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People, power and politics in the sharing economy: developing a public sector sharing economy

Abstract

In this paper, we explore how a local authority in the North of England attempted to develop a public sector sharing economy to deliver welfare services in new and innovative ways. The study examines how and why public sector sharing differs from commercial and not-for-profit sharing, and assesses the implications of this for getting public sector sharing economies off the ground. Our analysis suggests that public sector sharing comprises hybridized forms of sharing, in which some aspects align with a ‘collaboration’ style of sharing economy, not too dissimilar to typical marketplace exchange relationships. In other aspects, however, public sector sharing resembles a ‘reciprocity’ style of sharing more usually associated with the ‘sharing culture’ in evidence in not-for-profit sharing economies. In the public sector sharing economy under investigation, characteristics of state ‘redistribution’ also linger, as the local authority seeks to move away from traditional economic arrangements towards the sharing economy. Overall, our study shows that public sector sharing appears to exhibit a much higher degree of complexity than other types of sharing economy, which arises from the different motivations, values and ways of working among the various organizations and community groups involved. We conclude that an imperative of heterogeneity in governance strategies is needed to match the heterogeneity in evidence in the public sector sharing economy being developed.

Keywords

Collaboration; public sector sharing; reciprocity; sharing culture; sharing economy

1.0 Introduction

The sharing economy continues to stimulate widespread interest and attention (Arcidiacono at al., 2018; Belk & Price, 2016; Ince & Hall, 2018; Pais & Provasi, 2015; Stokes et al., 2014; Voytenko Palgan et al., 2021; Woskowsky, 2014), yet in academic circles, business and the media, attention focuses primarily on large commercial successes such as Uber and AirBnB. This attention was initially celebratory in tone, stressing an alternative consumption ethos whereby ownership is displaced by sharing and by new forms of economic participation focused on collaboration rather than competition (Botsman & Rogers, 2010; Botsman 2013; Stephany, 2015; Woskowsky, 2014). Today, however, criticism is increasingly directed at these large commercial platforms because of unfair competition, for example, and a lack of

employment rights (Ince & Hall, 2018; Katrini, 2018; Martin, 2016; Schneider, 2018; Schor, 2014 & 2015). The sharing economy comprises many different forms, and not-for-profit sharing platforms and initiatives are often viewed more favorably than such commercial ventures, not least because they are seen to be comprised of like-minded individuals engaged in sharing and collaborative forms of consumption connected to a range of social and environmental issues (Katrini, 2018; Martin, 2016; Schor, 2015). At the same time, however, not-for-profit sharing does not go unchallenged or unquestioned. Schor et al. (2016), for instance, identified a mismatch between the egalitarian goals espoused by not-for-profit sharing platforms and the actual practices of sharing whereby inequality is reproduced through the deployment of cultural capital, thus serving to inhibit sharing in these contexts.

Notwithstanding some of the issues highlighted above, public bodies and local governments are experimenting with not-for-profit platforms to share underused assets with citizens, local groups and organizations (Ganapati & Reddick, 2018; Pais & Provaasi, 2015; Voytenko Palgan et al., 2021). Here, as Ganapati and Reddick (2018, p. 81) note, *'the focus is on realizing public benefits, rather than delivering a pre-defined end product or service'*. In this context, replacing the public sector with voluntary and community sector provision is presented not simply as a necessity in times of crisis, but also as a desirable and noble thing for *'the giver as well as the receiver'* (Fenwick & Gibbon, 2016, p. 18-19). Nonetheless, there is an emerging body of literature (see Arcidiacono et al., 2018; Ince & Hall, 2018) lending support to the idea that sharing is actually quite difficult in practice, particularly in the context of welfare state retrenchment (Barnett, 2018).

In this paper we examine how a local authority in the North of England, attempted to initiate a sharing economy to change the way it delivers welfare services. The sharing economy,

branded Comoodle, was launched in 2015 when Kirklees Council won €1 million in Bloomberg Philanthropies Mayor's Challenge in the US to implement a sharing economy, which, they hoped, would enable them to mitigate some of the pressures created by financial austerity by sharing under used council resources with voluntary and community groups (Kirklees Council, 2015; Lever et al., 2019). Focusing on this initiative as an exemplar, in this paper we seek to understand how and why public sector sharing differs from commercial and not-for-profit sharing economies, and to assess the implications of this for getting public sector sharing economies off the ground.

Mindful of Hall and Ince's call for researchers to question the ways in which sharing economies are '*entangled within spaces of dominant political-economic order*' (2018, p.2), the work of Pais and Provasi (2015) is invaluable in navigating a path through the academic literature on the sharing economy from the vantage point of political economy. Drawing on Polanyi (2001 [1944]), Pais and Provasi (2015) outline a comprehensive framework, designed not simply to categorize sharing economies as such, but rather "*to analyse the spurious forms, reflect on the drivers of shifts from one type to another, and thus identify the main trends in the social relations induced by the sharing economy*" (p. 365). Identifying different levels of social embeddedness within the economy, the framework characterizes five forms of social integration: 'exchange', 'collaboration', 'reciprocity', 'common pool' and 'redistribution'. These five levels are instructive not only in terms of theorizing exchange relationships but in linking these with other facets of sharing, including the identity and motivation of actors, relationship between actors, nature of constraints, degree of commitment, principle of allocation, means of exchange, forms of trust and characteristics of the goods. In this paper, we draw on this framework to inform the conceptualization of the Comoodle sharing economy by contrasting it with more established forms of sharing.

