

**Challenging neoliberalization  
at the urban grassroots:  
A participatory action research case study  
of community empowerment**

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## Preface

This thesis is original and independent work by the author, Stella Darby. This research was funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council from 2012-2015. This project received ethical approval from the University of Leeds AREA Faculty Research Ethics Committee on 28 November 2013, under the project's original title, 'Community empowerment and social policy: case study research at the urban grassroots' (Ethics reference LTGEOG-005).

This thesis is presented as an alternative style of doctoral thesis, including published material, in accordance with the protocol set out by the University of Leeds Faculty of Environment for this thesis format. The three manuscripts included in this thesis, indicated as Chapters 3, 4, and 5 (and referred to by title in the text of the thesis), have been written for submission for publication in peer-reviewed journals. All are solely authored by the PhD candidate, Stella Darby, and report findings based on original research. The first manuscript (designated Chapter 3) was submitted to *Area* and received an invitation to revise and resubmit; the revised and resubmitted version was the one included in this thesis as submitted for examination in September 2016. This manuscript was subsequently accepted for publication before the *viva voce* thesis examination, and the final version, as edited for publication, now appears in this thesis. The second manuscript (Chapter 4) was developed and formatted to be close to being ready for submission, as per the protocol for this thesis format. The third manuscript (Chapter 5) was published in *Antipode* in July 2016. Chapters 1 and 2 of this thesis comprise the integrating preceding material required for this thesis format. The word length of these chapters combined is 15,000 words. At the end of Chapter 2 is a list of references for this integrating preceding material, as per the protocol. Each manuscript written for publication has its own reference list. Chapter 6 comprises the discussion and conclusions section required after the manuscripts. It is 6,168 words long and includes its own reference list. At the end of the thesis is a single, comprehensive list of all the works cited in each of these reference lists.

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines values-based practices at Oblong, a small charity in Leeds, UK, arguing that this grassroots organisation challenges neoliberalization processes and promotes social justice through developing purposeful practices for values-based reflection and collective action. Alongside a practical focus at Oblong, this research has developed a theoretical perspective of transformation of neoliberalization which challenges dominant discourses by affirming the value and power of small organisations' work. Exploring the limitations and tensions of this project's processes of co-production, this thesis draws parallels between processes of transforming neoliberalization through social justice work and creating grounded, co-produced and value-rational research via academic institutions.

Three papers, formatted for journal submission, form the main body of this thesis. The first paper, 'Making space for co-produced research "impact": learning from a participatory action research case study', advances the ongoing debate around the developing UK impact agenda, arguing for the significance of value-rational research and its promotion through increased space and recognition for the alternative impacts created by co-produced research. The second paper, 'Listening for social change', provides a conceptual and practical analysis of listening practices demonstrating how such practices make essential contributions to the promotion of social justice values. The third paper, 'Dynamic Resistance: Third-sector processes for transforming neoliberalization' constructs a holistic framework for analysis and practice of contestation of neoliberalization processes by third-sector organisations.

Drawing on systems thinking and theories of neoliberalization as process rather than entity, this thesis argues that values-based practices and processes at Oblong exemplify such organisations' significant power and potential to resist and transform neoliberalization processes at their sites of impact. Recognising the complexity, non-linearity, and interconnection of processes of neoliberalization and contestation, I further argue that a focus on values and processes must necessarily balance goal-oriented social action in order to create sustainable and empowering change for social justice.

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## **Chapter 1 – Introduction**

### **Introducing Oblong: a participant-turned-researcher's perspective**

Oblong, a small charity based in inner-city Leeds, in the north of England, began in 1996: a group of unemployed people decided to join together to create a community resource centre where people could use music and arts equipment they might not otherwise have been able to access. This original focus on creative arts soon expanded to include various types of community projects, and the group realised that the activities they were doing together made a real, positive impact on the lives of the people involved. Meaningful work, a shared sense of purpose, and a conscious effort to treat each other as equals made a difference to people's mental health, well-being and sense of community. The group decided to register as a charity and seek grant funding to support and extend their work. Special emphasis was placed on retaining Oblong's participatory, 'do-it-yourself' ethos and non-hierarchical structure as the group sought to expand its capacity, hiring a few part-time members of paid staff and moving into larger premises. Oblong has been managing repeat and one-off funding from national and local grant-making bodies ever since. It continues to run a successful volunteering programme, working with sixty adults who are long-term unemployed and/or recovering from mental ill health each year, and also delivers externally-commissioned mental well-being courses and provides community development training.

A diverse range of activities has sprung up at the suggestions of people involved: community gardening, video production, graphic design, English classes, mental well-being classes, a food co-op, and various other projects. Oblong has always held 'flat' management practices central to its operation and ethos, with core aims of empowerment and equality. Projects are run by collectives, where participants have equal decision-making power. Paid staff peer-manage each other, and volunteers participate in collectives with staff

facilitators on an equal footing. Volunteers and staff worked together to crystallise the organisation's core values. They are:

- equality – “ensuring that every individual has an equal opportunity to make the most of their lives and talents”;
- collectivism – “making decisions together as equals”;
- empowerment – “people feeling able to change their community for the better”;
- [being] community led – “(directed by people) – focusing on people’s ideas and needs”;
- respect and care – “how we relate to each other and the people we work with”; and
- sustainability – “caring for the future of the community and the environment” (Oblong 2015b).

Though not founded on the basis of active protest (Smith 2008; Appadurai 2008), Oblong developed and defined its values in opposition to wider capitalist societal inequalities, and formed its identity around empowerment and deepening democracy through transformational processes and non-hierarchical relations (Oblong 2015a; Kaufman 1997).

After nearly fifteen years of working from different rented premises Oblong participants grew tired of dependence on precarious spaces. From 2008 to 2011, Oblong operated from the small basement of Woodhouse Community Centre, rented from Leeds City Council who own and, at that point, managed the building. During this time, through strategic planning sessions with trustees and the regular forums where all participants could input into the running of the organisation, Oblong made a collective decision: members decided to seek to take over running Woodhouse Community Centre – a ten-room, Victorian-era building – through Community Asset Transfer.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Community Asset Transfer is a UK policy mechanism established in 2007 to enable community ownership or management of publicly owned land and buildings.

Oblong's aims in pursuing Community Asset Transfer were to ensure the continued operation of Woodhouse Community Centre for the local area, to secure a long-term space for Oblong's activities, and to decrease the organisation's dependence on grant funding in a time of decreasing grant availability. The process required getting an interest-bearing 'social investment' loan, as well as a capital grant, from the government-endowed Adventure Capital Fund in order to refurbish the building. Oblong now manages the building and is responsible for its maintenance and financial sustainability.

I became a part-time employee at Oblong as project co-ordinator of this Community Asset Transfer in the project's early stages, in 2010. At the same time, I was completing my MA in Activism and Social Change at the University of Leeds. Interviews I conducted for course work indicated that my colleagues were apprehensive but optimistic about the challenge of managing the operational and financial responsibilities of the community centre whilst maintaining the positive benefits of Oblong's 'flat' management structure. As I wrote in 2011, during Oblong's preparations for the asset transfer of Woodhouse Community Centre:

Financial and practical considerations of building management came first on some respondents' worry lists...but the majority of concerns emerged as more focused on operational and functional issues....There was also general worry about how the expansion would be perceived by others – a need to attract a diverse range of customers for financial reasons will need to be balanced with the desire to maintain our reputation with members of the local community as somewhere a bit different, a bit of an “underdog,” not sterile or overly professional but welcoming and friendly (Darby, unpublished).

My job role included writing a 'business case' for the social investment which Oblong sought and gained; meeting with the investors' representative to explain how Oblong's flat management structure could cope with such a responsibility; and, eventually, appearing before a board of professionals along with a colleague. Our task was to convince investors not to withhold

ongoing funding for refurbishment works already completed as per the terms of our agreement, after payments were suddenly stopped because Oblong's largest revenue grant was not immediately renewed. During this harrowing time, during which staff took a self-imposed, collective pay reduction, we remarked that Oblong's non-traditional management structure provided the strength, commitment and sense of joint responsibility which held the organisation together where others would have fallen apart. When the centre re-opened, behind schedule, in January 2012, Oblong's financial worries about loan repayment and lost income were compounded by the failure of an essential part of the heating system – yet another significant expense to be borne by this community group which sought autonomy through engagement with the capital-driven policy avenues available to it. The contemporary rhetoric of then-Prime Minister David Cameron's Big Society – a vision based on state divestment from public facilities – seemed to signal an increasingly stark contrast between the neoliberal governance processes of austerity politics and Oblong's aims to create equality and empowerment; to foster collectivism, respect and care, and community-directed leadership; and to practise environmental and organisational sustainability through its running of this community asset.

As my employment as project co-ordinator drew to a close in 2012, I felt worried that the financial pressures Oblong faced could overshadow its social values and impinge on its ability to practise them. As several staff members also expressed, regarding themselves, in subsequent interviews during this PhD research, those social values were a key reason I had wanted to work there in the first place. For Oblong, the take-over of the community centre was a means to an end – to bolster Oblong's ability to further its aims of building individuals' and communities' capacity, power, and self-determination – but I worried the resulting financial burdens threatened to become an end in themselves, simply because of their scale and their underpinning of all other activity. I began to perceive Oblong's conundrum as one experienced at many scales, from the individual to the collective, within a profit-centred system of economic and social relations. I wondered, anxiously and hopefully: How do we make space for, and prioritise, practising human values and promoting



social justice and relationships of care, at the same time as ensuring our necessary financial survival? I decided (after discussions with members of Oblong) to seek funding for a PhD which would allow me to explore these questions further.

For this doctoral research project, I conducted participatory action research with Oblong over a total period of four years. In the second year of the research, I worked two days per week at Oblong as an unpaid placement with the staff team – we called my job role ‘Resident Researcher’. In the first and third years, I volunteered with Oblong’s Development Collective, assisting with funding bids and strategic planning processes. In final year, I did not participate at Oblong; however during this period I shared drafts of publications with staff members for review and comment and occasionally went to the centre for social visits.

## **Research questions and summary of argument**

I began this research project with three initial questions constructed around *values, processes and structures*, and *actions*, in the context of a desire to construct notions of hope for social justice in the face of the apparent neoliberalization of community work.<sup>2</sup> Throughout this document, I refer to ‘social justice’, drawing on Oblong’s six self-defined values of equality, empowerment, collectivism, being community-led, sustainability, and respect and care as a non-exhaustive but functionally descriptive illustration of ‘social justice values’. The practical aims of our co-inquiry at Oblong were shaped and re-shaped throughout the project by participants, as detailed in the papers which form the main body of this thesis. The theoretical and conceptual

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<sup>2</sup> My original research questions:

1. Why does a given grassroots community group feel motivated to exist and act?
2. How do groups organise themselves to support and enact their values?
3. What actions do groups take, based on their values and using their chosen processes and structures?

In constructing a narrative for this thesis, these questions have been revised. I wish to be transparent: the research did not always occur in the order my linear narrative may imply.

questions addressed by the academic analysis I present in this thesis are as follows:

1. What role can shared values play in shaping the practices and actions of a group or organisation working for social justice?
2. What practices and processes can support a group or organisation to make space for, and prioritise, social justice values in the context of neoliberal capitalism?
3. How can we challenge dominant discourses of neoliberal capitalism in the ways we conceptualise and analyse the work of groups and organisations working for social justice?

Addressing these questions, this thesis – including the three papers written for publication which comprise the main body of the document – makes several key contributions. The first paper, ‘Making space for co-produced research ‘impact’: learning from a participatory action research case study’,<sup>3</sup> advances the ongoing debate around the developing UK impact agenda, arguing for the significance of value-rational research and its promotion through increased space and recognition for the alternative impacts created by co-produced research. The second paper, ‘Listening for social change’,<sup>4</sup> provides a conceptual and practical analysis of listening practices demonstrating how such practices make essential contributions to the promotion of social justice values. The third paper, ‘Dynamic Resistance: Third-sector processes for transforming neoliberalization’ (Darby 2016) constructs a holistic framework for analysis and practice of contestation of neoliberalization processes by third-sector organisations. The introductory, methodological and concluding chapters of this thesis provide commentary drawing these three distinct papers together. Thus the thesis as a whole contributes analysis demonstrating synthesis between systems thinking and theories of contestation of neoliberalization, in order to offer a

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Making space for co-produced research ‘impacts’” was invited for revision and re-submission by *Area*.

<sup>4</sup> ‘Listening for social change has been prepared for journal submission but not yet submitted.

conceptualisation of social justice practices which highlights the generative importance of values-based practices, decision-making, and processes.

This thesis argues that Oblong exemplifies a set of complex processes and embedded practices which empower the organisation to challenge neoliberalization processes and to promote its vision of social justice through purposely making space for values-based reflection and collective action. I begin from the premise that capitalism is a broadly destructive and harmful way of organising how we relate to each other as humans (Wright 2010). But, the numerous ways that people organise diverse economic activities in-against-and-beyond capitalist practices – Oblong is a case in point – can challenge perceptions of neoliberal capitalism as an immovable power system (Gibson-Graham 2006; Holloway 2002). I support a conception of neoliberalization as “an always incomplete and...contradictory process” (Peck & Tickell 2012, p.247) and argue that this viewpoint allows us to more productively analyse and conceptualise contestation to neoliberalization. This way of understanding neoliberalism as an unfinished and evolving process is well attuned to a systems thinking approach, which depicts systems as constantly changing, complex, and affected by emergent circumstances (Williams 2015). Drawing on living systems and social science approaches to systems thinking (Macy & Brown 2014; Chesters 2004), I posit that a processual, emergent view of change can offer hope and insight for contestation efforts. However, this viewpoint de-prioritises focussed struggle for particular, fixed goals. Such an approach makes much-needed space, alongside important considerations of practical achievability, for a focus on co-created values, values-based practices, and trusted processes for value-rational decision-making – which deliberates the desirability of intended goals and develops praxis based on those deliberations (Flyvbjerg 2001). I argue not that we need to renounce specific, practical goals, but rather that we need to redress an imbalance of unrealistically linear hopes and aims by prioritising social values and relational processes as equally valuable to decision-making for social change.

Throughout the papers for journal publication included in this thesis, I present aspects and examples of Oblong's small-scale, value-rational practices and processes as significant and relevant to broader social change processes. I do not argue that these practices form a model which others must adopt, but rather that practices like these across diverse contexts of small-scale social justice work are valuable, significant, and potentially powerful when we consider the complexities and possibilities of non-linear, emergent change processes. I further argue that academic institutional priorities hinder the potential for social change which value-rational, collaborative research can help promote, but that it is worthwhile to continue pursuing research which supports these processes through broadly-conceived co-production approaches. Acknowledgement of the important role of value-rational decision-making, and of processes which support it, is crucial to social change (Flyvbjerg 2001). Value-rationality empowers stances and social action which not only challenge the profit-centred goals of neoliberal capitalism but also destabilise the imbalanced and destructive logic of constant linear growth which underlies its dominant narrative. These alternative stances and actions are not simply waiting to be organised, but also already happening all around us. Recognising and contributing to their life-affirming value is not only effective but also rewarding.

### **(Neoliberal) capitalism: fearsome but not immutable**

A broad range of critical geographers and other scholars convincingly dissect and analyse the harms and destruction which capitalism, and its late twentieth-century neoliberal turn, continue to inflict on human and non-human life. Capitalist social relations alienate people from each other by mediating our relationships to each other and our perceptions of our creative efforts through the arbitrary channel of money and exchange value (Holloway 2002). The 'naturalisation' of neoliberal economic practices such as financialization, privatisation, and state support for corporate interests entrenches poverty and inequalities (Harvey 2007), configures public space to reproduce limiting norms of neoliberal capitalism (Leitner, Peck, et al. 2007) and co-opts public

services and civil society for neoliberal aims through professionalization, marketization and governance by the Shadow State (Wolch 1990; Mitchell 2001; Kaldor 2003; Jenkins 2005). Wright's (2010) eleven criticisms of capitalism cover the perpetuation of avoidable suffering, the restriction of freedom and human flourishing, the destruction of the environment and community ties, the violation of democratic values and social justice, and the promotion of war, as well as crucial economic inefficiencies.

In light of these demonstrable problems with global capitalism, working with Oblong interested me because, as an organisation, it challenges capitalist values both in principle and in practice, at a tangible, accessible scale. I wanted to regain hope – hope that everything would not always be inevitably co-opted and incorporated into an unescapable capitalist system; and hope that people could work together meaningfully, despite, alongside, and/or around the ways that capitalism makes us feel separate and alienated from each other. Anti-capitalist hopes focussed on revolutionary utopias – or, at least in the meantime, successful protest campaigns – have often left activists burnt-out and unfulfilled, prompting a turn towards prefigurative politics and change-making efforts focussed on the present, yet still hopeful for future transformations (Chatterton 2006; Solnit 2004). Following Gibson-Graham (2006), I celebrate the politics of possibility engendered by present-focussed practices of social justice, but I ponder the (paradoxically) enduring focus on future conditions inherent in the characterisation of alternative practices as 'prefigurative' (Gibson-Graham 2008b). Oblong represents a collective effort – currently taking place, as it happens, down the street from where I live – to reduce, combat, and transform some of the ill effects of neoliberal capitalism on participants' lives, such as mental ill-health and exclusion from the economy, in the here and now.

The multiple and myriad ways that humans subvert, work around, or simply ignore capitalist values indicate that capitalism is not, in fact, the static behemoth often theorised (Gibson-Graham 2008a; 2008b). So-called 'marginal' economic practices – such as informal care work; unpaid household labour; workers', consumers' and producers' co-operatives; community-

supported agriculture, social enterprises, and more – account for a greater amount of workers' time and/or more value created than capitalist enterprise (Gibson-Graham 2008a, p.617). The range of economic practices described here respond principally to human needs rather than profit goals. To consider just one case in point, Oblong's ways of working provide both an example of the performance of alternative and non-capitalist values and practices, as well as a confirmation of the multiple inefficiencies, irrelevancies and failures of capitalism which give rise to a need for 'Oblongs' in the first place. The broad-ranging critical mass of diverse alternative practices demonstrates that the capitalist narrative of necessary competition is not only false but also less-than-dominant in the value-systems that motivate people's actions. By pursuing a "performative ontological project of 'diverse economies'", Gibson-Graham (2008a, p.618) aim to shift perspectives towards a worldview which recognises the reality, credibility, viability and centrality of these diverse economic practices in all our lives – not in some distant future but in the present.

Thinking about neoliberalism as an ever-changing set of processes of neoliberalization, instead of an immutable entity, makes it easier to see how it can be contested, resisted and transformed in diverse ways. The development of neoliberalization processes has been and continues to be particular, context-specific and rooted in contestation to previous economic and social discourses (Leitner, Peck, et al. 2007). However, neoliberalism and contestation draw on each other and use each other as tools, jumping off points or justifications. This interplay is not a simple power struggle between disconnected things; each shapes, co-opts and is co-opted by another, therefore constantly evolving. Equally importantly, contesting groups may or may not identify neoliberalism as a target (Leitner, Sheppard, et al. 2007). We can see Oblong's development over two decades as an example of contradiction and tension between autonomous community action and neoliberal social policies. In its evolution from 'DIY' social centre to managing body of a city council-owned community centre, Oblong exemplifies grassroots urban social action which is inextricably tangled in neoliberal governance structures yet also able to exercise agency in how policy is

interpreted, enacted or even subverted on the ground (Meade 2012). Oblong's efforts to run its new community asset in a collective, non-hierarchical way create continuing tensions as well as opportunities for innovative reinterpretation of top-down policies. This ongoing interplay demonstrates the processual engagement and transformation of neoliberalization processes – rather than a linear, goal-oriented battle with a fixed entity of neoliberalism – which forms the basis of my analysis of Oblong's challenge to neoliberalization. I explain how Oblong's actions, on different scales and over time, demonstrate a holistic process of transforming neoliberalization processes in my paper 'Dynamic Resistance'.

### **Hope for social change? A systems thinking perspective**

Systems thinking offers a framework for thinking about change which corresponds to this view of neoliberalization as process-based, ever-evolving, and not necessarily as stable or inevitable as it may seem. Systems thinking emphasises the interrelationship of all elements of a system, as well as constant and nonlinear change (Macy & Brown 2014). A complex system is more than the sum of its parts: emergence is a crucially important quality in both large-scale and small-scale social processes (Chesters & Welsh 2005; Williams 2015). Whilst caution is necessary in the application of ecological and systems theories to social sciences – as some approaches may emphasise social control, marginalise the significance of individual experience and behaviour, or seek to 'naturalise' dominant narratives through an emphasis on adaptation and integration (Welsh 2014) – systems thinking contributes a holistic perspective which highlights interdependence and foregrounds collaborative processes (Hammond 2003).

Neoliberalism as a "highly dynamic, open system" is convincingly theorised as unstable, crisis-ridden and contradictory (MacLeavy 2012, pp.250–251, citing Peck & Tickell 1994), emphasising its vulnerability to emergent actions outside the control of those implementing processes of neoliberalization. Systems thinking shows us the significance of interconnection and interaction between capitalism and its 'others'. Likewise, any movement or organisation seeking

social change, despite antagonism towards dominant values, also maintains relationships and recourse to existing economic and political systems (Chesters 2004) – such relationships do not necessarily indicate co-optation or incorporation. Furthermore, linking the “fundamental and systemic critique” present within alter-globalisation social movements to the concept of emergence within a complex system forms the basis of Chesters’ (2004, p.324) argument for the broader significance of seemingly small and insignificant initiatives for social change. I argue, in ‘Dynamic Resistance’, that the actions of Oblong and other third-sector organisations like it can create real and relevant social change despite being small-scale and appearing, to some, to be easily co-opted. Oblong’s organisational values and practices demonstrate the ways that micro-scale social processes of adaptive and emergent change challenge macro-scale processes of neoliberalization by transforming the effects of neoliberal policies at the site of impact.

Analysing and conceptualising resistance and transformation of neoliberalization processes in terms of systems thinking can make it easier to have hope for change, and perhaps clearer what we might do to effect change. Systems thinking, with its emphasis on interrelationship, interaction and change, is congruent with Foucauldian notions of power as located not within a fixed location or entity but rather “dispersed throughout...complex networks of discourse, practices, and relationships” (Kesby 2005, p.2040, citing Clegg 1989 and Foucault 1975 & 1976). Although it is important not to discount the real and unequally distributed oppressive enactments of power and force, notions of emergence, complexity and interconnectedness suggest that seemingly insignificant groups and practices may exert powerful effects, albeit perhaps in less visible or directly-attributable ways. A view of power in the context of constant change and interrelatedness therefore sees empowerment – or the exercise of ‘power with’ – as a relational, dynamic process instead of a scarce quality to be attained through competition.

The approach of general systems theory to exploring “phenomena in terms of dynamic patterns of relationship”, instead of in terms of static components



(Brown 2015, para.3), highlights the importance of process and practice. This turn away from a positivist scientific approach of identification and classification chimes with Holloway's (2002) rejection of these modes of separation which reinforce the social alienation of capital through constructing illusory fixed qualities of power, and with his eschewing of identity politics which conceive of power as a zero-sum game. An emphasis on process, interaction and interconnection as crucial elements of systemic social change (Chesters 2004) correlates with Gibson-Graham's (2006; 2008a) vision of 'the economy' as a diverse set of constant processes of re- and co-creation through ethical negotiation rather than a static, defined entity. Oblong's constantly-evolving organisational practices demonstrate dynamic and relational processes of negotiating, constructing and exercising ethics and power. These processes occur amongst a range of interconnected individuals and organisations and within a broader context of global economic processes. It is the processual and ever-changing nature of this global context of neoliberalization – viewed through the lens of systems thinking and its emphasis on interconnection, complexity, emergence and nonlinear change – which makes the processes taking place in a single third-sector organisation working for social justice relevant to broader processes of social change. In the context of 'global civil society', Chesters' (2004) work argues that it is possible for processes of social change to create an emergent collective intelligence. Complex, adaptive, bottom-up participation and self-organisation develop processual feedback loops that significantly increase the agency and potential of the collective. Such feedback loops appear to affirm the participatory, democratic praxis which gives rise to emergent properties creating strength, longevity and interconnectivity within social change movements (Chesters 2004).

Thus systems thinking provides an analytical framework in which small-scale empowerment can confer hope for broad social change. This hope may seem paradoxical, though, because part of the point of systems thinking is that we cannot expect to achieve a certain outcome from doing a particular thing, given the complexity and interconnectedness of all the aspects of a system. Many activists suffer disillusionment and burn-out when hopes for visible

success or 'victory' in particular campaigns are thwarted (Solnit 2004). Skrimshire (2008) posits that current dominant discourses pervert creative, autonomous or utopian hopes, supplanting them with desires for security and preservation of lifestyle – though he also notes growing narratives of dissent, protest, anti-capitalism and hopeful stories. Hope for a particular outcome presupposes a Kantian 'metaphysics of morals', an assumption of reality in which some outcomes are more desirable than others (Mittleman 2009). This attachment to outcome which is so commonly a feature of our hopes, whether personal or societal, arises from a strong cultural expectation that we can and should exert measurable, verifiable control over end results, even in a complex and constantly changing world.

I mention briefly, in each of the papers included in this thesis, Oblong's strategic plans to get involved with helping to run other community centres in Leeds – namely an intention to train or guide other organisations in processes of values-based practice. However, even if we consider just two relevant factors – for example, austerity policies affecting local councils, and relationship dynamics within organisations Oblong might work with – multiple unpredictable outcomes are plausible. In a way, this confounds hope – at least if hope is pinned to a particular outcome. If I pin my hopes on Oblong's ability to execute its strategic plans, I will at the very least experience a lot of anxiety as unforeseen circumstances emerge over time. Values-based decision-making processes like Oblong's are, clearly, only a starting place for social change and not a guarantee of a steady march towards utopia.

On the other hand, letting go of the (let's face it) historically and experientially preposterous expectation that humans should be able to accurately plan and execute the future can be liberating. Such an attitude makes more space for people to purposefully consider what we value together, and how we might put shared values into action, as if these considerations were equally important to what it seems likely that we can realistically achieve – because, I argue, they are. Hope may arise as an expression of discontent or a perception of incongruence, without initially being linked to a defined alternative outcome. Holloway's (2002; 2010) notion of 'the No!', the refusal

of the logic of capitalism, describes such an initially aimless, but potentially generative, negativity: a rejection of current circumstances expresses a discontent with dominant power frameworks, and drives us to “walk in the wrong direction”, seeking different ways of relating to each other (Holloway 2016). Chesters (2004) emphasises the “kernel of antagonism” observable within global civil society as a key driving factor in what he calls the alter-globalisation movement: rather than advancing a particular end-goal, this antagonism drives a desire to simply do things differently. In the context of complex systems and emergent, nonlinear change, perhaps hope is most generative – or least draining – when it takes the form of a “radical emptiness”, a “negativity waiting to be defined” within the “unavoidable community of beings” that is an interconnected world of living systems (Gibson-Graham 2008b, p.156). From such an open hopefulness might arise an “appreciation of the sense of unfolding possibility that actually lies at the heart of human experience” (Skrimshire 2008, p.4, referencing Bloch’s *The Principle of Hope*). In this sense, hope – for as-yet-undefined alternative ways of doing things – engenders a sense of freedom, rather than a sense that meaning and satisfaction is contingent upon particular achievements.

Still, if hope is to be generative, it must be linked to transformative action; it must pass through this moment of open possibility and seek to establish meaning. If, as general systems theory proposes, change is nonlinear and emergent – and therefore unpredictable – what can we hope for? Holloway (2002; 2010; 2016) argues that our discontent with the ‘rule of money’ arises from a basic human desire for dignity, which is violated by capitalist social relations because they mediate our interactions through arbitrarily assigning monetary value to our creative efforts in order to maximise profit. Dignity does not take a particular fixed form but rather is an experience affected by our ways of doing things, and ways of relating to each other – processes which are fluid, adaptable and contextual. Pointing to the crucial importance of deliberative, reflexive processes to creating collective empowerment, Chesters (2004, p.339) argues that the effectiveness of broadly networked social change movements requires “faith in a process of encounter and deliberation...This does not...smooth away the familiar dilemmas of any

organisational process...it privileges these processes as the locus of political action.”

This research has focussed on how Oblong puts its hopes, which it has crystallised into core organisational values, into practice. Of course Oblong has concrete targets and outcomes it wants and needs to achieve. But, the emphasis on values and practice acts as a balance to instrumental pursuit of goals, and demonstrates that ethical process is as important to Oblong as outcomes: the means do not justify the ends, if a particular organisational goal requires an unacceptable compromise on core values. The acceptability of such a compromise is up for discussion through collective decision-making processes, just as the definition of Oblong’s core values is when these are periodically re-visited. As I argue in my ‘Listening’ paper, practices at Oblong which make space for sharing interpretations of core organisational values, and for thinking about how to put these values into practice, are crucial to organisational function and effectiveness – and therefore to the politics of social justice embedded in Oblong’s work. Responsive, relational, and interconnected organisational practices help Oblong promote social justice values through adaptive, emergent, and iterative interactions with processes of neoliberalization.

## **Social change through a focus on values and process**

Conceptualising social justice work through systems thinking is not about supplanting goals-focussed thinking and action with values- and process-focussed thinking and action. Rather, it is about recognising the value of thinking and acting based on values and trusted processes, and making space for these alongside practical considerations of achievability. I advocate purposely creating space for values-based organisational practices and processes in my paper on ‘Listening’. This paper describes the power of generative listening practices, like those used at Oblong, to reward and nourish participants when sharing their thoughts and feelings, and at the same time to ‘harvest’ a wealth of creative ideas for practical action. Micro-practices such as these form essential building blocks of a broader process of ‘dynamic

resistance', whereby collective praxis transforms the effects of neoliberalization processes over time and at multiple scales.

A value-rational approach – questioning the desirability of a course of action, and not just its technical achievability or instrumental potential (Flyvbjerg 2001) – is essential to the ethical negotiation required for praxis. Gibson-Graham (2008b) use the term 'ethical' to mean 'not structural', indicating a hopeful emptiness or negativity, an openness to co-creation of desirable objectives in a given space of decision-making, based not on an assumed dominant structure but on negotiation of values and priorities by those involved. Such deliberation does not, of course, ensure 'good' or 'positive' outcomes – this judgement is down to those involved. However, Flyvbjerg (2001) argues that value-rational processes are necessary to balance the intellectual or instrumental rationality which has dominated science, government, economic activity and public discourse for centuries. He states: "Problems with both biosphere and sociosphere indicate that social and political development based on instrumental rationality alone is not sustainable" (Flyvbjerg 2001, p.53). The process of "reflexive analysis and discussion of values and interests" (Flyvbjerg 2001, p.3) required for value-rational decision-making creates space for values which challenge the profit-based logic of money. Through observing broader social change movements like the loosely-networked alter-globalization movement, we can see that praxis which is consciously focussed on democratic and decentralized processes creates emergent properties which strengthen the movement (Chesters 2004). This highlights the centrality of purposeful processes to the effective practice of value-rational decision-making and action.

Through articulating its hopes as core values which guide practice, Oblong has created space in its day-to-day and strategic operation for processes of value-rational negotiation and deliberation, reflexive practice which emphasises attentive listening, and empowerment based on co-creation rather than domination. These responsive, relational and interconnected processes help Oblong promote social justice values through adaptive, emergent and iterative interactions with processes of neoliberalization. To

move from value-rational decision-making to values-based actions and practice, Flyvbjerg's (2001, p.60) value-rational questions – “Where are we going? Is this desirable? What should be done?” – become more process-focussed: How shall we do this? Is it consistent with our values? How can we take action in a way that is? Desires to construct value-rational futures which are adaptable and responsive to change hinge on *how* things are done as much as *what* is done. Reflexivity is essential in shaping the processes used to enact values. As a day-to-day collective task, reflexive practice becomes more easily practicable if a group defines – and periodically re-visits, re-defines, and or reinforces – its core principles or values to guide its reflection and action, as Oblong demonstrates.

Reflexive practice also helps participants become aware of the connections between the micro scale – for example, our own emotional or intellectual responses to issues – and the macro scale – such as widespread cultural norms or global economic practices. Through the process of exchange of views, members of a given community can come to realise that “reflexive criticality is not an individual quirk but is in fact a widely experienced and appropriate mode of response” to the perceived dominance of neoliberal logic; this realisation and legitimation of critical reflection can empower people to challenge the negative effects of neoliberal logic on their lives (Chesters & Welsh 2005, p.199).

Oblong demonstrates ways of doing things differently at the small scale which engage with large-scale pragmatic issues, like neoliberal governance and funding processes – whilst also making space for value-rational practices and decision-making, and for processes which support and enact such practices and decision-making. This research has deliberately focussed on values and process at an organisational scale for two reasons. Firstly, this project has aimed to share practical, experiential, grounded knowledge which might be interesting or inspirational for others working to promote social justice. Secondly, it contributes a conceptualisation of resistance and transformation based on values and processes, not reach and magnitude, thereby redressing an imbalance which contributes to cynicism and hopelessness about social

change which is perceived as ‘too small to count.’ Many an analytical critique chronicles the ways large-scale systems can undermine small-scale efforts. My intentions in doing this research were, instead, to explore and affirm small-scale practices of contesting large-scale processes and to develop interpretive frameworks for valuing, recognising and promoting the potential relevance of such practices at multiple scales.

## **Diverse processes and non-linear expectations**

Whilst this research promotes the significance and relevance of values-based practices at a small scale, this significance and relevance does not depend upon the replication of these same processes in multiple instances. Processes of contesting neoliberalization are as variegated and context-dependent as neoliberalization processes themselves. In other words, the things Oblong does would be different if anyone else were doing them – different people, different place, different circumstances. This research is not meant to develop a model or blueprint. Instead, it is an interpretation of experiences and observations which transparently promotes social justice values, offers ideas which I argue are relevant to practising such values, and – crucially – advocates a view of social change which focusses on processes and value-rationality.

As Gibson-Graham (2008c) explain, second-wave feminism shows us how empowerment can ‘spiral out’ and adapt to emergent contexts via values-based deliberation and processes. By legitimizing the notion that “the personal is political”, the women’s movement connected private, small-scale issues to public, global-scale political discourse. A “feminist spatiality” – one that is grounded in individuals, who are potentially everywhere (i.e. women, or, conceivably, the unemployed, those who need to eat, or those who desire dignity) – opens up a politics of ‘place’ which includes organisations and communities of practice at any scale, from household to ecosystem. The potential manifestation of such a politics is global, if we consider that a person or group empowered and politicized at any of these scales – including in their community, workplace, or a civic organisation – has the potential to practice

this empowerment at different scales and share this politics across networks (Gibson-Graham 2008c, p.661; Kesby et al. 2007; Chatterton & Pickerill 2010).

“Feminism’s remapping of political space and possibility suggests the ever present opportunity for local...transformation that does not require (though it does not preclude and indeed promotes) transformation at larger scales” (Gibson-Graham 2008c, p.661).

The non-uniformity, and continual adaptation, of feminism as a globally diverse movement demonstrates responsive, emergent, and constantly adapting expressions of empowerment. The centuries-long time span of this movement – often experiencing localised or short-term ‘defeat’ – allows us to see change as emergent and non-linear, encompassing multiple setbacks and unforeseen contextual developments yet maintaining momentum via processes of politicisation based on values negotiation and relevance at the human scale.

Systems thinking would have us consider the connections between empowerment processes and values-based practices at ‘marginal’ scales, and the challenges posed to neoliberalization processes at larger scales. Systems thinking supports the point that experimenting with practices similar to Oblong’s, in different circumstances, would produce emergent results affected by more factors than we can probably imagine or count. This does not detract from the relevance or significance of such marginal practices if our conception of transformative social change focusses not wholly on specific desired outcomes, but also on trusted processes and shared values. There is no ‘right place’ to begin creating empowerment or opening spaces of value-rational negotiation between people. The effects of global processes of neoliberalization are happening at every scale, touching individuals, communities, organisations, national governments and beyond. Any of these scales is as good a place as any to begin approaching things differently (Gibson-Graham 2008b, p.157).

Exploring value-rational approaches to meeting people’s economic and social needs, through iterative reflexive practice, is necessarily an “uncontrolled



experiment”, producing unpredicted, informative outcomes with every iteration (Gibson-Graham 2008a). Though these outcomes help inform the effectiveness of processes, it is of limited value to pronounce the results of iterative praxis ‘viable’, ‘successful’, or ‘co-opted’ as if analysing a completed journey along a linear trajectory. By taking a process-based approach, this research has sought to observe, co-create and articulate sources of inspiration, techniques for survival, and an empowering and hopeful way of looking at the ‘experiments’ of one organisation which might be useful for others. A focus on values-based practices and processes creates a vision of social change which does not define relevance and effectiveness based solely on conclusive achievement of specified ends. Rather, such a focus affirms that relationships and expressions and practices of shared values are equally as important as end goals. I suggest that this broadening of focus is helpful in maintaining hope and motivation through intrinsically non-linear, emergent processes of social change with unpredictable results.

### **Supporting value-rational change through research**

Through the process of doing this research with Oblong, I experienced institutional approaches to creating research outputs – including recent developments in the measurement of research impact by certain criteria – as unhelpfully linear and goal-focussed. As I argue in ‘Making space for co-produced research “impact”’, these approaches are unhelpful because they do not include enough space for value-rational decision-making with people who will be affected by research about what needs researching, and why, and what the people who will be affected want the research to try and achieve. The developing impact agenda implicitly promotes dominant values of linear growth and capitalist development. Space for value-rational, participant-led research processes is necessary to encourage research impacts which can respond effectively to the social and environmental issues which stem from over-emphasis of these dominant values.

Some of the ethical and practical challenges within participatory research approaches stem from a larger tension between institutional expectations of

linear research and the necessarily iterative processes of collective exploration of a research topic (Pain et al. 2015). In the context of this project, the completion of my PhD will signal the end of the research, yet it does not feel like this relational, collective process of knowledge co-production should finish with this piece of individually-produced academic work. Perhaps a further collaborative process of deciding together with Oblong participants how to mark the end of the project – perhaps reflecting on its ‘impacts’? – would be more appropriate. Yet an attempt to define the impacts of the project within institutional terms would raise further tensions: how can we definitively delineate the results from the process, or attribute individual responsibility for effects, with regard to an iterative, collective research project?

Such issues around institutional evaluation of research echo larger but parallel tensions between institutional priorities and an analytical framework of social change which focusses on processes, values and non-linear transformation. Still, academic work can be influential in creating space for the conceptualisation and application of such approaches. Whilst participatory action research poses challenges to traditional academic practice, its flexibility also helps address these tensions (McFarlane & Hansen 2007; Kesby et al. 2005). As I explore further in the next chapter, not only our approaches to research, but also the questions we ask, can help construct space for alternative analyses and practices within and outside of academia. Like Oblong within the third sector, researchers wishing to access resources and employment through academic funding and governance processes – and to transform these processes through subverting their effects – must exercise strategies of resistance, resilience, resourcefulness and reflexivity (Darby 2016).

### **Values-based social action as life-affirming process**

To summarise this chapter’s introductory discussion, an approach which acknowledges the essential role of values and processes in social change is congruent with a systems thinking viewpoint, which describes the world in terms of emergent qualities and cyclical, non-linear change. Such a worldview

is valuable because it is more consistent with observable cycles of life than economic models of constant and/or linear growth. Thinking of social change in terms of the constant expansion or progression of ideas, values or practices adopts the logic which has created many of the problems we are trying to solve – a logic which has driven the constant expansion and adaptation of capitalist practices in order to pursue ever-greater profits despite costs to human and non-human life. The power of this logic within us is comprehensible, following Foucault, given its embeddedness and constant reinforcement through cultural and social practices. Thinking about things differently and making decisions based on values and not just end-goals takes constant practice and revision (just as, incidentally, reproducing capitalist social relations does!). This research presents Oblong's iterative, cyclical, evolving practices as an example of 'walking in the other direction' whilst acknowledging the practicalities and contradictions of dominant capitalist practices (Holloway 2016).

## Chapter 2 – Methodology

### Research approach: values, aims & methods

I began this research with a desire to help produce something that would be practically useful to Oblong, and to promote its organisational values of empowerment, equality, collectivism, being community-led, sustainability, and respect and care. My belief in these values, and desire to do meaningful collective work in line with such values, was why I initially worked for Oblong as an employee (two years before considering undertaking this PhD). My worries about the ways my professional work at Oblong contributed to the organisation's engagement with increasingly neoliberal funding and governance structures influenced my desire to focus this research on affirming Oblong's praxis of its core values. For researchers with a social justice focus, the effects of neoliberal policies – on both the academy and on the work of community research partners – make values-based methodologies which are engaged and productive for partner groups increasingly significant (Fincher & Iveson 2012; Unsworth et al. 2011; Chatterton 2010). Fincher & Iveson argue for the explicit application of values as evaluative reasoning tools. They emphasise the importance of researching both processes and outcomes of enactments of justice. They conclude:

...[I]f we re-design geographies of justice in the city a bit, so that they search for ways that justice-thinking is actually occurring and being implemented in many times and places, rather than focusing almost exclusively on documenting instances of injustice, evidence about the hope residing in cities will be compiled to sit usefully alongside the many examples of despair (2012, p.240).

My aim in initiating this research was to use the project to open up space for grounded examples of "justice-thinking" to be examined and analysed in a way which affirmed their effects, power and potential. The aim was not to produce a conceptual critique of Oblong, nor a model for practice. Whilst critiques of such examples' inevitable entanglement with processes of neoliberalization are valuable in illuminating unjust processes and outcomes,

I judged that an affirmative examination would create more meaningful contributions both to my academic field and to the needs of Oblong. Similarly, I neither wished to evaluate Oblong's practice against any established model of 'ideal' criteria for community work, anti-capitalist activism, or grassroots organisation, nor to create a new model as a means of advising (or judging) others working for social justice. My methodological choices for this project aimed to help (co-)create: first, practices and outcomes which were useful for Oblong and congruent with its values; second, analysis which affirmed the power and potential of such values-based practices and processes; and third, a research account which allows other organisations or groups working for social justice values to assess what aspects of this research might be useful to them, and how they might apply or adapt them to their own work.

I chose a participatory action research approach because it is consistent with these aims and with Oblong's values, which I wanted the research process to espouse. Participatory action research practitioners distinguish between participatory techniques and participatory approaches. Participatory action research is different from the use of participatory techniques for data collection, or 'expert'-centred approaches to action research. Participatory action research emphasises action and outcomes of the research process, as well as emphasising the (degrees of) empowerment that can be achieved through transformation of unequal power dynamics (Alexander et al. 2007; Kesby et al. 2005; Kindon et al. 2007). Participatory action research does not simply facilitate gathering deeper, richer data; it allows and indeed relies upon participants' active engagement. This involvement engenders direct and indirect outcomes which may extend beyond the life of the research project itself (McFarlane & Hansen 2007). Participatory action research offers an epistemological breadth ready to encompass "diverse forms of knowing" and arises from an ontology of human dynamism. Contributions are practical as well as theoretical (Kindon et al. 2007; Pain et al. 2007).

Funded post-graduate research poses limitations on how participatory a research project can be, but this approach has been successfully used by other post-graduate researchers (Cahill 2004). Although institutional

limitations may mean, for example, that researchers must define a topic of study without ideal input from respondents, participants can and do still exercise agency through as many participatory elements as prove feasible, as has been the case at Oblong. Participants advised on research parameters, specified preferred methods, participated in collective practical analysis, took action on research results, and experienced and acted upon reflexive learning which occurred through taking part in the research process. Whilst parameters of post-graduate research may pose challenges for participatory action research, the approach's adaptability helps address these tensions (McFarlane & Hansen 2007; Kesby et al. 2005).

This research employed several qualitative methods within a context of ongoing, iterative direction by participants. Principally, I volunteered within the organisation as a participant observer for a total period of three years. The most intense period of participant observation was during the second year of the project, when I worked as a 'placement' member of the staff team two days per week for one year. In the preceding (first) and following (third) years of the project, I volunteered for a few hours each week. Like participatory action research, participant observation can be thought of as an approach rather than a singular method, in that it often comprises several methods (Evans 2012, citing Moffat 1979). Within my participant observer role as Oblong's 'Resident Researcher', I facilitated workshops with participants which functioned as focus groups (Kandola 2012) and employed participatory diagramming techniques (Kesby et al. 2005); I conducted semi-structured interviews with six staff members (Roulston 2010); and I interacted with participants through conversations which sometimes functioned as informal or unstructured interviews when topics of interest arose (Brannan & Oultram 2012). I participated in several of Oblong's 'project collectives' made up of volunteers and staff. Collectives' activities comprised the following:

- collaborative development of organisational policies and procedures;
- development work such as grant fundraising and participation in local third-sector networks;
- facilitation of volunteer forums on organisation-wide issues and of strategic planning sessions with staff and trustees;

- collaboratively designing and delivering community development training sessions;
- peer management and appraisal processes; and
- ad-hoc tasks such as contributing to marketing strategy development or staffing reception with volunteers.

Semi-structured interviews with staff members took place in the context of a communications training session. The day before the group attended training provided by an external facilitator, I conducted interviews about staff members' experiences of communications practices within the team. As a participant observer I also had access to Oblong's shared organisational documents, which informed my analyses. In addition to these participant observation activities, I conducted a final evaluation of Oblong's three-year Make a Difference volunteering programme for its funders, the Big Lottery, as a paid freelance evaluator. I collected data through structured interviews and focus groups with eighteen volunteers using collaborative diagramming techniques in both. Staff analysed data together in order to inform adaptations of organisational practice and future plans. With participants' previous verbal permission, anonymous data collected for the evaluation report I produced (Darby 2015) was also used in the analysis conducted for this PhD, particularly in my paper 'Dynamic Resistance'. The principle research activities described above are detailed more fully in my paper 'Making space for co-produced research "impacts"'.

Although it has been suggested that participant observation and participatory research are incompatible (Wright & Nelson 1995), this project has attempted a 'creative synthesis' of these approaches (Evans 2012) by relying, from the start, on participants' collaborative direction of the design, principle activities, and processes of the research. However, as in Evans' (2012) work, some of Wright & Nelson's (1995) critiques also apply to this project. Whilst participants (including myself) exercised collective control over reflection and practical action during the research – thus directing research processes and outcomes during the project – these processes and outcomes are represented in academic publications based on my independent analysis and theorising. Participants were involved by providing comments on drafts. Furthermore,

most participants would only access these publications through me because of proprietary publishing practices, and some have stated they find academic language inaccessible. Despite these tensions, I argue that this project is consistent with the ethics of a participatory action research approach which attempts to engage participants across a 'spectrum of participation' (Martin 2010; Nabatchi 2012) despite unavoidable risks, limitations and norms (Kesby et al. 2007).

## **Ethics and rigour**

In the sections below, I reflect on how my research approach and methods are consistent with guiding principles for community-based participatory research (taken from CSJCA & NCCPE 2012), with ethical guidelines for participant observation (selected from Spradley 1980), and with criteria for valid and rigorous action research (adapted from Melrose 2005 and Bradbury Huang 2010).

### **Ethical principles for community-based participatory research**

#### ***Mutual respect***

The research took place, and was overseen and discussed, within the context of Oblong's consensus decision-making processes, core values, and organisational guidelines for treating all participants with respect and care, discussed at each person's induction to Oblong and on an ongoing basis. Staff team meetings and project collectives provided a structure which encouraged everyone to listen to the voices of others and accept diverse perspectives.

On several occasions, however, I felt the need to affirm other participants' expertise as equally valuable when people made comments about my position as an academic researcher. In some cases, jokes and banter felt like appropriate ways to acknowledge these tensions and, hopefully, affirm my respect for my co-researchers without condescension.



### ***Equality and inclusion***

Oblong's practices of collective working and decision-making aim to enable equal participation, inclusion, and empowerment of those often excluded in wider society. Oblong's recruitment processes aim to involve a range of people representative of the diversity of the local community. Its induction and guidelines for member behaviour include guidance on challenging discriminatory and oppressive attitudes and behaviours, so these principles are embedded in the organisation where the research was developed, conducted and overseen. When planning for workshops, meetings, focus groups or interviews, I attempted to ensure that materials and venues were accessible to all, for example those who were dyslexic, uncomfortable with writing, experiencing social anxiety, or physically disabled.

Despite these efforts, hierarchies of knowledge, confidence and ability to articulate oneself persist even within formats designed to foster equality and inclusion, and interactions at Oblong during this research were no exception.

### ***Democratic participation***

In project collectives, staff, volunteers, and I worked collaboratively on the organisation of workshops. We also developed policies and funding bids and created documents, resources and processes on an ongoing basis, which constituted the data-collection and practical analysis processes of this research. My PhD was regularly discussed. The fact that I would be the one who gained an academic qualification from this project was acknowledged and taken into account when considering what tasks participants wanted to take responsibility for. At the same time, it was underscored that everyone's knowledge and contributions were necessary to organisational decisions that would affect us all. We carefully planned and facilitated workshops and interactive sessions to include a range of activities and communication styles that played to different strengths, interests and comfort levels and could draw out diverse perspectives. People could – and did – opt out of participating.

### ***Active learning***

Oblong's organisational practices provided regular opportunities for review, reflection, and action-planning based on learning during the research process. These included weekly staff progress check-ins, weekly or fortnightly project collective meetings, quarterly staff reporting to trustees, quarterly peer appraisal of each staff member's work, quarterly planning sessions, and annual review and strategic planning sessions. Within the small collective which co-organised regular volunteer forums (known as Bob-alongs), we recorded regular reflections in meeting notes shared via Oblong's internal social media. We also conducted a reflective annual review, from which a volunteer produced posters highlighting the organisational changes implemented because of participants' contributions. Using the data I collected from volunteers and collated for the evaluation of Oblong's volunteering programme, staff jointly analysed responses, and planned future projects and changes to operational practices based on this learning.

It is as yet unclear how, and if, Oblong wish to share the academic outputs of the project with a wider audience. This learning was not nearly as collaborative as our practice-focussed learning, and requires further reflection together.

### ***Making a difference***

When proposing a collaborative research project to participants, I stated my view that research promoting Oblong's core values of equality, empowerment, collectivism, respect & care, sustainability, and being community-led would make a 'positive' difference to those involved in, affected by, and aware of Oblong's work. The staff team, board of trustees, and I worked together to develop a plan for the research and my role at the organisation. We did not alter these established values as they had been developed by consensus as part of Oblong's organisational vision for social change. Different research activities responded to practical needs arising in the organisation. These included discussing the centre's security measures, creating HR procedures and policies, and undertaking communications training as a staff team. We also incorporated reflective inquiry on Oblong's values and how they were, or

could be, put into practice within the context of practical issues. As such, the goal of positive change, based on these values, was built into the research at each stage. These processes of inquiry were designed to prompt reflective practice, in addition to the decisions, changes, and outcomes that participants co-produced.

### ***Collective action***

Oblong's projects and the whole organisation are run by collective working and decision-making; each person's work typically spans different collectives. Groups and individual members therefore have different interests in certain situations. I chose facilitation techniques like Open Space and World Café, designed to create space for all participants' voices during collective discussions and deliberations (although such processes are never unproblematic) (Owen 2008; Brown et al. 2005). Research processes produced decisions which enhanced collective working within Oblong, including strategic decision-making, thereby enhancing its effectiveness to take collective action as an organisation.

### ***Personal integrity***

I took several conscious steps to behave with personal integrity as a researcher. These included clearly stating my time commitment and my intentions for the research to be useful to Oblong in both process and outcomes at the beginning of the project when seeking participants' input, ideas, and final approval for the different types of involvement I could have with the organisation. Throughout the project I remained accountable for my commitments. I was responsive to emergent needs and open to change in the processes of the research. My analysis and reporting of the research has transparently stated my intention to promote social justice values through theorising effective practices and ways of thinking about social change based on this work with Oblong. It has identified Oblong's core values as those driving the research process. However this analysis and reporting has also presented both successes and challenges of Oblong's working model and practices.

## **Key principles of ethical participant observation**

### ***Safeguard informants' rights, interests and sensitivities***

I was a participant observer with unfettered access to all organisational processes and documents at Oblong. I was also an engaged stakeholder. I thought carefully about both what sorts of research processes would best serve the organisation's stated aims and values, and what sort of academic theorising would live up to the trust placed in me as a researcher and to my intention to promote social justice values. Participants agreed that it would not serve Oblong's interests for the organisation to be anonymised. Instead, publications related to the research might potentially raise Oblong's profile, and Oblong deserves to receive credit for its practices. On the other hand, it was decided that research emphasising Oblong's resistance to neoliberal governance processes would not be directly publicised or promoted in third sector forums or in ways which would deliberately draw attention from funders and governance bodies. This might harm Oblong's reputation and/or access to resources with bodies viewing such processes positively.

Whilst individual volunteers at Oblong were not consulted about my presence and participation as a researcher, I made it widely known – through conversation and contributions to meetings, my email signature, written materials, and my profile on internal social media – that I was working at Oblong as a 'Resident Researcher' and identified my university. Participants self-selected attendance at workshops and sessions I facilitated.

### ***Communicate research objectives***

At the start of the project, I communicated to Oblong staff and trustees that the objectives of the research project were to increase participant engagement with organisational values, to offer my time and skills to the organisation as a participant observer, to co-produce relevant documents or reports as per the activities I might get involved in, and to produce academic writing to obtain a PhD. As the research progressed, the objectives of particular activities sometimes altered as changing needs arose, through collective discussion and joint decisions.

### ***Protect the privacy of informants***

I did not promise participants anonymity within Oblong: this would have been unrealistic because of the small size of the organisation and frequent close interactions between participants. I did not refer to volunteers by name/alias in any published or unpublished documents, and avoided gender identifiers wherever possible. I asked staff members to choose their own alias, if desired, for interview responses. I subsequently did not use names/aliases or gender identifiers when reporting staff's interview responses; however these identifiers do appear in some quotes relating to less sensitive topics, as per each participant's prior informed consent.

### ***Make reports available to informants***

Draft bids for repeat funding, which represented decisions and plans resulting from staff's joint analysis of project evaluation data, was presented to volunteers using simple flipcharts for their discussion and input in informal, facilitated sessions. The evaluation report itself was shared with participants via Oblong's internal social media, and portions were quoted and reported on via Oblong's website. An annual review of the changes produced by volunteer forums was reported via a series of posters produced by one of the co-organising volunteers highlighting these changes to all Oblong participants. For a period during my participant observation placement, I maintained and publicised a blog which shared my theoretical and practical reflections in accessible language.

## **Criteria for rigorous, high-quality action research**

### ***Repeating the cycle***

Facilitated volunteer forums (Bob-alongs) took place every six weeks. They incorporated reflection and planning on organisational values and operations, with implementation/action taking place in-between. Oblong's peer management processes prompted cyclical oversight of my 'Resident Researcher' role through weekly meetings, quarterly target review and planning sessions, quarterly reporting to trustees, and quarterly peer appraisals. The annual strategic review and planning session which took

place during the research period also incorporated reflection on the evaluation of Oblong's three-year Make a Difference project goals and practice of values through the project activities.

My research placement with Oblong ended relatively soon after the staff team's communications training session, and one staff member later left the organisation. Therefore I did not repeat the cycle of interviews with staff after this training and subsequent use of the tools in meetings and planning sessions, but rather relied on my observations for relevant data.

### ***Maximising the credibility of the research group***

The research group consisted of staff, trustees and volunteers at the partner organisation. All participants, including myself, were active and experienced stakeholders in the organisation.

### ***Clarity and suitability of data-collection methods and processes***

Alienating formal processes (such as long, written consent forms using academic language) were minimised during data collection, except for one-to-one interviews. I ensured that participants knew what level of confidentiality they could expect and how the data would be used by discussing this in-depth verbally and on a repeated basis as research continued (Miller & Bell 2012). Data was collected in interactive formats which could be easily shared with participants.

For example, data collected from volunteers in the volunteering project evaluation (which was produced for Oblong and the Big Lottery, and cited in this research) took place in informal groups or one-to-one discussions. Copies of colourful, hand-drawn questionnaires and diagrams were provided. Participants could add responses themselves or dictate responses to me or another writer. These data were collated into practical computer-processed formats for the staff team to jointly analyse for future planning.

Data was collected at Bob-along workshops with volunteers using marker pens, sticky notes and flip charts. All participants were invited and encouraged to contribute through participatory facilitation methods. These data and any other products were photographed and shared on Oblong's

internal social media, as were planning, reflection and action notes made with the volunteers who co-organised these sessions with me.

Data from staff interviews was recorded in real time on hand-drawn mind-maps, with interviewees' agreement on word choice and mapping. Each participant's personal diagram was given to them along with an mp3 recording and transcript of their interview (with the exception of one interviewee, who only received a mind-map and a partial recording and transcript because recording equipment failed partway through the interview). Additionally, all of these mind-maps were combined into one collective mind-map which was shared with participants and remains in Oblong's possession.

Written data such as organisational policies and meeting notes were all accessible to me and other participants through Oblong's shared drives and internal social media. Observation notes which I made for myself, as well as reflective logs, remained private.

### ***Group interpretation***

Oblong staff and volunteers collectively interpreted data in the following contexts: practising Oblong's values in day-to-day interactions; responding to evaluation and feedback data by adapting operation procedures and planning for future projects; strategic planning based on input from participants; and taking ad-hoc action on group reflections.

However, with relation to academic conceptualisations of neoliberalization, hope, systems thinking, and other theoretical underpinnings of the analysis presented in this thesis, participants did not directly contribute to the interpretation of data. I did not ask participants to contribute to this academic analysis and theorization for a number of reasons. First, I did not feel confident proposing and facilitating a discussion around these topics. Second, I thought participants might feel these sessions were a waste of time. Third, I worried that such discussions might intensify any perceptions of me as 'expert'. Finally, I was not sure how to navigate the institutional requirements for a PhD thesis of original and independent analysis if theoretical contributions were generated jointly by a number of participants.

### ***Articulation of objectives, defensibility of knowledge claims & theorisation***

This thesis and my communication with Oblong participants has consistently framed the objectives of this research as responsive and emergent – aiming to co-produce practicable outcomes through congruent research processes, and to inform theoretical contributions as part of my academic outputs – within a framework of values-based practice articulated around Oblong’s core values. I have framed knowledge claims as practicable theory in the defined context of organisational practice for social justice and academic practice, and as theoretical contributions to ways of conceptualising and analysing resistance to neoliberalization processes. I have been transparent about the context this knowledge was created in, and my positionality as a researcher, in order to enable readers to reflect on the applicability of these contributions to their own thinking and practice.

### ***Ensuring ethical partnership & participation***

See ‘Ethical principles for community-based participatory research’ above.

### ***Pragmatic actionability, significance & relevance***

The practical focus of each collective at Oblong, around which my work was based, meant that research processes revolved around solutions to problems and practice of Oblong’s values in the context of operational needs. The significance and relevance of the research for Oblong derives from its emergence in response to organisational needs, as well as the use of methods and techniques selected for their congruence with organisational values and participants’ needs. As such, I argue that these methods have produced insights which are relevant for other organisations promoting social justice, both in terms of practice and perspectives on their work, as well as being significant to the wider academic community through offering theory which is both grounded in real-life praxis and broadly conceptualised in a holistic theoretical framework of global processes of change.



## **Co-production: navigating epistemological and institutional tensions**

This project's co-production approach meant that research processes and outcomes were emergent, non-linear, responsive, and relational, supporting an epistemology which values experiential and collectively produced knowledge (Campbell & Vanderhoven 2016). As I argue in my paper 'Making space for co-produced research "impacts"', these elements of co-production bring benefits including enhanced potential for participant empowerment and ownership of research outcomes, and increased opportunities for experiential learning during the research process. However, translating such research processes and learning into academic outputs reveals epistemological and ontological tensions between transformative, collaborative research approaches and institutional expectations of academic research (Mountz et al. 2003; Askins 2009; The Autonomous Geographies Collective 2010). I thought getting ESRC funding to do this work as a PhD project was a clever way of being resourceful, but nothing could have prepared me for the difficulties, and developmental opportunities, of writing academically at this level about something so close to my heart. The argument presented in my paper 'Listening for social change' – that creating space for feelings and emotions is invaluable to social justice practice – also follows within research practice. My experience of research thus far leads me to suggest that, if participatory action research is to advance an epistemology which values grounded and experiential knowledge, listening to our own such knowledge as (participant) (co-)researchers is as important as listening to others'.

A notion of intra-personal listening responds to the acknowledgement of value-rationality as equally valid and important as instrumental rationality. The dominant discourse of instrumental rationality and reification of masculinist conceptions of 'the scientific method' leads to a post-hoc rationalisation of decisions and beliefs across many spheres of activity. The tension and sometimes harmful effects of this may be noted particularly in domains of societal governance and study (Flyvbjerg 2001; Sundberg 2003). A linear portrayal of research processes, whilst helpful in facilitating understanding of

*what* took place, can at the same time serve to mask *why* choices were made, and perhaps revised, during a research process. Reflexivity which focusses on the researcher's identity, biases, and worldview is valuable in explicating some of these choices (Cunliffe 2004), but may also contribute to a sense of clear, logically-attributable cause-and-effect when this may not always be the case. Much about our intrapersonal and social processes is not readily visible – as work on affect asserts (Anderson 2006; 2012; Pile 2010) – but our conventions of study preclude an 'extra-rational' understanding or articulation of non-cognitive processes which would be acceptable and legitimate within the realm of 'robust', 'valid', and 'rigorous' research.

How do we find ways of valuing diverse forms of our own knowledge as researchers? As a participant in those processes of experiential learning and a stakeholder at Oblong, I assert that my own experiential knowledge is a valuable asset and valid basis for sound academic choices. The methods and techniques that I chose were undeniably influenced by my previous experience, the needs of the organisation, the skills I developed on the job, and my own emotional and bodily intelligences as well as intellectual rationality – and, of course, my positionality (which is discussed more in depth in the papers to follow). Likewise, my analysis and theory-building were 'grounded', constructivist and interpretivist, allowing for responsiveness to emerging events, needs and creative insights (Charmaz 2008). Although I used methods like coding to help stimulate my thinking, these processes were complementary to analysis I developed based on experiential learning. However, the dominant narrative of positivist scientific method meant that I often second-guessed myself and doubted my methodological and analytical choices as a researcher.

Whilst a degree of self-doubt is important – and criticality and reflexivity are essential to ethical and rigorous research – overly analytical reflexivity can be immobilising and could block the "deep emotional responses" needed for engaged scholarship (Derickson & Routledge 2014). For example, although reflexive logs helped me examine my assumptions, I also found the practice to perpetuate problematic, and sometimes paralysing, expectations of

progressing towards an elusive 'perfect' methodology or irrefutable analysis. My own processes of attempting rational analysis were often hindered by worries about the intellectual defensibility of my arguments, before those arguments could even take form in my mind – and especially by the imaginary, yet plausible, scenario of defending my ideas to an unspecified, combative (male) academic in front of a room of people. I turned to approaches like drawing, walking in the woods, and meditating to bypass unhelpful criticality in my intellectual consciousness and access insights about my work based on 'other ways of knowing' within myself (Freire 1974). I did my most confident and value-rational analysis in these ways – by tuning in to creativity (Suddaby 2006), imagery, ideas, and/or feelings arising from a slightly different level of consciousness. Much as the acknowledgement of non-academic, experiential, situated, and emotional knowledge can help empower practitioners, I found that acknowledgement of my own 'other' knowledges allowed me to theorise more confidently. Finding ways of listening to our own diverse types of intelligence – in addition to the intellectual logic and reason prized by positivist discourses of science – can contribute important insights to our research analysis and to reflexive research practice.

'Intra-personal listening' practices help me navigate the ongoing difficulties of producing intellectually rational theory and presenting non-linear research processes in a linear narrative; however, I still have an unresolved sense of uneasiness arising from the disjuncture between pursuing an individual academic qualification with this thesis, and the collective learning processes which informed the production of it. As discussed above, practical analysis throughout the project – e.g. reflecting on and learning from experiences arising from the research questions and activities, and putting this learning into practice – happened collectively, as part of Oblong's normal working processes; but the theoretical and conceptual analysis presented in my academic writing is not collective. This would have been difficult given institutional requirements for a PhD, yet I feel uncomfortable about it because, as detailed above, my own doubts were what really held me back from attempting to facilitate collective theoretical analysis. The research process has been a developmental and empowering experience for me as an

individual and a researcher thanks to the opportunities for learning and practical experience that Oblong gave me. This research has impacted me and the work I do within my academic institution as much as it has impacted my research partners at Oblong, and I wish to call attention to this and acknowledge it.

My discomfort about the disjuncture between my isolated academic analysis and the stated intention to produce 'useful' research with Oblong relates to my argument in 'Making space for co-produced research "impacts"' about the need to value alternative impacts: I do not feel that the full potential for positive impact of this project has been realised via the available institutional avenues, and for this to happen it would be necessary to co-produce ideas and actions for desired impacts with Oblong. However, my experience thus far has been that the space which exists for alternative types of research outputs and processes amounts to being allowed to produce these in addition to everything else that is already required, and permitted to squeeze them uncomfortably into formats designed for other research approaches. This experiential, emotional and mental discomfort makes me reluctant to continue my work with Oblong through restrictive academic avenues – even though I and others argue for researchers' power to expand institutional recognition of the significant impacts which arise from, occur during, and continue after processes of co-producing research (Pain et al. 2015; Campbell & Vanderhoven 2016).

## **Empowerment-through-participation?**

Participatory action research is an approach aimed at sharing power, but too often this is perceived to mean beneficent redistribution by transferring power from the more-powerful institutional researcher to the less-powerful community partner (Mohan 2006). Other critiques of participatory action research argue that participation itself becomes a vehicle for exerting power through constructing and representing participants' contributions, and therefore creates a new form of tyranny (Cooke & Kothari 2001). It is certainly important not to ignore such power dynamics. However, I argue that

considering participants as inherently less powerful than academic researchers can disrespect and 'invisibilize' the power that research partners might and do exercise in domains excluded by a perception of power as a unidirectional force of domination. These conceptions rely on an assumption that only dominant social actors may confer power – supporting a refuted notion of empowerment as something one does to or for another (Stott & Longhurst 2011; Wiles 2011).

I have argued that a systems thinking approach is congruent with Foucauldian notions of power and resistance as entangled and mutually constitutive (Kesby 2005). It is crucial not to discount the real and unequally distributed effects of oppressive behaviours of domination. Yet, notions of emergence, complexity and interconnectedness central to systems thinking suggest that oppressed or seemingly insignificant groups and practices do exert power, albeit in non-linear or less visible ways (Cote & Nightingale 2012). If we reconceive of power/resistance as mutually constitutive, emergent, and not necessarily linear, we engender respect for the significance of those we work with, regardless of their status within the framework of dominant values. When we respect the power and significance of people and work that may not prioritise size, influence, or wealth, we weaken the perceived dominance of such a framework through our refusal to recognise and reproduce it.

A view of power/resistance as mutually constitutive, emergent, and not necessarily linear broadens the focus for debate within participatory action research processes, and suggests alternative and/or additional considerations for ethical behaviour (Kesby 2005; Kesby et al. 2007). I argue that rather than power itself, a more relevant focus for resistance is power's irresponsible use. Whilst it does matter who has power and what they can do with it, it is equally important how they choose to exercise it and to what ends. When we start to ask questions about how and why power is used, values and process come into focus as crucial aspects of resistance and power. As we can see on a micro scale in Oblong's practices, making space for the expression and practice of social justice values can destabilise the dominance of implicit values of money and growth within the sphere of influence of those

expressions and practices. When participants feel able to share feelings, values, and ideas for how social justice values might be feasibly put into practice – despite, or alongside, or in harmony with the question of resources – the individual and collective exercise of power to effect alternative values grows stronger. Within participatory action research processes, we have the option to take responsibility for how we use our power as researchers, rather than trying to denounce this power. In respecting the existing power of those we work with, and opening up questions about how power should be used and why, we cede control of outcomes and make space for collective and value-rational decision-making. Such decision-making creates tangible, sustainable alternatives which provide a powerful challenge to dominant discourses and value-systems (Chatterton 2006; Gibson-Graham 2008c).

We can show respect for those we work with by being transparent about the values we intend our research to espouse. We can take responsibility for the choices we make about the research process, the questions we choose to ask, and how we choose to share power by involving participants in decision-making about research. Transparency allows participants to decide for themselves what they wish to get involved with, because sharing power means sharing responsibility as well. The corollary of this is that when we refuse to share responsibility for the potential outcomes and impacts of research, we are also refusing to share power over the processes which might lead us to those outcomes. The more we share power, the more we cede control of the research (Campbell & Vanderhoven 2016). And yet, a sacrifice of some control over final outcomes can create space for values-based collaboration with enormous potential to challenge destructive dominant discourses and to empower academic researchers and community-based research partners alike. No method or research approach can guarantee transformative results. But – considering this potential, the demonstrable need for social change, and the fact we are rarely as in control of outcomes as we might like to think we are anyway – shifting the balance is more than worth it.

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## **Chapter 3 – Making space for co-produced research ‘impact’: learning from a participatory action research case study**

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### **Abstract**

There is growing emphasis in the UK on promoting research that creates a positive impact on society. Research Councils UK, the major national research funding agencies, have recently defined a framework for promoting and measuring this impact. This paper contributes to current debates about this developing agenda and, particularly, the problematic intersection of the impact agenda and coproduction research approaches. I argue that processes of negotiating values, aims and power relations are essential to creating relevant, ethical impacts with research participants. In contrast to the emphasis placed on linear and top-down change by the impact agenda, my experience doing participatory action research with a UK community group shows that co-produced research produces different kinds of impacts: co-produced impacts are emergent and non-linear; responsive and relational; and empowering when rooted in reciprocal collaboration with research partners. This paper questions the implicit values the impact framework imposes on academic researchers and community partners, calling for continued critical engagement with the impact agenda to encourage the value-rational reflection, deliberation and collaboration needed for creating socially transformative research.

**Key words:** UK, co-production, participatory action research, power, research impact, values

## **The impact agenda: values, barriers and transition**

Emphasis in the UK on the societal impact of academic research has sparked growing debate about the Research Councils UK impact agenda. The Research Excellence Framework (REF), the current UK system for assessing research quality in higher education, introduced measurement of research impact in 2014. The next REF, potentially in 2020, will again incorporate impact case study review alongside existing assessments of academic publications. Some oppose the ‘impact’ agenda as a facet of academia’s increasing neoliberalisation (Slater 2012). Yet many who cautiously welcome it seek to amplify its potential for supporting social justice and social change, aiming to reconcile this potential with the conundrums that the impact agenda creates for coproduced research. Co-production is an increasingly popular approach that can ‘simultaneously yield greater academic insight and public benefit’ (Campbell and Vanderhoven 2016, 11). This paper contributes to these discussions through reflections on the process and impacts of a recently conducted, co-produced research project.

Co-production relies on collaboration between academic and non-academic research partners to produce both practical and academic knowledge; it has lately received increased recognition from research institutions because it is ‘perceived as a solution to an argued “relevance gap” . . . and to the demands of “impact”’ (Durose et al. 2012, 2). The top-down and market-relevant impacts favoured by the impact framework undermine collaborative impacts typically sought through co-production approaches. Analysis of REF 2014 impact case studies found the top three impact categories were ‘Technology Commercialization’, ‘Parliamentary Scrutiny’ and ‘Influencing Government Policy’ (Kings College London and Digital Science 2015, 30–1). Another category, ‘Community and Local Government’, implies that impacts relevant for ‘communities’ must happen through local government. The framework makes meaningful co-design of desired impacts with non-academic research partners and users difficult, because funding is awarded after researchers submit impact statements. Many significant impacts from co-produced research struggle to follow ‘Pathways to Impact’ because of impact’s marked



linearity: predicting impacts, executing plans, and reporting after research concludes (Pain et al. 2015; Campbell & Vanderhoven 2016).

However, the evolving impact agenda remains alterable. The recent independent REF review recommends interdisciplinary collaboration and broader interpretation (Stern 2016). Studies on participatory and co-produced research and its relationship to impact assessment suggest improvements and raise questions (Campbell and Vanderhoven 2016; Pain et al. 2015). Communities involved in research should be involved in defining impact, and small-scale impacts recognised as significant. Process-driven impacts deserve recognition; and what about impacts generated by non-academic collaborators, and serendipitous impacts (Pain et al. 2015)? Co-production partners also impact academia – for example by affecting what is taught. This is noted in the Stern review (2016), but not addressed. In addition to research on impact and co-production which aims to help shape this agenda, other engagements demonstrate diverse approaches to evidencing impact, as well as echoing concerns raised above (cf Whittle et al. 2011; Conlon et al. 2014; Macpherson et al. 2014; Pain 2014; Pickerill 2014; Veale 2014). This paper highlights facets and outcomes of my own experience of co-produced research, and advocates an approach to impact that promotes ethical deliberation and aims to enhance societal capacity for empowered autonomy.

I argue that for the impact agenda to achieve its stated purpose, it must promote research approaches that develop values-based rationality and practices. In so far as it engages research partners in collaborative research processes, co-production promotes dialogue about what is not only achievable but desirable. Such research values emergent needs and learning processes as much as final products. It is unabashedly shaped by relationships and efforts to practice care and reciprocity. It also considers participants' empowerment and ownership of practical impacts as fundamental to the ethics and success of the research. Value-rational, co-produced research, and the emergent, relational, empowering impacts it can engender, are needed globally across societies in which economic rationality often overrides environmental and human concerns.

The next section draws on relevant literature to discuss why the impact agenda must make space for such research. Subsequent sections demonstrate, through examples from participatory action research conducted with a small UK community organisation, the importance of phronesis, or values negotiation; emergent and non-linear processes; and reciprocal relationality. The conclusion acknowledges the limitations of this study, considers the roles researchers play and argues that value-rational deliberation is crucial not only to research projects but to development of the impact agenda itself.

## **Marginalised elements of impact**

### **Co-production: supporting user-owned impacts**

Co-production, ‘too important to be considered . . . merely the latest fad’ (Campbell and Vanderhoven 2016, 34), is not a method or technique but rather an approach: it frames knowledge production as a process relying on interaction between researchers and others concerned with what is studied. Co-production challenges traditional power dynamics by valuing the expertise of experience rather than placing academic knowledge above practitioner knowledge. It integrates different ways of knowing to produce academic excellence and practical benefits (Campbell and Vanderhoven 2016). It creates a relational notion of accountability, key to creating publicly valued outcomes (Durose et al. 2012). Although the wide-ranging variety of research practices based on co-production ‘show concern for equality and emancipation’ (Wynne-Jones et al. 2015, p.218), co-production is not unproblematic. Attempting co-production requires engaging in messy processes of negotiating power structures and diverse values, confronting our academic positionality, and risking letting go of control of outcomes (and outputs) of research. Many are concerned that ‘the uptake of participatory methods may be occurring without the necessary shift in epistemological orientation or political commitment’, while others contend these notions must remain debateable (Wynne-Jones et al. 2015, 219). The challenges of co-production are inseparable from its strengths. Co-production engages

practitioners and researchers in collaborative value-judgements about what knowledge is desirable, challenging assumptions about knowledge production and creating increased dialogue and relationality between science and society (Antonacopoulou 2010). Co-produced approaches can produce research that is more context-relevant, more adaptable to change and more rigorous than 'expert'-led research; meanwhile participants – i.e. 'the public' – benefit from research processes and relationships as much as from findings (Campbell and Vanderhoven 2016).

Presently, co-produced impacts that are non-linear, unpredictable or small-scale are consigned to narrow margins within the impact agenda (Kneale 2014; Macpherson et al. 2014). The effort required of researchers and research partners to substantiate measurable impacts makes funding timescales, adequate valuing of collaborators' time, and/or timely contributions to policy-making difficult to achieve (Mason et al. 2013; Pickerill 2014; Macpherson et al. 2014; Conlon et al. 2014). Processes of impact evidence-gathering can damage mutually-respectful research partnerships cultivated through co-production by re-introducing hierarchical power relations and conceptions of knowledge (Williams 2013). Despite the diverse forms of demonstrable impact, structural power imbalances and linear progress models implicit in the developing impact agenda hinder recognition of emergent, non-linear impacts created through co-production.

Impact's criteria and priorities encourage top-down, expert-led change. As Pain (2014) points out, impact, so far, leans toward promoting masculinist views of knowledge and power: it privileges reach, significance, outcomes, large-scale intervention and competition over typical strengths of feminist research approaches such as collaboration, flat power relations, deep engagement, relational and reciprocal conceptions of research outcomes and appreciation of small, diverse transformations. Though Pain discourages such a binary view, her comparison provides a perspective that helps us critique impact's tacit values. Co-production, with its attempts to contest 'the strict hierarchy between the "knower"' and the researched, and its openness to co-construction of diverse truths, challenges notions of 'value-neutral objectivist

science', which Sundberg terms 'masculinist epistemologies' (Sundberg 2003, 181–182, quoting Staeheli & Lawson 1995, 328). Evans (2016) reflects on feminist approaches to exercising an ethic of care in participatory research, noting the negative impacts that a focus on large-scale, government- or expert-led change can have on participants who have invested emotionally in projects on a local level. She emphasises the centrality of this ethic of care to the relationships that enable – and exceed – research, as well as the challenges of practising care for all those impacted by research. I join Evans in advocating 'a re-valuing of feminist and participatory action research approaches, which may have most impact at local level, in order to achieve meaningful shifts in the impact agenda' (2016, 13).

### **Phronesis: co-producing value-rational impacts**

In a second binary comparison, Flyvbjerg (2001) argues that aims of the natural sciences – i.e. establishing predictive, generalisable theories – have dominated social sciences to the exclusion of 'value rationality'. He suggests the balance between instrumental rationality – based on what is possible to achieve – and value rationality – based on what is desirable to pursue – must be redressed, because 'problems with both biosphere and sociosphere indicate . . . development based on instrumental rationality alone is not sustainable' (Flyvbjerg 2001, 53).

Without endorsing his notion of 'Science Wars', I support Flyvbjerg's (2001) argument for a more balanced rationality which promotes the deliberation of social values as essential to public discourses. Without space for this deliberation, our colleagues outside the social sciences likely find it equally difficult to:

- 'present...an ascertainable contribution to the society and economy' (EPSRC 2016);
- 'tailor and target [their] impact activities to ensure that they are relevant to the specific user and beneficiary groups likely to be interested in [their] research' (AHRC 2015); or
- 'anticipate and deliver the needs of the ultimate users of our science" (NERC 2016).

If funding and reporting procedures do not practically allow for meaningful engagement with potentially diverse users and beneficiaries about what is worthwhile to them, and why, this creates difficulties in any discipline. The impact agenda must better accommodate the value-rational research needed to make the most of contributions across disciplines.

Mason et al. (2013) point out a crucial element missing from many of the Knowledge Exchange partnerships promoted by the existing impact agenda (see also North 2013): this important but absent element is phronesis – the process of discussing and negotiating values, aims and power relations (Flyvbjerg 2001). The developing impact agenda neglects phronetic research, instead necessitating that research respond to its imbedded yet unspoken values. In co-produced research, creating desirable, significant impacts with community partners requires a phronetic process of dialogue and decision-making about the values underlying research, the roles and power of those involved and the research aims (Flyvbjerg 2001).

## **Learning from community-based co-production**

### **Designing phronetic research together**

#### ***Case study: Oblong***

The discussion here draws on research conducted with Oblong, a small community organisation based in Leeds that runs a volunteering programme involving about 65 people a year, Head Space mental well-being courses and Woodhouse Community Centre. A registered charity, Oblong employs six part-time staff and funds its activities through grants, and revenue from Woodhouse Community Centre. Oblong defines six core organisational values: equality, collectivism, empowerment, being community-led, sustainability, and respect and care. Its structure includes peer management for staff and non-hierarchical decision-making within project collectives involving staff and volunteers. Oblong's organisational values, structures and daily practices, combined with the financial and political pressures it faces as

part of the UK third-sector, comprise a rich context for impactful co-produced research.

### ***Research approach***

Conceived as participatory action research (Kindon 2005), this research relied on participants' active engagement. Its aims were both practical and theoretical (Kindon et al. 2007). The project drew on principles of constructivist grounded theory, testing 'tentative ideas and conceptual structures against ongoing observations' and adapting methodological techniques to emerging questions (Charmaz 2008; Suddaby 2006, 636).

Academically and practically, Oblong's praxis of social values interested me most, and I wanted this research to meet organisational needs. I offered to work for Oblong two days a week for one year. I proposed to either work on administrative tasks while conducting observations, or focus on facilitating workshops to re-energise collective engagement with Oblong's core values. Staff, trustees and I together chose the second option, which would address emerging practical research questions about day-to-day practice of organisational values, as well as responding to theoretical questions around processes of contesting neoliberalisation relevant to my required doctoral research outputs. We agreed I should participate in Oblong's peer-management practices through a placement with the staff team. Weekly reporting, quarterly planning and quarterly peer appraisals provided collective oversight and input into the direction of the research.

### ***Researcher positionality***

Previously an Oblong employee and currently a local resident, I considered myself both stakeholder and partner during this research. My positionality as 'insider/outsider' moved along a continuum in different situations (Herr and Anderson 2015), but I was trusted to contribute to decision-making at every level and accountable for my agreed targets. Reflecting on potential power inequalities, I decided I must respect, rather than second-guess, my colleagues' evident trust in Oblong's collective decision-making processes to mitigate any undue influence. The 'more-than-research' relationships I enjoy

with Oblong staff are based on an ethic of care (Evans 2016) and on shared experience of previously working together. However, my academic writing tasks – and eventual qualification – would not be collective. My placement ended with an affirming process of ‘peer exit appraisal’. Seeking verification of ‘my’ research impacts would feel uncomfortable and incongruent with the research approach (Williams 2013; Pain et al. 2015). Reduced contact after years of collaboration raises feelings of sadness and disconnection for me which I hope future involvement will ease.

### ***Research activities***

This paper refers to four main research activities:

1. After meeting with volunteers’ collectives, a need emerged for re-vitalising Oblong’s volunteer forum, the Bob-along. Along with volunteer co-organisers, I ‘re-launched’ and facilitated this dwindling forum. Six-weekly sessions resembled informal focus groups, incorporating Appreciative Inquiry and Open Space techniques, diagramming, shared food, and socialising (Whitney and Trosten-Bloom 2003; Kesby et al. 2005).
2. During the research period, staff and trustees identified a need to update and develop numerous organisational policies – e.g. to govern parental leave, grievances, recruitment. I joined staff and volunteer Policy Working Group members in collectively drafting, discussing and editing policies subsequently proposed to trustees and staff.
3. I also participated in the Development Collective: primarily grant fundraising. Arising from this work, and drawing on practices learned through staff training, I facilitated Oblong’s annual strategic ‘away day’ for staff and trustees to build shared understanding of values and make decisions about long-term organisational direction. In my research role as participant-observer (DeWalt 2010), as in the Policy Working Group, this work prompted conceptual reflection on the processes and significance of the phronesis taking place.
4. Staff identified a need for training in communication skills to help improve collective working and decided this pertained to my research role. I organised a session with an external trainer and partook as participant-

observer. Prior to the training I conducted reflective interviews (Ellis et al. 1997) with each staff member about their feelings, actions and perceptions of Oblong's values in relation to staff communication practices.

### **Co-designed impacts**

In contrast to the impact toolkit my university provides – which guides researchers to identify overlapping priorities between potential impacts and stakeholders' priorities – co-produced, phronetic research builds priority-setting with stakeholders into research processes. Oblong's Bob-along forum discussed 'classic value-rational questions: Where are we going? Is it desirable? What should be done?' (Flyvbjerg 2001, 130). Participants argued over, and stipulated improvements to, organisation-wide practices – like security measures, meeting protocols and 'branding' – and influenced development of major funding bids.

As we developed Oblong's organisational policies together, critical and practical thinking about power relations created by procedures encouraged productive processes of cyclical reflection. Discussions around dilemmas and disagreements – e.g. how much parental leave, beyond the minimum, is affordable? Should grievances be handled by trustees in a non-hierarchical organisation? – enabled us to embed Oblong's values in policy. The resulting robustness of several key policies developed on non-hierarchical management and organisational operation positioned Oblong to share best practice and pursue accreditations that increase access to funding and support.

The staff communication skills training, and preceding reflective interviews, helped the team learn listening and facilitation tools for negotiating disagreements, voicing concerns, navigating power relations, valuing contributions and espousing organisational care ethics. Improved communication increased the team's effectiveness in planning and decision-making. A researcher suggesting staff communication training based on an impact-driven intention to 'create a new environment' (University of Leeds 2016) would likely damage relationships and be counter-productive. This



phronetic research activity instead stemmed from participant-led discussions about the value-rationality of Oblong's daily practices.

The Development Collective – deliberating weekly about how to access and use resources while maintaining Oblong's aims and values – secured £350,000 of funding, steered involvement in developing a network of local organisations and conducted Oblong's annual social impact survey. Strategic 'away day' facilitation focused on deliberations about the application of intrinsic values to outward-facing plans.

Outcomes included improved internal relationships; increased understanding of shared values; and agreement on key decisions about future plans, potential expansion and external partnerships. Pertinent impacts for Oblong's strategy-building and sustainability emerged from processes of phronesis and collaborative reciprocity, not from analysis of research data.

Co-designed research activities:

- functioned as iterative learning cycles for participants to reflect on and adapt Oblong's values praxis through different aspects of organisational practice and procedures;
- produced data relevant to broader organisational processes of contesting neoliberalization (see Darby 2016); and
- helped to generate, and reflexively evaluate, practical, relevant 'impacts'.

They also created empowerment through ownership of outcomes and increased capacity for value-rational decision-making (evaluated in Darby 2015). Participant-driven research activities generated significant strategic impacts for Oblong and its 'beneficiaries', and positively impacted Oblong's resilience, resourcefulness and collective empowerment by addressing vulnerabilities, equipping group members with skills, affirming autonomous values and decreasing barriers to resources and influence (MacKinnon and Derickson 2012; Darby 2016). Relational, responsive research created small but relevant transformations in organisational practice (Pain 2014).

## **Emergent impacts: non-linear and process-based**

Research that values ‘movement, process and change’ – as impactful research surely must – allows for emergence within research design (Charmaz 2008, 157). Each research activity described above emerged from circumstances affecting Oblong during this project, and from participants’ collective decision that my role would be facilitative and engaged, not operational and observational. I could not predict the Bob-along volunteer forum becoming central to creating practical and relevant impacts before working with participants. The opportunity to participate in organisational policy development arose from circumstances and discussions, not a research proposal. Likewise, the opportunity to help shape and participate in the staff team’s communication skills training arose from existing organisational conditions and relationships. This emergent, process-based activity enabled me to create interview questions and commission training that were impactful because they were responsive and context-relevant. Though Oblong holds strategic planning sessions yearly, the content and impacts of my ‘away day’ facilitation depended on events that emerged during research processes. Charmaz (2011) and Flyvbjerg (2001) emphasise the importance of qualitative research grounded in context – allowing for emergence of both methodology and outcomes – to development of socially transformative theory and practice.

The activities described also demonstrate non-linear, discursive ways co-production processes create research impact (Pain et al. 2015). Participants’ ideas about the Bob-along’s format and aims changed progressively. As with any experiential learning or action research cycle (Kolb 1984; Reason and Bradbury 2001), we needed to act, reflect, analyse and re-formulate plans. In organisational policy development, not research findings but the process of asking questions about values within a relevant real-life situation created beneficial impact. The staff team’s communication skill-building remains an iterative, action-reflection process: staff continue to use and adapt their learning. Change occurred because of questions the research process generated, not findings. Strategic planning will impact the organisation

iteratively over time, as participants revisit decisions to inform short-term planning, target-setting and future strategy as circumstances change.

Impact toolkits and training ask researchers to plan impact, implement plans, collect and report evidence, and, lastly, review and reflect. This envisioned impact process illustrates a distinct linearity that subverts essential value-rational processes of iterative reflection. The examples discussed here demonstrate how co-produced research creates non-linear, process-driven impacts more likely to be relevant for non-academic research partners (Pain et al. 2015).

### **Caring impacts: reciprocal and relational**

The emergent, non-linear research impacts discussed above were effectual because they resulted from values-based decision-making, reciprocity and collaboration (Taylor 2014). The impact framework, however, encourages researchers to ‘make the biggest possible impact on policy and practice’ (ESRC 2016). This approach exaggerates the authority of academic knowledge and prioritises impact over ethics of care. It assumes research will produce results to which others will react, instead of supporting research that is itself reactive and responsive. The case discussed here relied on relationships and ethics of care to create research that responded to partners’ needs.

Because I offered time and engagement to Oblong, and the staff team offered valuable collective management time, the Bob-along forum evolved responsively and benefited organisational and academic aims. My willingness to contribute to Oblong’s policy development, and Oblong’s willingness to trust me in that role, meant I experienced and helped create values-based praxis, instead of inferring analysis from documents or disengaged observations. When the need arose for training and reflection on staff’s internal communication, caring relationships enabled me to ask sensitive interview questions to support reflection and to provide an insightful, responsive brief on the team’s needs to the trainer. Oblong’s willingness to provide developmental opportunities and collective guidance gave me skills and

knowledge to offer effective facilitation for strategic planning. Research questions constructed with investment in Oblong's core values – equality, collectivism, empowerment, being community-led, sustainability, and respect and care – and co-designed research activities drew on the “more-than-research” relationship[s]’ between participants (Evans 2016, 218). The care, reciprocity and shared values underpinning these activities meant research processes could have meaningful, generative effects on the organisation during the project, instead of producing a critique afterwards to theoretically instruct others (Taylor 2014; North 2013). The outcomes in this study refute the notion of impact as something researchers do to or for others. To support the transformations that occur through phronetic research processes – based on reciprocal relationships, ethics of care and value-rational interactions – a generative impact agenda must enable non-academic partners to impact research as much as they are impacted.

## **Conclusions: co-producing value-rational impact**

Institutional tools for creating impact statements ask researchers to map changes their research will create on every scale from local to global, prizing large-scale impacts across broadly envisioned ‘change environments’ (University of Leeds 2016). Impacts of this research with Oblong came from context-grounded collaboration, originating at a small scale. These elements of co-production generate empowerment through participants’ ownership and commitment to outcomes they co-created, enhancing research impact at small scales. These impacts may well apply at much broader scales – indeed, all the more so because they respond to real-life contexts. The importance of empowering, collaborative processes to creating ownership of impact may be the most often-overlooked but broadly relevant aspect of co-produced research.

Impact frameworks are variegated – drawing heavily on metrics in Australia, focusing on long-term contributions of doctoral trainees in the USA (Jump 2015), and, by contrast, ‘emphasis[ing] institutional reflection, learning and sharing’ in the Netherlands (Williams 2012). I do not wish for a measurement

system that aims to judge and enforce 'positive social values'. But the developing UK impact agenda tacitly imposes values of top-down change, expert-led knowledge production and unquestioned marketisation through its tools, assessment criteria and funding processes. Impact agendas exert effects beyond their institutions or countries of origin, via researchers' engagements (Williams 2012; 2013). Research approaches that help promote and develop values-based deliberation; emergent, responsive impacts; ethics of care; and participant ownership of outcomes must become integral, not marginal, to the impact agenda if it is to contribute to societal changes that address global environmental threats and social injustices.

As an academic community, we can seek to guide the budding impact agenda to mature into a fit-for-purpose approach: this requires 'impact' to recognise the value and necessity of research that may not commercialise, legislate or 'go viral', but that seeks to listen, deliberate, reciprocate, respect and collaborate. Researchers contribute to impact's direction by creating space for reflection within publications, conferences and critical research projects. While the case discussed in this paper involves a small UK organisation with particular self-defined values, the practicalities and realities of impacts generated through co-production vary greatly according to scale, location and research partnerships. The broad experience of researchers using co-production approaches across different contexts (Wynne-Jones et al. 2015) can inform the impact agenda by highlighting the impacts achieved through such research and by continuing to develop, reflect on, and share approaches that make space for co-produced impacts. We might yet claim space, perhaps within funding procedures, to incorporate processes of generating working practices with research partners and co-defining impacts. While the impact agenda prompts useful reflection about effecting change, such questions are much better addressed with those affected. Issues facing societies on levels from local to global demand solutions that acknowledge interdependence and promote co-operative, inclusive deliberation. An effective impact agenda will encourage research that helps develop societal capacities for values-based

decision making, collaboration and iterative responsiveness to evolving challenges.

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## Chapter 4 – Listening for social change

### Abstract

This paper provides a conceptual and practical analysis of listening practices, demonstrating how such practices make essential contributions to the promotion of social justice values. Drawing on literature about listening in the ‘caring industries’ as well as activist and business contexts, I describe ‘generative listening’ as a skilled, purposeful practice of offering respectful attention, which encourages participants to express their ideas and feelings and affirms that these are valued. Such listening practices constitute skilled emotional work and, I argue, are essential to creating necessary space for emotion within organisations working for social change (Brown & Pickerill 2009). Analysing data from participant observations and in-depth interviews conducted in the context of participatory action research at Oblong, a small UK charity, I argue that purposeful practice of generative listening skills creates essential space for praxis of social values within organisations and supports participants’ empowerment to enact and promote social justice more widely. I conclude that the emotional work of listening is a learnable skill which organisations working towards social justice can purposely develop, practise, value and prioritise; and that this work is essential to co-creation of processes of empowerment and social change which are responsive and relevant to ever-changing circumstances of context and scale.

### Introduction

*“Listening like it’s going in, not listening like, ‘I’m waiting for you to stop so it’s my turn.’ Ha ha!” (participant interview, 2014).*

This paper is about generative listening – a skilled, purposeful practice of offering respectful attention which encourages people to express their ideas and feelings and affirms that these are valued. I explore generative listening practices through participatory action research on collective decision-making and flat management processes at Oblong, a small charity in Leeds, England. Oblong runs a volunteering programme, a community centre, and adult

training courses. Volunteers at Oblong get involved in participant-initiated activities like community gardening, IT tutoring, events co-ordination, and others, as well as participating in consensus decision-making on individual projects and organisational operation. Oblong's aims and principles are radical, though its 'tactics' comprise everyday praxis rather than direct action. Oblong's sites of intervention pertain more to the mundane ways that neoliberal capitalism "gets under our skin" (Schrecker & Bamba 2015, p.51) than to the various more spectacular abuses of human rights also attributable to global capitalism. Nevertheless, Oblong's commitment to six self-defined core values – equality, empowerment, collectivism, sustainability, respect and care, and being community-led – and its collective management structure signal a resistance to 'business as usual' which has been a defining feature of the organisation since its establishment in 1996, when a group of unemployed people decided to pool available resources to make art and support community projects. Twenty years on, Oblong has taken financial and operational responsibility for a large, city council-owned community centre, as well as delivering mental well-being courses commissioned by local health care trusts and managing repeat funding from national grant-making bodies to run a volunteering scheme for around sixty adults who are long-term unemployed and/or recovering from mental illness.

This research focusses on the practices Oblong uses to maintain and bolster its commitment, as a collective, to the core values established by its participants. Despite Oblong's almost inevitable entanglement with economically rationalised neoliberal governance and funding structures in order to secure its longevity and support its work, the group demonstrates what I have theorised elsewhere as 'dynamic resistance' (Darby 2016). Whilst that analysis focusses on cyclical, organisation-level resistance to the neoliberalization processes that Oblong encounters, this paper focusses more specifically on day-to-day organisational practice which supports effective values-based praxis for social change – particularly practices of generative listening.

I argue that purposeful practice of generative listening skills creates essential space for praxis of social values within organisations and supports participants' empowerment to enact and promote social justice more widely. Although this paper draws on an empirical example to illustrate the importance of listening in supporting everyday action for social change, it is intended as a practical and conceptual contribution rather than claiming positivist empirical validity (McTaggart 2005). The first section explores the treatment of listening in diverse literature, the necessity for space for emotions in social change work, the emotional labour of listening which underlies effective organisational functioning, and the importance of socio-spatial listening practices to individual and collective empowerment. The next section briefly outlines the participatory action research approach I took towards this project and the specific research activities which inform the analysis presented here. The following section discusses the ways that generative listening practices at Oblong support values-based praxis, empowerment and organisational work towards social change. Finally, I conclude that the emotional work of listening is a learnable skill which organisations working towards social justice can purposely develop, practise, value and prioritise; and that this work is essential to co-creation of processes of empowerment and social change which are responsive and relevant to ever-changing circumstances of context and scale.

## **Listening as political praxis**

### **Research on listening**

There is not a great deal of research about listening as a social and communication skill within human geography literature. The practice of listening features most prominently in feminist human geography, perhaps indicating how listening has been feminized and marginalised (McDowell 1997; Bondi 2003). Still, even within this body of literature, listening is mostly referred to in terms of research techniques and methods. Authors argue that researchers should listen more and listen better, and they demonstrate commitment to empowering listening through their research methods and approaches (Cahill 2007b; Hyams 2004). While this literature rightly

emphasises the importance of listening as a neglected or marginalised practice, and recognises that it is “not necessarily easy to do” (Bondi 2003, p.72) more attention is paid to the desired outcomes than to the active, conscious processes of effective listening. A tendency to gloss over these aspects of listening contributes to a sense that listening well might be a natural talent rather than a learnable skill.

Other disciplines, including psychotherapy, health care, social work, and education, likewise emphasise the importance of effective listening in relational work. Bondi’s (2005) work on the relevance of therapeutic practices to human geography research represents a key overlap between disciplines. Active listening – characterised by listening for total meaning, responding to feelings expressed, and noting non-verbal cues (Rogers & Farson 1987) – is a key skill in education and practice for counsellors, psychotherapists and social workers (Levitt 2001; Nugent & Halvorson 1995). These disciplines use established, though problematized, scales and indices to measure the development and application of active listening skills (Bodie 2011; Paukert et al. 2004). Active listening is seen to improve interpersonal interactions, elicit increased awareness of emotions in the speaker, and help improve emotional well-being (Weger Jr. et al. 2014; Hutchby 2005; Bodie et al. 2015). In work with children and families, active listening plays an important role in enhancing and maintaining emotional awareness and empathy for improved relationships (Hutchby 2005; Cole & Cole 1999; McNaughton et al. 2008).

Contrary to the false impression that effective listening is a natural talent or inherent ability, these skills are extensively trained (Weger et al. 2010). Social work research shows that incorporation of mindfulness and reflection exercises alongside existing approaches to teaching active listening helps practitioners learn and practice these skills more effectively (Goh 2012). Medical and health care practitioners are likewise trained in active listening skills in order to improve diagnosis and enhance patient-practitioner relationships (Robertson 2005; Shipley 2010). Education research, particularly that focussed on experiential and action learning, points to the importance of teaching listening skills in order to deepen understanding of

concepts, increase empathy, and promote collaborative leadership (Leonard & Marquardt 2010; Raelin 2006). A common thread running through this multi-disciplinary literature is the role of practitioners' use of learned listening skills in creating space for self-determination by clients, service users, patients and students (McLeod 2006).

Guidelines and training processes within varied activist communities also recognise the importance of listening skills to effective collective action. The Art of Hosting – a facilitation style used by a large international community to help groups self-organise – emphasises the need to listen fully, respectfully and without judgement in order to co-create sustainable results (Corrigan 2013). Consensus decision-making processes, used by myriad groups as diverse as Occupy, Quakers, Zapatistas, radical environmental campaigns, and the American Heart Association (Nail 2013; AHA 2013) rely on active listening to engender the understanding of all participants' thoughts and feelings. This makes it possible to jointly reach a decision which is supported, or at least accepted, by everyone involved (Seeds for Change 2010). Community Organising in England likewise provides practitioner training which defines active listening skills as core to supporting change in communities through building trust, engagement and capacity to identify and act on solutions to problems (RE:generate 2009). Community psychology studies and guidelines on patient-, survivor-, and user-led advocacy draw heavily on active listening processes such as listening partnerships and supportive group listening (Bond et al. 2000; seAp 2013; Goodman & Epstein 2008).

Not only activist organisations and the caring professions recognise the importance of generative listening: listening is heavily researched in business management and marketing disciplines. The exchange of mental and emotional resources, through the harvesting of ideas and the nourishment of capacity and commitment, can be highly profitable. Active and 'active-empathic' listening improves the effectiveness of management and supervision of subordinate workers (Mineyama et al. 2007) as well as enhancing the personal selling process (Comer & Drollinger 1999). Listening

training has been perceived as important for decades across a majority of Fortune 500 companies in order to improve performance (Wolvin & Coakley 1991; Hunt & Cusella 1983), and intra-organisational listening is described as a “powerful competitive tool” (Helms & Haynes 1992). Indeed, Kline’s *Time to Think* (1999), which informed the listening processes studied with a community activist organisation in the research presented here, is used extensively in the for-profit business world as well as the charity and education sectors. However, many of the insights of business-focussed research on the organisational benefits of effective listening for interpersonal relationships, organisational management, decision-making, and implementation of ideas remain equally relevant to non-commercial, community and activist organisations. This paper does not argue that effective listening in itself will pave the way for effortless triumph of social justice values over profit-centred values; rather, it posits generative listening as an essential part of value-rational socio-spatial practices which support individuals and collectives to tune into what is important to them and why (Flyvbjerg 2001), and to develop the capacity and power to act on personal and collective values across different scales and spheres of influence.

### **Tuning into our emotional selves through listening**

The effect of generative listening on helping participants tune into and articulate their emotional lives is key to social justice action because of the dual processes of both nourishing capacity – through helping participants feel heard and recognised – and ‘harvesting’ emotions, ideas and values to be mobilised into action (Rodgers 2010; Bosco 2007). We know that there needs to be space for emotions and relationships within movements for resistance and social change (Flam & King 2005; Goodwin et al. 2001). Brown and Pickerill (2009) look closely at the importance of creating space for emotion within the places, timescales, personal experiences, and interpersonal relationships which contribute to people’s ability to participate in social activism.

This paper refers to cognitive emotions – feelings which are expressed and experienced on a conscious level (Pile 2010). Though much work on emotion



situates it at the individual, intrapersonal level (Sharp 2009), the emotional work discussed in this paper relates not only to processes of recognising and expressing personal emotions but also to the work of connection-building – both equally important to social change movements. Emotions move beyond the individual almost as soon as they are expressed: emotional practices “are ‘social’ practices by default” (Everts & Wagner 2012, p.174). Askins (2009) characterises emotion as relational and essential – not universal, but part of a shared human experience. Routledge (2012) also acknowledges the relationality and co-creation of emotions which spur collective action such as protest and direct-action activism. Space for emotion – and for the relationships and interactions which make emotion a relational experience – is essential to inspiring, driving, and sustaining action for social change.

Across varied approaches to activism, listening is seen to increase effectiveness of collective action not only because it serves to gather and consolidate ideas, but also because it helps individuals to feel rewarded for their part in taking action. For this to occur, it is important that those contributing feel truly heard, not just drained of ideas or asked to speak and then ignored (RE:generate 2009). Active listening skills are important because they signal to people that they have been heard and understood (Weger Jr. et al. 2014). Empowering listening is both receptive and generative: it is a purposeful action which serves to harvest a collective wealth of ideas as well as to nourish and replenish the sharing capacities of those contributing to the collective.

Within less ruptural organisations working to promote social justice, there must equally be space for emotion and personality, and for communication which recognises the value of these attributes to the effectiveness of this work. How could we expect volunteers to be enthusiastic about running a community centre together if there were not space there for their ideas and feelings? How could we improve organisational practices if there were never time to say that we felt upset and stressed at meetings? Allowing space for this recognition of emotion within groups and organisations responding to everyday injustices may allow “constellations of feeling” to grow into forms of ‘implicit activism’

which seek to prioritise the relationships of care that develop in such groups (Horton & Kraftl 2009, p.15) in resistance to external threats from governance and funding structures. