PARTNERSHIP GOVERNANCE AND DEMOCRATIC EFFECTIVENESS: Community leaders and public managers as strategic actors

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ABSTRACT

Partnerships delivering public policy goals need to consider questions of effectiveness in a dual framework concerned with service and democratic performance. The flexibility afforded to partnership working places a premium on managerial action loosely coupled to political oversight. Yet the goals of partnerships are about matters of political debate and choice. We explore this issue by examining the way in which strategic actors impact on the democratic performance of partnerships. Our focus is on community leaders and public managers as ‘dual intermediaries’ in the democratic arena of partnership working. Community leaders tend to be conceptualised normatively and empirically as actors with a high degree of agency, actively promoting the views of citizens and users into the arenas of partnership decision-making. However, the role of institutions in constraining this agency is often underplayed. Public managers, on the other hand, have typically been understood as constrained by the logics of appropriateness that apply in the public sector. Consequently their potential for agency has often been discounted. The paper concludes by drawing out the implications for the theory and practice of partnership working.

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INTRODUCTION

The emergence of partnership working has been driven by the desire to improve the effectiveness of service delivery, and to overcome the constraints of traditional models of public administration. Processes of public service reform internationally have resulted in a much greater variety of institutional designs for the shaping, making and delivery of public policy. Partnerships are thus part of a general trend to establish operational activity at arm’s length from elected office holders, and give greater opportunity for managerial discretion and citizen engagement (Sullivan and Skelcher 2002). In theory, the separation of political goal setting from managerial execution should provide for an enhanced capacity to translate intent into outcomes, thus enhancing public welfare. The key mechanism is the enhanced ability of managers to determine the best means to deliver public policy, without being subject to day-to-day involvement of elected politicians (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2000), and the greater scope for direct citizen involvement (Newman 2001; Barnes, Newman and Sullivan 2004). This approach contrasts with the politically headed bureau, the predominant model under traditional public administration in which elected politicians supervised officials (Hughes 2003). Within this model, officials acted as the servants of their political masters, and citizens had a limited role through electoral and pressure group activity.

This paper explores the proposition that the effectiveness of partnership working cannot just be a matter of improved service outcomes. Partnership, at least in the UK context, is the default model through which much local public policy is now determined and implemented. Consequently questions of democratic effectiveness cannot be ignored. Partnership bodies debate and decide the distribution of public welfare to the citizens or users within their jurisdiction. This is an inherently political process, and the effectiveness with which normal constitutional safeguards apply thus becomes an important matter for inquiry. There is now a growing stream of research into the extent to which partnerships and other new organisational forms are anchored in the democratic institutions of a society (Klijn and Skelcher forthcoming; Sørensen and Torfing 2005). Within this research field, particular attention is now being focused on the role of community leaders and public managers as “dual intermediaries”, exercising constrained agency within an evolving institutional field. Our paper engages with this particular issue, and explores the question of when these actors make a difference to the democratic aspects of partnership working.

The paper starts by discussing the significance of the democratic dimension to partnership working, drawing on our recent research. This sets out our conceptual framework, and highlights the potential significance of community leaders and public managers. We then consider in more detail the roles of community leaders and public managers as ‘dual intermediaries’ in realising effective democratic arrangements for partnerships. The analysis of their roles is located in the context of the tension between individual agency and the structures within which they are located. The paper concludes by showing how different discourses of partnership provide part of the structural context for these strategic actors, and draws out the issues for future research. The paper forms one output from a long-term research programme being undertaken at the University of Birmingham’s School of Public Policy, in association
with colleagues elsewhere in Europe. It is an exploratory paper that reports our initial research findings and sets out the path for our continuing investigations.

PARTNERSHIPS AS DEMOCRATIC ARENAS

Our research focuses on partnerships that bring together various combinations of public, private, not-for-profit, and community actors in ‘new collaborative spaces’ where public policy is determined and implemented (Skelcher, Mathur and Smith 2005). The term ‘new collaborative space’ is used to convey the less constitutionally defined structure of these arenas for public action, where partners themselves play a key role in determining the rules of engagement and nature of relationship with other actors. For example, partnerships as formalised arenas for decision-making may be connected into a rich network of interactions such that the boundaries between the two become blurred. Consequently the institutional design of partnerships varies. Our definition excludes ‘public-private partnerships’ (PPPs) which, in the UK context, typically refers to a contractual relationship between government and business, for example purchasing the provision of social care services or the construction of a new hospital.