Our analysis suggests that Comoodle is a hybrid form of sharing economy; in some aspects it aligns with ‘collaboration’, a type of sharing economy not too dissimilar to ‘exchange’, and in other aspects it resembles ‘reciprocity’, a type more often seen in many not-for-profit sharing economies. We also see characteristics that evidence ‘redistribution’ as the council seeks to move away from this traditional economic arrangement through the development of the Comoodle initiative. The hybrid nature of Comoodle, together with the extensive range of sharing activities it seeks to promote (*‘stuff’*, *‘space’* and *‘skills’*), has ramifications for the governance of this public sector sharing economy. Extensive empirical analysis of municipal governance of the sharing economy suggests that local governments would be advised to adopt several from a range of governance strategies, including; (1) governing by authority; (2) governing by provision; (3) governing through enabling; (4) governing through partnership; and (5) self-governing (Voytenko Palgan, et al., 2021). At present Comoodle is governed through the mechanism of a ‘self-governing’ strategy, and evidence suggests that this could hinder getting this sharing economy off the ground.

In the next section we review key literature on the sharing economy, and outline the analytical framing we use to conceptualize the Comoodle sharing economy.

2.0 Making sense of the sharing economy

There is considerable debate within academic literature as to whether many commercial sharing economy platforms are really about ‘sharing’, and a range of terms has been used to try and capture the nature of the exchanges between participants within various commercial and not-for-profit sharing economy platforms and initiatives. These include; access-based consumption (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012; Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2015 & 2016), collaborative consumption (Stokes et al., 2014), gift giving (Corciolani & Dalli, 2014; Harvey et al., 2017),

mutuality (Arnould & Rose 2016), sharing (Belk 2010, 2014 & 2016), pseudo-sharing (Belk 2013), hybrid exchange (Scaraboto, 2015) and sharing culture (Katrini, 2018; Light & Miskelly, 2015).

With regard to not-for-profit sharing, the notion of ‘sharing culture’ was introduced to delineate these initiatives from the ‘sharing economy’, which is conceived as comprising only commercial platforms (Katrini, 2018; Light & Miskelly, 2015). Sharing culture is based on solidarity and reciprocity rather than economic exchange, a situation within which participants are empowered to make decisions co-operatively (Katrini, 2018). Thus, ‘sharing culture’ goes beyond the simple sharing of resources; there is also a focus on ‘sharing power’ to ensure sharing is egalitarian. Some studies demonstrate that despite best efforts, egalitarianism is far from inevitable in the context of not-for-profit sharing. For example, in their ethnographic study of four not-for-profit sharing economies (a time bank, a food swap, a maker space and open-access education site) Schor et al. (2016) found a mismatch between the sites’ articulated goals of openness/equality of opportunity and the actual practice of sharing. This was evidenced by ‘un-written socio-cultural rules’ and ‘distinguishing practices’ governing what could be traded and shared, and in all four cases social hierarchies based on social and cultural capital determined who was able to share with whom. Consequently, as Schor and colleagues caution, transcending traditional power relationships *‘requires more than just good intentions and novel economic arrangements’* (2016, p. 67). The concept of ‘sharing culture’ is useful nonetheless because it draws attention to important features of sharing, which in addition to sharing resources includes solidarity, equality and mutuality (Arnould & Rose, 2016), and ultimately the importance of developing more equitable ways of living (Lloveras et al., 2018; Lloveras et al., 2020). In so doing, and as the

next paragraphs outline, it also invites us to question the neoliberal ideological assumptions implicit within many commercial sharing platforms.

In their analysis of non-commodified forms of sharing and mutual aid in households, White and Williams (2018) raise important and relevant questions related to a further distinction that Katrini (2018) draws between the sharing economy and sharing culture; namely that the former comprises an alternative form of capitalism and the latter an alternative economic system. They argue, for example, that a society organized along non-hierarchical and cooperative lines is not only necessary to challenge capitalism's destructive crisis-tendencies, but that this is already in existence today. In this respect, White and Williams urge us to recognize the centrality of “*non-capitalist practices in our own lives*” (2018, p. 176). From looking after each other's children, shopping for elderly neighbors, to digging up the snow from the street in winter, they note that these sharing practices are ‘*undertaken for non-economic rationales, altruism, reciprocity, and ethics of care*’ (2018, p.179).

These sharing practices would be characterized by Pais and Provasi (2015) as exhibiting social reciprocity. Drawing on ideas expounded by the political economist Karl Polanyi (2001 [1944]), Pais and Provasi argue that of Polanyi's three forms of integration between economy and society (i.e. marketplace exchange, state redistribution and social reciprocity), late 20th century political economy has focused on the first two form to leave ‘*social reciprocity in the background*’ (2015, p. 354). Despite their economic and political differences, both marketplace exchange (influenced by neoliberalism) and state redistribution (influenced by Keynesian economics), are seen as having contributed to the dis-embedding of economic relations from social ties. Given positive evaluations of the sharing economy in terms of its potentially alternative collaborative ethos, Pais and Provasi (2015) examine the

extent to which '*expressions of the sharing economy*' (p. 353) challenge the 20th century dis-embedding of economic relations from social ties, thus potentially bringing social reciprocity (back) into the foreground. The analytical framework they develop builds upon Polanyi's ideas about the role of social reciprocity within the economy and distinguishes three forms of reciprocity – (1) 'reciprocity' in the strictest sense of a direct relationship that generates a mutual positive debt between individuals who know each other; (2) 'collaboration' as a weaker form of reciprocity in which there is no relationship between the parties involved outside of the interest that induces them to cooperate; and (3) 'common pool' where the social bond is based on a generalized reciprocity – which are placed between 'exchange' and 'redistribution'.

Pais and Provasi's (2015) analysis suggests that large scale commercial sharing platforms such as Uber and AirBnB operate merely as increasingly efficient 'exchange' economies, facilitated by the advanced technological interfaces of their platforms. Other commercial sharing economies such as car pooling, ride sharing and many crowd funding platforms are akin to market exchange, but involve 'collaboration' and weak social ties to the extent that it is the '*institutional arrangements embedded in the technological platforms which allow cooperation*' (2015, p. 362), including mechanisms for establishing trust indirectly through reputational measures. Not-for-profit sharing economies such as couchsurfing, timebanks and Local Exchange Transfer Systems (LETS) exhibit elements of true 'reciprocity', thus serving to re-embed economic relations in social ties in a more substantial sense. Finally, open-source software, open-design, and an Italian sharing economy called Social Street which operates on-line via a closed Facebook group as well as off-line, are said to exemplify a 'common pool' arrangement. The latter provides an intentionally informal arrangement between citizens and local government, and Pais and Provasi suggest that when '*bottom-up sharing*

schemes (such as social street) attract the attention of public authorities they prefigure a new role for the local administration that transforms the classic logic of redistribution into the co-design of the shared management of the common good' (2015, p. 369).

We draw on Pais and Provasi's (2015) framework to assist in conceptualizing Comoodle, which in one sense might be described as being somewhat similar to the Social Street sharing economy by virtue of its similar vision of '*shared management of the common good.*'

However, as we shall see, the design and development of Comoodle departs sharply from the Sharing Street example in that it could only be described as top-down rather than bottom-up, both in terms of its conception, and governance.

In their extensive empirical analysis of the contemporary public sector sharing economy landscape globally, Voytenko Palgan et al. (2021) identify five mechanisms of municipal governance: (1) governing by authority; (2) governing by provision; (3) governing through enabling; (4) governing through partnership; and (5) self-governing. Only self-governing, as the name suggests, involves local authorities operating their own sharing economies. Here, examples include local authorities sharing various forms of transportation with their employees, the sharing of assets between authorities, and finally one or two local authorities that are sharing their own assets with agencies and non-profit organizations within their cities. As Voytenko Palgan et al. inform us, however, the latter '*are often experimental initiatives*' (2021, p. 7), and we might therefore think of Kirklees Council as being very much an innovator in terms of the Comoodle public sector sharing economy.

Of the eleven roles that Voytenko Palgan et al. (2021) identify as operating within these five governance mechanisms, the role of '*city as owner*' is the most relevant in our

evaluation of Comoodle. Once again the authors provide examples to illuminate these roles, and it is pertinent to note that all of the examples cited focus on sharing in a very specific category; such as sharing space for educational or cultural events, or tool sharing. Such a narrow focusing of sharing activity is also apparent in Ganapati and Reddick's (2018) analysis of public sector sharing in the USA. Finally, Voytenko Palgan et al. suggest that public sector '*interventions in the sharing economy are important when there is insufficient interest towards a certain service among citizens or businesses while municipalities consider it worth promoting*' (2021, p. 8). This brings us back to Ganapati and Reddick's (2018) assertion that public sector sharing is primarily about promoting public benefits, although this may be contrasted with Barnett's (2018, p. xi) contention that while '*sharing may bring to mind images of collective life and togetherness... the objects of sharing practices are often burdens of certain sorts.*'

The next section provides a short background discussion of the inception and planning behind the Comoodle sharing economy, and outlines the process of data collection and analysis. In section 4.0, we move on to examine how and why this 'self-governed' (Voytenko Palgan et al., 2021) public sector sharing economy differs from commercial and not-for-profit sharing economies, and to assess the implications of this for its growth and expansion.

3.0 Research context and methods

Kirklees is located in West Yorkshire, between Manchester (to the west), Leeds (to the east) and Sheffield (to the south) (see Figure 1). Constructed in 1974 through the provisions of the Local Government Act 1972, Kirklees' local governance framework encompasses eleven former local government districts covering an area of 408.6 km², of which Huddersfield is the

administrative center. Covering a mixed rural and urban area with an ethnically diverse population of around 440,000, the region has significant social and economic disparities (Kirklees, 2019). Indeed, residents in the borough's most deprived areas around Batley and Dewsbury in the urban north have a life expectancy up to five years less than residents in the more prosperous parts of rural south Kirklees (Kirklees, 2013). Overcoming these and related problems and developing innovative policy solutions was one of the major reasons for applying for funding from Bloomberg Philanthropies.

Insert Figure 1. Map of Kirklees (Adapted from Kirklees, 2019) about here

In order to capture and encourage any innovation emerging via urban governance and civic engagement strategies around the world, Bloomberg Philanthropies launched the Mayor's Challenge; initially the challenge ran in the United States in 2012-2013, and then in Europe in 2013-2014 (LSE 2014). There were five core themes to the initiative:

1. Economy: doing more with less;
2. Civic Engagement: facilitating citizen action;
3. Social Inclusion: building trust and value;
4. Health and Well-being: aiding healthy living, and;
5. Environment: securing the future.

The vision for a sharing economy platform outlined in Kirklees Council's winning Bloomberg bid was to enable a new approach to local service provision that stimulated the sharing of untapped council resources (*stuff, space and skills*) in ways that would allow Kirklees 'to do more with less'. The underlying rationale for Comoodle was to change the

emphasis in institutional thinking away from the notion of *'how much will this cost'* towards *'what can we do with what we've already got?'* (Kirklees Council, 2015). The delivery plan outlined Kirklees Council's thinking about these issues in the following way:

'City governments everywhere face tightening constraints on resources alongside rising demands and high aspirations from citizens. Kirklees will stimulate and operate a new sharing economy to maximize untapped local resources and do more with less. The council will pool idle government assets with the non-profit sector; from vehicles to venues, and citizens' skills and expertise; making these assets available to community organizations through a project-focused online platform' (Kirklees Council, 2015, p. 3).

In some ways, Kirklees Council was ahead of the game with planning for Comoodle. In early 2015, further budget cuts of £69m were announced with the potential loss of a further 1,000 jobs (BBC, 2015) and increasing pressures in terms of delivering services in the borough's most deprived districts. At the same time, however, Kirklees Council clearly recognized that if a new sharing initiative was to operate successfully, they would have to significantly redefine the way they worked with community groups to enable a successful policy transition.

A number of sharing pilots were established so as to be able to test assumptions that volunteers would come forward to deliver community projects if the council was to share *stuff* (i.e. tools and equipment), *space* and *skills* with community groups and voluntary sector organizations. Thus the pilots were tied to Bloomberg's five priorities on a number of levels.¹

¹ It should be noted that we do not discuss the functioning of the sharing economy platform that subsequently emerged from the pilots.

Key members from each of the community groups and voluntary sector organizations that were involved in the sharing pilots were already collaborating to various degrees with Kirklees Council prior to this sharing economy initiative. Each was therefore happy for collaborations to form the basis of a sharing pilot, so that the council could identify, understand and overcome the barriers and problems that might inhibit the development of a public sector sharing economy.

Fieldwork was conducted over a nine-month period involving in-depth interviews with key stakeholders from various Kirklees Council departments and the community groups and voluntary sector organizations involved in the pilots. In total, fifteen people were interviewed, some more than once, with the discussions focusing primarily on their experiences of engaging in and administering the pilots. Each interview lasted approximately two hours and was digitally recorded and transcribed in full.

We also conducted participant observation at activities connected to each of the pilots (e.g. gardening work; classes and meetings at a community center, which is not examined in this paper; and moving and sorting food donations at a food bank). We also attended meetings and workshops hosted by the council with a variety of partners, including Bloomberg Philanthropies (www.bloomberg.org), Nesta Innovation Foundation (www.nesta.org.uk) and various sharing economy consultants brought in to assist Kirklees Council. Given that the paper seeks to conceptualize a public sector sharing economy from the vantage point of political economy, the coding of field notes and interview transcripts was informed by Pais and Provasi's (2015) theoretical framework which highlights the distinctive features of forms of integration in the sharing economy. Thus, our analysis entails an abductive logic, following Willis' suggestion that ethnography requires a theoretical imagination, and

conversely that social science theory needs ethnographic groundings, since '*illuminating analytical points flow only from bringing concepts into a relationship with the messiness of ordinary life, somehow recorded*' (2005, p. xi). In so doing we identified three themes; people, power and politics, which we elaborate in the next section.

4.0 Findings

For reasons of brevity our findings report on two of the sharing pilots; a pilot sharing *stuff* and a pilot sharing *space*.

4.1 People

The first theme – people – examines the experiences of those engaged in the Comoodle sharing pilots. Drawing on Pais and Provasi (2015), here we focus in particular on the relevance of (1) the identity of actors; (2) their motivations, and; (3) the forms of trust that underpin their interactions (see Table 1). As we can see from Table 1, Pais and Provasi argue that in the context of both 'exchange' and 'redistribution' arrangements, the identity and personal history of participants is immaterial to the economic relationship, but for different reasons. Exchange is characterized as being 'impersonal', based on 'extrinsic motivation' with trust for both parties stemming from 'systemic confidence' in the market system governing exchange relationships. In redistribution the identity and personal history of the recipient must not be taken into account, they contend, in order '*to respect the impartiality of public action*' (2015, p. 358). Motivation is again 'extrinsic' with systemic trust in the authority providing a guarantee for recipients, and a '*moral source of trust and legitimacy*' (p. 359) serving as a guarantee for the authority; hence 'institutional trust' is said to provide the basis for redistribution.

‘Collaboration’, ‘reciprocity’ and ‘common pool’ sit between ‘exchange’ and ‘redistribution’ in Table 1 although, as Pais and Provasi suggest, they are vastly different, primarily because the economic relationship is embedded in social ties, albeit to varying degrees. As we shall see, particular characteristics of several of these five forms of integration can be detected in the two sharing pilots designed to prefigure the Comoodle sharing economy, which are examined below.

Insert Table 1. Analysis of Comoodle drawing on Pais and Provasi (2015) about here

The pilot for sharing ‘*stuff*’ focuses on a community group that set out to maintain the quality of green spaces and play areas on a residential housing estate comprised of around 100 public and private sector properties. Residents had initially got together to tackle issues that emerged after new houses were built on the estate. While the new properties were under construction, the property developer paid a private contractor to look after two acres of open green space. Once the final property was sold, however, responsibility passed back to Kirklees Council, the owners of the land. While the residents understood that the council didn't have the time and resources to maintain the green spaces to the same level as the contractors, when the developers left, they nonetheless expressed concern about the quality of the work being provided by the council. Leaving green spaces to become wild and overgrown, they argued, not only undermined the aesthetics of the estate, it also had the potential to negatively impact house prices.

Neighborhood groups around the world often implement creative ways of addressing their requirements through new forms of sharing and resource collaborations (Meroni, 2007).

Regarding the background to this pilot, two residents took it upon themselves to mobilize

other residents into action. A residents' association was quickly set up and a grant of £2,000 secured from the Parish Council. As this was insufficient to be able to purchase the heavy equipment required to cut large areas of grass and manicure the green space, the group entered into discussions with Kirklees Council to find alternative solutions. It was from these initial discussions that a sharing pilot focused on 'stuff' subsequently emerged. The pilot involved a 'ride-on' lawn mower and other gardening tools being loaned to the residents, with the residents' association transferring its £2000 grant funding to Kirklees Council. Although residents would look after the equipment locally and have exclusive access for the duration of the pilot, both parties agreed that ultimate responsibility for the equipment, including maintaining the equipment, lay with the council. Here we certainly see evidence of 'electivity' - a short form term that Pais and Provasi (2015, p. 361) use to indicate '*a form of elective reciprocity that presupposes a direct relationship between individuals who know each other and accept each other*', and 'interpersonal trust' based on this direct relationship between key members of the residents' association and members of the council who were driving this sharing initiative. That is to say, on one level the pilot appears to be moving towards 'reciprocity' as the council seeks to move away from 'redistribution'.

However, it is not clear that the motivation to engage in this sharing initiative could be described as being 'mainly intrinsic' for either of the two parties, as would be the case in an arrangement based on reciprocity. Once the pilot had been up and running for some time, one of the resident volunteers talked about the potential benefits of engaging in the sharing initiative in the following way;

"The feel-good factor that we've had from doing what we've done has been you know, tenfold. It's been more about, not just about cutting grass, it's been about community

spirit, about people speaking to people, who normally maybe you'd not have spoken to because you're getting to know each other through what we're doing."

This suggests what Pais and Provasi call 'identitarian' motivation, that is to say a 'motivational investment springing from a particular form of reciprocity: the one that ties the individual to the community to which s/he (sic) feels a sense of belonging' (2015, p. 362), which they suggest underpins 'common pool' arrangements.

In comparison, the council seems likely to remain motivated by 'extrinsic' factors, as per its normal 'redistribution' arrangements. In this regard, while a council participant was in clear admiration of the work, time and commitment of the volunteers, and would certainly like to see the council supporting similar sharing initiatives, the financial savings involved made her dubious about the value of these ways of working, as she pointed out;

"[T]here's gonna become a point where we need to look at actually is it worth our time...to look at what benefit we're getting from it...and that's quite a tricky one really because the savings are minimal."

The pilot for sharing 'space' focuses on a food bank that was running short of space to sort donations of food and other essential items prior to bundling into 'weekly' parcels for individuals and families in 'food poverty' (Lambie-Mumford, 2017). The food bank started out as a very small operation run by a local church in 1992 and it didn't grow much until about 1997. At this time, a decision was made to move into a more central location in the borough, as this was where most of the people in need of support were living. At the time, about 10 food parcels were given out weekly, but after a decade of steady growth, this figure

had reached 20-30 parcels a week by 2007. Demand began to increase exponentially from this point onwards, however, our interviewees informed us, in line with a range of structural problems arising from the financial crisis and subsequent government policies, all of which combined to enhance the number of people in food poverty, with the food bank soon providing around 200 parcels a week.

Space had thus been an ongoing problem, with the food bank moving into progressively larger buildings on an ongoing basis. By 2015, the food bank had become a key organization in the distribution of food parcels across the borough. Central government had already pushed funding for people in food poverty out to the local authorities (Lever et al., 2019), and the council had informed the food bank that if it increased the number of people it helped on a regular basis, the council would pay for the increase. At the same time, however, the council informed the food bank that it would have to become financially sustainable, and with demand increasing throughout 2015, the food bank was once again considering investing in extra space. Consequently, as Kirklees Council and the food bank had been ‘sharing the burden’ (Barnett, 2018) of caring for people experiencing food poverty for some time, the council quickly found the food bank temporary short-term storage space at a local market, and a sharing pilot for ‘*space*’ was initiated.

Although the value of the work being undertaken by the council in trying to initiate a sharing economy was recognized by interviewees at the food bank, there was also a feeling that the council failed to understand and appreciate the nature and extent of the pressures faced by the food bank. For example, comparing the space the food bank management felt they needed to be able to cope with the increasing volume of corporate food surplus and public donations coming their way, an interviewee made the point that; “...*if someone offers me a wagon load*

now it will fill the room and we couldn't take it". An interviewee from the council saw things very differently, commenting that the council was simply organizing "temporary storage space where they'd over-spilt with some tins."

These two quotes reveal starkly contrasting perspectives about the nature and extent of the pilot, which does not appear to have moved very far from the 'redistribution' arrangement under which the two parties were already working. The fact that the food bank was chosen for the pilot and the mutual admiration that was apparent among interviews with key members of both the food bank and the council suggest at least some level of social ties between the two organizations, which no doubt assisted the 'institutional trust' underpinning the pilot. This existence of social ties 'in the background' is somewhat consistent with the Polanyian perspective adopted by Pais and Provasi (2015), and with the suggestion of 'market multiplicity and plasticity' in Lloveras et al.'s (2020, p.229) analysis of mutualism within the capitalist marketplace. Indeed, the framework we are drawing on is not simply a strict categorization of different forms of integration, it is also a means to '*reflect on the drivers of shifts from one type to another, and thus identify the main trends in the social relations induced by the sharing economy*' (Pais & Provasi, 2015, p. 365).

4.2 Power

The second theme focuses on the power relations between the council and the community groups and voluntary sector organizations taking part in the Comoodle pilots. Following Pais and Provasi (2015) our analysis focuses on; (1) the symmetry of the relationship; (2) the nature of the constraint; and (3) the degree of commitment between the parties. Again, referring to Table 1, we can see that the relationship is generally considered to be 'symmetrical', that is to say the balance of power between parties is considered to be

relatively equal for ‘exchange’ and ‘collaborative’ forms of integration, and ‘asymmetrical’ or unequal for ‘redistribution’ and ‘common pool’ forms, with ‘reciprocity’ exhibiting a mix of equal and unequal power relations between parties. In the context of ‘exchange’, the ‘private legal’ system ensures that *‘parties can enter and especially leave the relationship without constraint or barriers’* (2015, p.356), thus the degree of commitment to each other is ‘low’. Within ‘redistribution’ arrangements, however, ‘public legal’ frameworks and regulations ensure that *‘freedom to leave the relationship is in principle precluded’*, with *‘dissatisfied subordinates’* (p.357) only able to ‘voice’ their complaints as per the regulations. ‘Informal’ constraints between parties lead to a ‘medium’ level of commitment to the relationship in the context of ‘collaboration’ arrangements, and ‘ethical’ constraints as a result of loyalty lead to a ‘medium/high’ level of commitment to the relationship in ‘reciprocal’ arrangements. Finally, the relationship in ‘common pool’ arrangements is said to be constrained by ‘communitarian’ values that place *‘obligations on all members of the community’* (p. 363), ensuring a ‘high’ degree of commitment. We turn now to consider the power relations governing the two sharing pilots.

In the pilot for sharing ‘stuff’, the ‘asymmetry’ in the power dynamics characterizing the relationship between the council and the residents’ association was palpable in terms of labor and the scheduling of work. For the council, it was absolutely vital to maintain clear lines delineating their role as the upper hand in the maintenance of open green spaces and the contribution that local voluntary groups could make; as a council interviewee informed us, *“...volunteers should add value to the work that the council does.”* However, administering this in practice was problematic, not least because volunteers were only expected to do *“an interim cut when we weren’t cutting.”* In reality, however, it soon became clear that this would not work, primarily because, as the council informant went on to say; *“our teams were*

turning up and the grass was cut.” The residents’ association appeared to understand the predicament faced by the council as a result of the recent public sector spending cuts, and as one of the volunteers mentioned; *‘we didn’t complain to the local newspaper’* like other communities were doing at that time. Instead, *“we are working with the council”* to achieve mutually beneficial goals. Thus, the residents’ association was seemingly oblivious to the fact that they could be seen to be taking jobs away from council workers and the wider political implications therein.

Here it would seem that the residents’ association viewed itself as operating under an ‘informal’ agreement with the council. Indeed, we might even conceive of the residents’ association as having taken an ‘ethical’ stance given the concern expressed by some of its key members in respect of the increased burden of work on council workers. Given the amount of work put into the pilot by volunteers, as witnessed through participant observation and in the course of various interviews, we would suggest that they display a ‘medium’ level of commitment to the relationship they were building with the council, thus suggesting a ‘collaboration’ or even a ‘reciprocity’ arrangement. The council’s perspective was quite different; it needed to maintain the upper hand, as it were, in this relationship in order not to jeopardize relations with unions, and to adhere to the public legal frameworks governing its commitment to maintaining green spaces across the borough. It was clearly proving problematic for the council to move away from its usual ‘redistribution’ arrangement towards ‘collaboration’, never mind towards the ‘reciprocity’ arrangement the residents’ association appeared to be envisaging for the future sharing economy.

‘Asymmetrical’ power relations were also in evidence in the pilot for sharing ‘space’. We have already mentioned that the food bank was in dire need of more space. During the course

of our interviews, however, it became apparent that the food bank was anticipating that this extra space would be shared with them on a reasonably long-term basis. This was important to the food bank, not least because, the more space they had access to, the more they could sort and share food and other items that were being donated in increasingly large quantities (from supermarkets and other retailers) with other smaller charities and food pantries, thus enabling them to help harder to reach communities, particularly in the north of the borough. The council's ambition for the sharing economy, by contrast, appears to have been based on what has been termed an 'access economy' (Bardhi & Eckhardt, 2012; Eckhardt & Bardhi, 2015 & 2016), which effectively refers to a short-term, ad-hoc approach to sharing akin to Pais and Provasi's (2015) characterization of 'collaboration'. As a participant from the council informed us; "*I thought from my conversations with [the food bank], it was quite clear I was sorting them out with some temporary storage space.*"

The food bank was clearly hoping to engage in the sharing pilot on the basis of 'reciprocity', involving a 'medium to high' degree of commitment between themselves and the council based on a 'mutual ethics of care' (White & Williams, 2018). In contrast, the council appears to be more interested in moving from the dis-embeddedness of its 'redistribution' arrangement to only the weakest form of social ties implied in 'collaboration' rather than the stronger form implied by reciprocal arrangements, a circumstance which we will pick up on and elaborate further in the next section, which deals with the theme of politics.

4.3. Politics

The third and final theme focuses on the politics involved in determining how this public sector sharing economy will operate. Here we draw on the remaining three features outlined in Pais and Provasi's (2015) framework to inform our analysis of the sharing pilots. These

are; (1) the principle of allocation; (2) the means of exchange, and; (3) the characteristics of the goods under consideration of sharing.

In ‘exchange’ relationships, the principle of allocation is ‘equivalence’ based on money. As such goods become ‘private’ and excludable in the sense of the *‘protection of exclusive ownership of goods even in non-rival consumption’* (Pais & Provasi, 2015, p356). In the context of ‘redistribution’, institutions allocate goods and resources on the basis of agreed criteria ensuring ‘justice’, and as a result these items become ‘public’ goods. The principle of allocation in arrangements based on ‘collaboration’ is ‘quasi-equivalence’ which, as we shall see, is the proposal for Comoodle, mediated by ‘reputation’, leading to ‘shareable’ goods. For ‘reciprocity’, the principle of allocation is ‘mutual positive debt’ mediated by ‘gratitude’, which leads to the ‘relational’ bonding value of goods, and for ‘common pool’ arrangements, it is ‘mutuality’ mediated by *‘the subjective status that derives from communitarian values’* (Pais & Provasi, 2015, p. 363) potentially involving privileges of rank as well as responsibility to those in need, leading to such goods and resources becoming ‘common goods’.

In the context of attempting to share the gardening equipment in the pilot for ‘stuff’, an important aspect that the council needed to work through was the variety of formal rules and regulations, particularly in relation to health and safety; as a council interviewee informed us;

“They’re acting as volunteers, but we have to treat them as employees in terms of health and safety, which means we have to do all of the same training that we’d give our normal staff.”

The issue of health and safety regarding the use of the equipment was also tied to the fact that the volunteers were using the council's equipment on the council's land. As the aforementioned council interviewee reminded us when discussing the green spaces being tended by volunteers:

“They feel like they own it and actually it's the council's, we own it, we're responsible for it. So, in terms of the law it's our responsibility and it's really hard to get that across to people.”

Although the volunteers recognized the importance of health and safety, they viewed the formal training as simple common sense. Tensions intensified when it emerged that only volunteers who had been appropriately trained by the council could use the loaned equipment, and given the time and resources involved, only five volunteers had been trained.

For the council, this whole situation was particularly problematic, as another council interviewee stated:

“One of the difficulties I'm having is [that] our current risk assessments for our own staff have some things in there that the volunteers haven't got in terms of qualifications and things like that.”

One reading of this circumstance is that by loaning the equipment to the volunteers to tend the council's land, this puts the council in a position of 'mutual positive debt' with the volunteers, thus requiring their commitment to health and safety training, although it is dubious to suggest that 'gratitude' would form the basis of such a debt. In a circumstance of

mutual positive debt, the tools and equipment would effectively become ‘relational’ goods ‘to the extent that they are able to change the identities of the parties involved and their relation’ (Pais & Provasis, 2015, p.361). This is not what the council had in mind for their Comoodle sharing economy, and one solution put forward to address these legal issues was to consider formally licensing the equipment. This would clearly take the relationship beyond any of the three forms of sharing characterized by Pais and Provasis (2015), and firmly into the domain of ‘exchange’.

Regarding the pilot for ‘space’, both parties were keen for the sharing economy to work. The food bank manager, for example, was clearly enthusiastic for Kirklees to try and get something like this off the ground: *I’m very positive about it...it fits in really well with what we’re about as well.*” The project manager for the sharing initiative at the council also acknowledged that he was “*excited because it reignited... thoughts... about how we should live alongside each other and share resources and be much more collaborative and co-operative.*” However, although equally keen to see Comoodle work, another interviewee from the food bank argued that the scope of the pilot had to be a lot bigger and more sophisticated if it was going to be effective. In reality, there was a considerable gap between ideology and practice. Echoing the notion of ‘mutual positive debt’ underpinned by ‘gratitude’, an interviewee on the board of directors at the food bank argued that there was an assumption that if the council simply supplied the food bank with a bit of extra space when they needed it, the food bank would, at no cost to the council, “*provide a crisis support service for the people of Kirklees.*” Council interviewees, however, saw the sharing relationship between themselves and the food bank in a completely different light, lamenting the fact that the space they had provided at the market “*wasn’t of a standard that they [the food bank] were happy with*”. Once again, we see here evidence of the council leaning towards an arrangement that

would fit more closely with ‘collaboration’ rather than ‘reciprocity’. Indeed, at project workshops with key members from the Comoodle team and sharing economy consultants, we observed extensive discussions about potential measures for social value outcomes of sharing activity as a basis of allocation, with a Comoodle star rating system serving as ‘quasi-equivalence’.

5.0 Concluding discussion

So where does this leave us in terms of understanding how and why public sector sharing economies differ from commercial and not-for-profit sharing economies? Analysis of the Comoodle sharing initiative from the perspective of Pais and Provasi’s (2015) framework (as summarized in Table 1) identifies a veritable mix of characteristics that Kirklees Council looked to operationalise as they set out to move from a ‘redistribution’ arrangement towards a sharing economy arrangement through engagement with various community groups and voluntary sector organizations. Detailed examination of two of the pilots prefiguring the Comoodle sharing economy suggest a hybrid of ‘collaboration’ and ‘reciprocity’, with lingering evidence of ‘redistribution’. We begin our discussion by evaluating the hybrid character of Comoodle in comparison to commercial and not-for-profit sharing economies. We then move on to consider the ramifications of this hybridity in the context of a ‘city owned’ and ‘self-governed’ public sector sharing economy (Voytenko Palgan et al., 2021) such as Comoodle. In so doing we respond to the second part of our research question, in respect of the implications for getting public sector sharing economies off the ground.

With regard to the role of identity and personal history facilitating public sector sharing, we see a relative foregrounding of social ties in the ‘elective reciprocity’ characterizing the *stuff* pilot, as well as in the lingering ‘citizenship’ in evidence in both the pilots we have examined.

Such relative foregrounding of social ties in the sharing pilots echoes on-going partnership arrangements between Kirklees Council and community groups and voluntary sector organizations within the borough of Kirklees. That is to say, the dis-embedding of social ties required by the ‘citizenship’ underpinning ‘redistribution’ arrangements is never absolute (Pais & Provasi, 2015; Polanyi, 2001 [1944]). Over the years, people from the council and from community and voluntary sector organizations have clearly come into contact and developed direct professional relationships with one another through various formal and informal meetings and networks. The ‘interpersonal trust’ that has developed through these direct relationships no doubt augmented the ‘institutional trust’ underpinning extant ‘redistribution’ arrangements.

Kirklees Council was, however, seeking to develop measures of social value through the ‘quasi-equivalence’ of a Comoodle star rating system. This star rating system was to be implemented as the ‘principle of allocation’ underpinning sharing activity in the future online platform. It is not without irony that this online public sector sharing economy platform would eventually operate to dis-embed rather than re-embed social ties. That is to say, by virtue of moving away from ‘institutional trust’ underpinned, albeit to a limited extent, by ‘interpersonal trust’ formed through direct relationships towards an online form of ‘indirect trust’, the Comoodle sharing platform would serve to dis-embed its ‘collaboration’ based form of sharing from (previously established) social ties. This has implications for the governance of public sector sharing economies, which we touch upon in the next paragraph, and subsequently develop.

In terms of the power dynamics involved in public sector sharing, the relationships between Kirklees Council and the community and voluntary sector organizations involved in

Comoodle thus far are clearly asymmetrical. That is to say, the balance of power clearly remained (very much) with the council. Volunteers in both pilots were anticipating a ‘medium-high’ level of commitment in the course of sharing council owned resources. The council, however, was clearly interested in moving away from the former ‘high’ degree of commitment associated with a ‘redistribution’ arrangement to a ‘medium’ level of commitment where it is possible to exit from sharing relationships with relative ease. Such short-term temporary forms of resource sharing are associated with a ‘collaboration’ arrangement analogous to ‘exchange’ given the weak form of reciprocity involved (Katrini, 2018; Pais & Provasi, 2015). While volunteers viewed their sharing relationships as being constrained by ‘informal’, and even ‘ethical’, agreements, associated with a ‘sharing culture’ (Katrini, 2018; Light & Miskelly, 2015), the council found it difficult to move away from the ‘public legal’ constraints of their ‘redistribution’ arrangements.

This contrast in values and ways of working between community and voluntary sector organizations has repercussions for the governance of a public sector sharing economy such as Comoodle. Since the sharing culture that underpins ‘reciprocity’ based forms of sharing involves not just sharing resources but sharing responsibility for decision-making in relation to resources (Bradley & Pargman, 2017; Katrini, 2018), it would have been wise for Kirklees Council to take heed of Schor et al.’s (2016) warning. Specifically, that transcending traditional power relationships involves more than simply ‘*novel economic arrangements*’ (2016, p. 67) such as the council was envisaging for Comoodle through a ‘collaboration’ style of sharing. In this regard, we recall that the Social Street sharing economy discussed by Pais and Provasi (2015) operates both on-line and off-line. Once relationships have been established on-line, parties subsequently also meet in off-line contexts, and we would suggest that it is through such direct relationships that ‘*the (co)-design of the shared management of*

the common good' (Pais & Provasi, 2015: p. 369) is in part facilitated. In addition to direct relationships we suggest that 'reciprocity' also requires sharing power and responsibility, since this engenders the 'mutual positive debt' that underpins sharing in 'reciprocity' based arrangements.

The analysis thus far indicates a high degree of complexity in the Comoodle public sector sharing economy. This complexity arises out of different motivations, values and ways of working between the various organizations involved in the sharing initiative as already discussed. However, this was exacerbated further by huge variety in the types of resources the council was intending to share; '*stuff*', '*space*' and '*skills*'. Each domain of sharing no doubt brings a different set of circumstances, as our analysis of just two pilots relating to the sharing of particular kinds of stuff and space indicates. Different types of stuff; transport in the form of vans or bicycles, for example, compared to gardening equipment, will no doubt give rise to issues not yet touched upon. This complexity intensifies still further when we take into account the additional dynamics of the beneficiaries of public sector sharing initiatives. In contrast to commercial sharing economies, and indeed some not-for-profit sharing initiatives, the community groups and voluntary sector organizations involved in the pilots would not be able to engage in sharing for the private benefit of their organizations and the individuals comprising them. The public benefits of the *stuff* pilot are debatable, and it was not clear that gardening projects such as these should proceed through Comoodle, unless they could demonstrate wider social value. By contrast, the social value to be realized through the distribution of food parcels to people in food poverty, as beneficiaries of the *space* pilot, is much greater.

All of this is to say that the ‘city as owner’ role together with the ‘self-governing’ strategy of municipal governance (Voytenko Palgan et al., 2021) being employed in the Comoodle public sector sharing economy at this time was likely to be unsustainable. Empirical evidence suggests that a combination of governance mechanisms is needed in order for public sector sharing to take off in a substantial way. In the context of Kirklees, this could have entailed the council adopting a ‘governing by provision’ strategy (Voytenko Palgan et al., 2021), for example, alongside the ‘self-governing’ strategy of Comoodle. However, this would have required the council to relinquish control over some domains of sharing by providing financial support to help grass roots sharing economy initiatives to grow; as seen, for example, in Sharing City initiatives in Seoul, Gothenburg and Amsterdam (Voytenko Palgan et al., 2021). The nascent sharing activity between the food bank and various food pantries within Kirklees, which we became aware of through our analysis of the *space* pilot, could have provided an ideal opportunity. In this context, the five governance strategies identified by Voytenko Palgan et al. (2021), provide for the necessary heterogeneity in governance that is likely to be required to match the heterogeneity in evidence in public sector sharing to be able to share burdens (Barnett, 2018), promote public benefits (Ganapati & Reddick, 2018) and pursue the common good.

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