team management or senior management or elected councillors, I would choose when I could work with them and essentially give a dog a bone. So I would look to, um, take a softer approach where I thought it was beneficial. But I, in essence, I was seen as, um, a problem, something that had to be tolerated because I always had legislation and policy on my side. ... And what would often happen is people would try and go behind my back because it would be a case of ‘As soon as we mention it to him, it’s gonna be a nightmare, because we’ll run out of money, or we won’t be able to do what we want’. So as a result of that I was then often seen as a positive by community groups. But they would then also bring their own agenda to the situation. So, looking back, [chuckles] it wasn’t a job without, it was a job that had a lot of stress to it because there was a very fine line.”* (interviewee Q, intermediary)

These intermediaries were aware of and used to the challenges involved with “when you’re doing anything different” (interviewee L) and treading “a very fine line” (interviewee Q). Their colleagues and managers would see them as “being awkward” (interviewee L) or, more worryingly, “as the enemy within[,] ... someone who had to be tolerated or played or managed” (interviewee Q). This put them in a situation of “continually repeating and challenging over and over and over” (interviewee L), choosing to “give a dog a bone” and experiencing that “people would try and go behind my back” (interviewee Q). As interviewee Q explained elsewhere in the interview, he eventually felt his driving force got fundamentally compromised when funding cuts and a change in management created “a bullying culture”. It is perhaps no surprise that both these intermediaries left their job.

So, intermediaries with a transformative driving force did not fare as well as those who saw their role in more neutral and facilitative terms. Community-based innovations struggling to sustain themselves were therefore more likely to be fitted into organisational policies, procedures and criteria, rather than the other way around. This tendency was reinforced by the dominant local narrative identified in the research report that community-based innovations should ‘play the game’ by becoming part of the system if they wanted to survive.

### **Reimagining intermediating: a relational approach**

The analysis highlights the double-sided nature of the work intermediaries do to support social innovation in local governance. By ‘fitting in’ community-based innovations and local governance organisations, they are ‘treading a fine line’ between transformation and instrumentalization. In the case of Liverpool, the balance tipped strongly towards the latter, as intermediaries predominantly engaged in ‘guiding’ community-based innovations within the existing system, while those with a transformative ‘driving force’ were driven out. While in other cases the pendulum might swing in the other direction, these findings urge us to not just examine the work intermediaries do and what difference this makes to social innovation then and there, but to critically reimagine their practices as part of wider transformation of local governance. As Tchida (2019) puts it: “The shift required is much more radical—a fundamental reimagining of the roles of professionals and community members, and the relationship between them” (383). This means reimagining “why we do it and the assumptions we carry about the world and those with and for whom we work” (ibidem, 355).

So, what would such a radically reimagined approach look like? The analysis here has only given a preliminary sense of ‘a different approach’ driven by a desire to nourish rather



than compromise the values and ethos of community-based innovations, nurture reciprocal relationships with local governance organisations, and transform the latter's habitual ways of thinking, acting and organising. This resonates with the relational approach that is gaining increasing traction as an alternative and sustainable governance framework (Stout and Love, 2016, 2018). A fruitful way forward would therefore be to develop a relational approach for social innovation intermediaries. As space constraints prevent a review and discussion of this relational approach in any detail, a few relevant illustrations will be offered.

Tchida (2019) reimagines the field of community development by building on Mary Follett's (1924, 1934) relational concept of 'power-with' as an alternative to 'power-over'. Exercising 'power-over' means organising pre-defined processes that lock interventions in a particular framing and objectifies the community. Instead, 'power-with' means including community members in developing a holistic understanding of the situation, co-organizing local activities, ongoing shared inquiry and learning, and accountability to the community about ways to address the root causes of problems. This relational framework is evinced in principles and practices of Asset-Based Community Development (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993; Ledwith and Springett 2010; Block 2018), which could form a key source for developing the professional practices and identity of social innovation intermediaries.

The author of this chapter has advanced a similar combination of relational philosophy with innovative practices geared to promoting alternative values and assumptions for local governance (Bartels 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019). For instance, Bartels (2016) demonstrated how the innovative approach of 'Neighbourhood Practice Teams' in Amsterdam followed the 'law of the situation' (Follett 1924) rather than the 'logic of the organization' by having a sustained presence in a community to experience its needs and assets, organizing a change process through a range of small-scale interventions, and ongoing reflection and learning with all stakeholders. Key to this approach is that front-line workers engage in 'encounters with an open mind' ('integrating' in Follettian terms) with the community, rather than imposing pre-held goals and assumptions ('hierarchy') or sustaining adversarial positions ('competition') (Bartels 2018). Thus, a key aspect of a relational framework for intermediating social innovation is that it provides alternative principles and practices geared to fitting local governance institutions in with the values, needs and dynamics of community-driven innovations.

A second, related aspect is that a relational approach identifies ways to disentangle and change the complex webs of interdependencies and intransigencies that maintain the status quo. An important issue identified in Amsterdam is that the transformative impact of

innovative practices is limited by the relational dynamics that uphold hegemonic institutions, such as rationalistic evaluation (Bartels 2017). Transformative relational working involves building ‘civic capacity’ (De Souza Briggs 2008) geared to changing the status quo by generating “new ways of interacting and communicating among the participants” (Wagenaar 2014, 231) and mobilizing the requisite governance coalitions and resources. Based on the findings of this chapter, an important venue for future research and practice will be to explore whether and how taking such a relational approach to ‘fitting in’ enables social innovation intermediaries to support and sustain transformative change in local governance.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.smart-urban-intermediaries.com>

<sup>2</sup> With 1 member of Tree House, 2 managers of other community organisations, 3 councillors, 2 public service managers, and 4 intermediaries.

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