There are two reasons why the democratic structures and practices of partnerships should be subject to investigation: their relaxed democratic governance obligations, and the apparent agency available to key actors.

Obligations for democratic governance

In the first place, fewer democratic governance obligations tend to be imposed on partnerships than apply to the organisations of representative government, and thus it is important to explain whether and how they relate to the democratic life of the wider community. The normative design of representative governmental bodies traditionally emphasised procedural regularity through explicit rules (Peters 2000). In the partnership context this democratic-bureaucratic logic of appropriateness (March and Olsen 1989) breaks down. The rationale for lower standards of democratic oversight and accountability is that it offers the flexibility to structure the decision-making process in a way that best fits the issues at hand, and focuses the organisation on policy delivery rather than accountability procedures. Potentially, a logic of ‘public service’ consequentiality takes precedence. In other words, partnership working privileges the ends, while mainstream government bureaucracies tend to privilege the means. This reflects a fundamental trade-off in the design of public policy institutions. Conformance with the democratic governance standards normally applying to public service bodies is exchanged for expectations of enhanced performance in the exercise of tasks. In Scharpf’s terms, output legitimacy gains precedence over input legitimacy (Scharpf 1999).

This is demonstrated in empirical research on partnerships in England undertaken by one of the authors and his co-researchers (Smith, Mathur and Skelcher 2006). The

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2 This is a slightly different usage of ‘logic of consequentiality’ from that in March and Olsen’s work. We understand ‘consequences’ in terms of public service outcomes, while March and Olsen approach this question from a rational actor perspective.
team constructed a Governance Assessment Tool (GAT) in order to measure the democratic features of partnerships constitutions. The GAT consists of twenty-seven criteria based on the governance standards applying to English local authorities, other than those (such as election of members) that do not have an equivalent in partnerships. English local authorities were chosen as the benchmark because they have the most exacting standards of any governmental body, and thus provide a normative basis for assessment. The criteria are grouped into four areas: transparency (e.g. rights of public access to decision arenas, reports, etc.); internal governance (e.g. whether there are membership and quorum rules); member conduct (e.g. rules relating to conflicts of interest); and external reporting (e.g. production of annual report; complaints process, etc.).

The GAT was applied to twenty-seven partnerships in two localities. The partnerships covered a range of policy areas, including health, sustainability, education, regeneration, and culture. The constitutional arrangements of each partnership were scored against the GAT criteria, enabling the production of an overall profile (figure 1). This shows that while a few partnerships come close to local authority governance standards, most fall some way short, and a few comply with only a small number of the criteria. The partnerships do have different levels of authority and responsibility, and thus one explanation could be that the extent of compliance with the normative criteria of democratic governance is proportional to this. In other words, bodies with spending responsibilities and having the potential to make a major impact on citizens and communities would have tighter governance regime that those that were principally advisory. However the data do not consistently support this proposition. Instead, the qualitative interviews we undertook with actors revealed that there were a range of informal norms and rules about how the governance of the partnership took place, in some cases leading to considerable citizen and client involvement around (but not necessarily in) the core decision-making arenas.
The agency of managers and community leaders

This leads to the second reason for studying the democratic aspects of these collaborative spaces, which is that the minimal governance obligations open up an arena in which community leaders and public managers potentially have the opportunity to exercise considerable agency. Indeed, from the perspective of managerialism, Third Way ideology, and theories of participative and deliberative democracy, this is precisely why partnerships are of benefit. They offer new ways of engaging in the public policy process that are less constrained than those applying to representative institutions of government and civil service bureaux. So, paradoxically, although the democratic performance of partnerships is lower than those of representative institutions, there may be other means through which democratic involvement and accountability are assured. For example, closer contact between managers and citizens may produce a higher level of responsiveness in public policy design and delivery (Box 2001; Sorensen 2004), by-passing the ideological filters of elected politicians.

In our recent study, we found that public and voluntary sector managers were the numerically predominant occupational group on partnership boards, holding half the available places (table 1). Citizens and users, and business managers, each occupied around a quarter of the places. Detailed analysis of citizen and user partnership board members reported elsewhere (Skelcher forthcoming) identifies a number of ‘active citizens’ or ‘community leaders’ who play a key role on partnerships. This reflects findings of other research discussed later in this paper.
The qualitative research found that managers had some discretion to influence the informal governance norms of partnerships, and to some extent their formal constitutional arrangements. The survey also identified the opportunity for board members to make decisions largely outside formal supervision by their organisations or constituencies, with 93% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that they were ‘given a free hand by [their] organisation to do what [they] believe is best’. The capacity of partnership board members to exercise discretion out of sight of elected politicians is reinforced by the membership analysis. The survey results reveal that only 1% of the 144 board members are councillors.

Table 1: Occupational status of partnership board members

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public sector employee</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed, retired, carer, other</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private sector employee</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voluntary sector employee</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Councillor/ member of public sector board</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total (n=144)</strong></td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Smith, Mathur and Skelcher (forthcoming)

Yet despite the relative autonomy of partnerships from institutions of representative government, many are at the heart of networks of engagement with clients, users, and citizens. Sometimes such engagement is direct, and other times through civil society organisations, governmental agencies, and business bodies. This suggests that some democratic practice is taking place, and the research evidence indicates that public managers working in partnerships and active citizens/community leaders are important actors in this process. We need to understand more about these actors in order to develop our understanding of the effectiveness of partnerships from a democratic perspective.

A FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSING THE DEMOCRATIC CONTRIBUTION OF PUBLIC MANAGERS AND COMMUNITY LEADERS

Democratic performance

The framework for understanding the role of public managers and community leaders draws on the concept of ‘democratic performance’ (Mathur and Skelcher forthcoming). Democratic performance is a measure of the extent to which the institutional design of a governmental body – including a partnership – accords with fundamental democratic principles of legitimacy, consent, and accountability. Legitimacy concerns the use of societally authorised power in the public interest. Consent refers to the process through which government and citizens deliberate on matters of public interest and reach a judgement. Accountability involves the explanation of actions by government, and the renewal or revocation of their mandate.
Democratic performance involves the measurement of both the formal institutional hardware of explicit rules (e.g. terms of reference, conflict of interest procedures, decision rules) and the informal institutional software of day-to-day practices around these formal rules (e.g. conventions about stakeholder engagement methods, informal relationships between managers and citizens, etc.). Consequently it accommodates a notion that design is as much an evolutionary process undertaken by reflexive actors as the result of a deliberate act of creation by a political principal (Goodin 1996). This fits with the indicative evidence on the role of managers and community leaders in partnership design and practice.

Democratic performance, therefore, is a function both of the capacity for democratic practices inherent in the institutional design, and the potential of citizens and users to realise that possibility through their engagement with the institution (figure 2). The capacity for democratic practices is a judgement about the formal constitutional design of the partnership, in other words the characteristics being measured through the Governance Assessment Tool. The particular constitutional arrangements of partnerships may enhance or constrain democratic practice – for example, by the decision of whether or not to publicise board meetings and permit public attendance. The potential for democratic practices concerns the norms, perceptions, and motivations of citizens, users, and their communities in which they are located. The work of Lukes (1974), for example, provides a theoretical perspective on how power may be exercised in subtle ways to constrain the democratic engagement of communities.
Figure 2: Framework for analysing agency of managers and community leaders in relation to democratic performance of partnerships

Democratic performance:
Extent to which institutional design (hardware and software) of partnership accords with fundamental democratic principles

Democratic capacity:
Extent to which institutional design of the partnership offers scope for democratic practices.

When do community leaders matter?

How do managers mediate the relationship with publics?

Democratic potential:
Ability and motivation of publics (citizens and users) to realise, or transform, the democratic possibilities in the institutional design of the partnership

Partnership discourses:
Community participation; managerialist; elite co-determination.

Source: Adapted from Mathur and Skelcher (2004)
Dual intermediaries

The framework locates public managers and community leaders as ‘dual intermediaries’ between the institutional arrangements for democratic practice, and the potential inherent in the constituency of users or citizens. This includes the possibility that, as reflexive agents, citizens will transform the institutional design of the partnership, for example through introducing new pieces of institutional software such as building relationships with supportive managers. The notion of dual intermediaries offers a more balanced view to the problems of enabling democratic practice in partnerships than the predominant approach in the literature that sees the ‘problem’ as being how to engage publics. It draws on the findings of our research, and that of other colleagues at Birmingham. Barnes, Newman, Knops and Sullivan (2003), for example, have demonstrated that the way in which public institutions are structured has a major impact on how publics are constituted for participation and the consequent authority decision-makers accord them.

Thus democratic performance is both about the capacity of the institutional design to accommodate democratic practices, and citizen ability and motivation to realise this. In this model the agency of public managers and community leaders is reflected in their position as mediators between democratic potential and capacity. This is an active process of mediation in which our actors reflect on the impact of their actions, the actions of significant others, and on this basis construct strategies. These strategies may be rationally devised and executed, but are more likely to be emergent in nature given the complexity and flexibility of each collaborative space (Mintzberg 1978). With Lowndes (2005: 306), we propose that our actors have the capacity to become “institutional entrepreneurs” who shape and change their environments by “remembering, borrowing and sharing”. However, we also propose that our key actors can take on the roles of ‘institutional conservatives’, intervening to limit democratic performance and maintain stability in their sphere of influence.

The impact of discourses of partnership

However, our actors’ dialectical relationship with ‘the rules of the game’ is only part of the story. Public managers and community leaders are also influenced by, and have some reciprocal influence upon, the discourses (integrated sets of ideas and concepts that are produced and reproduced in practices [Hajer 1995]) that dominate the way actors understand, think about, and frame responses to public policy issues. Partnership working is not immune to the influence of these discourses (Hastings 1999). Skelcher, Mathur and Smith (2005) identify three partnership discourses: community participation, managerialist and elite co-decision. The community participation discourse envisages partnership as a means to enable greater involvement by citizens and users, thus enhancing the possibilities for deliberative practices and the design of outcomes that meet community needs. The managerialist discourse views partnerships as a means of securing a stable operating platform between organisations in a fragmented public policy system. Community involvement provides a means to improve the intelligence available to managerial decision-makers, thus theoretically enhancing programme delivery. The elite co-decision discourse relates to the possibilities for a leadership coalition to emerge and negotiate collective action across a policy sector or community, impacting on the constituencies represented around the table in a neo-corporatist manner. Each of
these discourses has differing implications regarding the roles of agents discussed in this article which we review in the conclusion to this paper.

AGENCY IN COLLABORATIVE SPACES

We now move to consider the question of reflexive agency by community leaders and managers within the institutional structures of partnerships in England. The focus of the discussion is to explore the dynamic between structure and agency and its implications for the democratic performance of partnerships.

The agency of community leaders

The recognition of citizens playing a role as ‘community leaders’ reflects the opening up of the governance process to include people drawn from communities (Klijn and Koppenjan 2000; Purdue 2005). Such community leaders are commonly engaged as part of an official structure, for example a local strategic partnership created by a local authority, business and civil society organisations, or a New Deal for Communities board established by central government. Their role is defined as to represent and “deliver their communities” (Taylor 2003: 138). The engagement of community leaders is considered as a new form of participation opening up the “arenas of decision making” (Klijn and Koppenjan 2000) with the individuals able to take advantage of the democratic potential (figure 2), acting as agents in the new collaborative spaces that partnerships create. They also serve as a link, reconnecting increasingly divorced citizens with councillors and council officers (Klijn and Koppenjan 2000).

However, the literature identifies a number of flaws and limitations that exist in practice. Instead of serving to bridge state and citizenry, community leaders operate in a “no-man’s land” (Taylor 2003: 185). On the one hand, they are in danger of straying too heavily towards their public sector partners and becoming incorporated in state structures (Sullivan and Skelcher 2002) and detached from the community they represent (Anastacio, Gidley, Hart, Keith, Mayo and Kowarzik 2000). Alternatively they can be criticised by their public sector partners for being unrepresentative and unable to represent beyond their community when they say something “unpalatable” (Taylor 2003: 133). Whilst there is certainly democratic potential for the community leader involved this can only occur if the benefits are passed down to the community (Maloney, Smith and Stoker 2000). A community leader may, however, act as a block thereby replicating existing social exclusion patterns (Purdue, Razzaque, Hambleton, Stewart, Huxham and Vangen 2000).

A community leader needs to be seen as legitimate by their community but it appears more important that they are seen as such by the state partners (Barnes et al 2004; Anastacio et al 2000). Whilst councils are increasingly required to involve communities and community leaders, they are begrudging in doing so, leaving a sense that community opinions are “not sought after but their support needed” (Purdue et al 2000: 32). On such a basis, the involvement of community leaders is more “council bureaucracy than a route to citizen empowerment” (Purdue et al 2000: 32). The community leader is therefore in a position where “they do not decide the game that is being played; they do not determine the rules of play, the system of refereeing or,
indeed, who plays” (Taylor 2003: 123). For example, the heterogeneity of traditionally underrepresented groups in communities is unlikely to be adequately served by the single seat that is sometimes offered on a partnership board (Smith and Stephenson 2005). The dominance of state players in establishing the rules for the involvement of community leaders may also affect the type of person likely to become involved, encouraging the atypical few possessing the necessary management skills (for example, Taylor 2003) and personal contacts (Hendricks and Tops 2005).

In spite of such criticisms, there is still an underlying belief in the community leader literature that it is individuals that “made (it) work” (Hendrick and Tops 2005: 480). Whilst perhaps unsurprising, such an assumption seems at odds with the apparent significance of institutional context upon the agency of community leaders. Indeed, the literature seems to provide examples of both formal and informal institutions that restrict the ability of community leaders to make a difference. For instance, only having a single seat for black and ethnic minority groups on a partnership board reflects a constraint based on formal organisational design. Furthermore, community leaders are commonly seen as legitimate only if they are drawn from a formal voluntary and community sector organisation. On the more informal institutional side, the perceived existence of a “secretive organizational culture” (Purdue 2005: 261) within the council was found to make working with them difficult. There appears to be strong reluctance amongst councils to give up power and alter policy after community leader input (Klijn and Koppenjan 2000).

The neglect of institutions is perhaps even more prominent in Bang’s concept of the ‘Everyday Maker’. These individuals represent a new kind of activist with a credo that includes “do it yourself” (Bang and Sørensen 2001) and whilst overlapping in many areas with the definitional practices of community leaders elsewhere, a major point of departure is that the Everyday Maker is not interested in “participating in formal institutions” (Bang 2005) and is “largely uncoupled” (Bang and Dyberg 2003: 234) from the state structure operating in a “flatly organised” system (Bang 2005: 161). However, in the examples of Everyday Makers provided by Bang, and Everyday Fixers provided by Hendricks and Tops (2005), the actors are all engaged with institutions of some sort (for example Hendricks and Tops’ Everyday Fixer works for a neighbourhood development corporation). This shows that even those who try to bypass institutions will be unable to do so as fully as they would wish.

So whilst community leaders appear to be working in new collaborative spaces, this analysis suggests the significance of existing systems of long-standing institutions within which the activities of community leaders occur is neglected. Indeed, as we argue earlier, democratic effectiveness often lags behind concern with service outcomes, making the new space largely illusory with community leaders confined by the formal and informal institutions that surround them. Currently, we can observe that the literature reflects the conflict between agency and structure that is apparent in other areas of political analysis. Both agency and structure are present in these accounts of community leadership but their relative influence is contested, often within the same account. As a result the analysis of community leadership lacks theoretical coherence and a rebalancing of the debate is overdue.
The agency of public managers

Public managers are the complement to community leaders as dual intermediaries. They can be seen as key actors in the design and operation of partnerships and their link to citizens, users and other constituencies. This section considers the ways in which the public policy literature on managers has developed and concludes that a richer conceptualisation of agency, albeit “constrained agency”, allows us to examine how public managers recognise both their service delivery and democratic objectives within partnerships.

The public policy literature on managers exhibits similar difficulties to the comparable literature on community leaders in coming to terms with the structure-agency question. In this case however the resulting divisions are reflected more in the development of particular schools of thought than in the unresolved conflict in the work of individual scholars. These schools have emerged over time, and rather than being eradicated by their successors have become sedimented within the public policy tradition.

In the 1950s and 1960s in Britain, the study of public administration, as it was then termed, largely focused on the formal structures of central and local government. Public managers within this ‘old institutionalist’ conception (Peters 2005) were viewed as functionaries whose proper purpose was simply to operationalise legislation and guidance. With the benefit of hindsight it is tempting to view this tradition as a form of naïve formal-legal analysis that has little or nothing to offer to the study of public policy today. However Rhodes (2006) has argued that the starting point for the dominant new approach to political science remains the historical analysis of formal-legal institutions and the ideas embedded in them.

Nevertheless, in the 1970s and 1980s rational choice and behaviourist theorists tipped the balance of power in their favour through a sustained critique of the public administration tradition and an emphasis on the ability of individual actors to shape events. In rational choice theory individuals in general are seen as essentially utility maximising in pursuing their interests, and it is not therefore surprising to see public managers characterised as budget maximising empire builders. Within this tradition the behaviour of public managers presents a set of problems to be solved by the agency of politicians. In the study of policy implementation, for example, the principal-agent model and related game theoretic models have “centred on the compliance problem, assuming that legislators are attempting to prevent defection by bureaucrats” (Peters 2005: 55-57).

Both behaviourist and rational choice schools have subsequently themselves received substantial criticism for lack of theoretical substance and consistency (for example Hay 2002). Some rational choice theorists have responded by trying to find a home within new institutionalism but they have not escaped further criticism for theoretical inconsistency (Blyth 2002). Nevertheless, individualist schools continue to have an influence in public policy scholarship (Ward 2002), not least in their focus on asking ‘where is the individual in all this’ and ‘how do structures change if not through individual or group action’?
Alongside individualist approaches and the persistent influence of the ‘old institutionalist’ tradition, new institutionalist approaches have most recently rediscovered the importance of formal and informal rules and routines in reducing the scope for agency. ‘Standard operating procedures’ (Hall 1986) tend to be “self-reinforcing and remarkably enduring” (Lowndes 2006:3). Rules conceptualised in this way not only put considerable constraints on actors, but also free them from the burden of having to make every decision from scratch on a daily basis. Meanwhile the increasing application of discourse theory in public policy research also implies the constraint and simplification of choices in daily life. In this case the frames of reference available to the actor in a given situation are determined well in advance by the dominant way of seeing and talking about the subject (Dryzek 1990). Even before we apprehend that there is a choice to make, the ideational toolbox we have at our disposal has been defined and delimited. When discourse theory and new institutionalism come together, therefore, public managers work within a considerably richer environment than the formal structures of the old institutionalism allow them, but, if anything, are more constrained by rules, routines and ideas than their predecessors.

Bringing us up to date, public policy scholars are now seeking ways of bringing agency back into political analysis without recycling the intentionalist models of the 1970s and 1980s. In the USA Feldman and Khademian (2002, 2005) have drawn attention to how public managers actively build relationships within and across organisations. Against the principal-agent orthodoxy, public managers act within constraints but are afforded considerable agency in creating, influencing and changing the relationships between actors. In the UK Newman (2005: 730), albeit from a very different point of view, has critiqued the “thin” conception of managers as bureau-shapers or resource dependent networkers. She argues that public managers remain profoundly influenced by the structures and discourses around them, but equally “must be viewed as active and creative subjects not simply as enacting or reproducing a particular governmental project” (Newman 2005: 731).

The new institutionalist school represented by Lowndes (2005: 299) has argued that “individuals and institutions are mutually constitutive”; just as rules and routines shape individual conduct, so agents actively engage with the standard operating procedures, sometimes reinforcing their effects, sometimes undermining and changing them. This elaboration of agency within new institutionalism opens the way for institutional entrepreneurs to develop “strategies of ‘remembering’, ‘borrowing’ and ‘sharing’” (Lowndes 2005: 306). In this conception, managers have reflexive and strategic capacities that allow them as agents to learn from the past and attempt to influence the future.

These richer conceptions of the person, and in particular the public manager, come from a variety of different standpoints. Nevertheless, they each respond to the challenge of producing a more credible model of the agent in a dialectic relationship with structure and ideas. In doing so, they focus attention on the issue of personal responsibility which was curiously absent from both the intentionalist and structuralist conceptualisations which preceded them. While the title of Feldman and Khademian’s (2002) article - “To Manage is to Govern” - somewhat overstates the case, this way of thinking opens the way for scholars influenced by the new Weberian
thinking (e.g., Beetham 1996; du Gay 2000) to explore not just effectiveness of service delivery, but also how managers exercise their democratic and ethical responsibilities in relation to the communities they serve.

Thus recent progress towards a more even structure-agency balance in public policy analysis arms us with a more rounded conception of managers as recognisable and responsible individuals – reflexive agents who exercise discretion within a loosely structured collaborative space, and in the process engage with community leaders. Rather than seeing public managers simply as either utility maximisers, functionaries constrained by public bureaucracies, or ‘bearers’ of predominant discourses about partnership, we can ask how they actively respond to (or seek to escape from) the flexibilities in the collaborative space as it impacts on questions of democracy. Finally, we can ask how far managers, as they are influenced by and influence the context of partnerships they inhabit, recognise and act upon their capacity to encourage democratic engagement and balance this with the imperatives of service delivery.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has examined the democratic performance of collaborative spaces in terms of the roles played by two sets of agents: community leaders and public managers. The underlying hypothesis is that these actors animate the institutional hardware and software of partnerships, and consequently realise a level of democratic performance. An examination of the managerial and community leader literature serves to highlight the commonality between the strands in the sense that they both suggest a need to better understand the circumstances in which agents are able to matter within the structured settings of partnerships.

Our review of the literature reveals that these reflexive actors are located centre stage in the partnership dramaturgy. They have agency, but operate within a structural context. To fully understand our observations, we seek a more rounded account of their “constrained agency”. This draws on our earlier research in which we identified the role of ideas in shaping institutions and actions (Skelcher, Mathur, and Smith 2005). In this conception actors are constrained by institutional designs, but are positioned as active agents relative to these by underlying sets of ideas or discourses.

The three partnership discourses discussed earlier in the paper each imply different roles for both community leaders and partnership managers (table 2).
Table 2: Partnership discourses and the roles of community leaders and managers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PARTNERSHIP DISCOURSE</th>
<th>COMMUNITY LEADER</th>
<th>PUBLIC MANAGER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community participation</td>
<td>Key actor</td>
<td>Agent for empowerment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managerialism</td>
<td>Tick box of community involvement</td>
<td>Agent of service delivery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elite co-determination</td>
<td>Deliver the community</td>
<td>Team player, club member and resource contributor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Whilst table 2 illustrates the theoretical roles for both community leaders and managers within each of the discourses, this also serves to highlight the discrepancy between the theory of involving these agents in partnerships and the practice of doing so. For example, the literature shows that whilst a community participation discourse considers community leaders as key actors this is rarely borne out in practice. Community leaders are constrained by informal and formal institutions that affect their power and go neglected in the literature. Whilst the elite co-determinist discourse views community leaders as delivering the community, in reality their presence is no more than tolerated within the elite.

Thus when these ideas emerge into the flexible and messy environment of partnerships, they do so in less than ideal forms. Some partnerships are dominated by a particular discourse throughout their development, but others tolerate or struggle with competing and contradictory frameworks of ideas throughout their life cycle. Context and time also play an important part in determining the discursive mix to which particular partnerships are subject at particular stages in their development, with some ideas being more important at certain moments than others.

We bring together this strategic and reflexive agency with the opportunities presented by highly differentiated institutional environments to suggest that our key actors have a dialectic relationship with the ideas and institutions that shape partnerships. Just as they are influenced by partnership discourses and rules and routines, so public managers and community leaders take opportunities to shape and change their institutional and discursive environment. The result of building on our earlier work in this way is that we achieve a perspective that is both finer grained in its examination of particular partnership environments and applicable more generally to a variety of actors in institutional settings.

In this context we note that, after approaching the structure-agency dilemma from opposite ends of the argument, the respective literatures on our key groups of actors, partnership managers and community leaders, have reached a similar conclusion. The community leadership literature, as one might expect, has tended to privilege the agency of its key actors and is only now reluctantly accepting the concept of constraint in the forms of the institutions and discourses we outlined above. On the other hand the public policy literature on management has recently veered away from individualist approaches towards structuralism and now seeks to identify a more even
structure-agency balance within its theory and research methodology. Despite these
different trends, our more generalisable approach allows us to ask very similar
questions of public managers and community leaders about whether they seek to
make a difference to the democratic effectiveness of partnerships and what effect this
has in practice. Our future empirical research will lead to a better understanding of
the circumstances in which structure moulds agency and vice versa. Or to put it more
bluntly, when do community leaders or public managers matter?

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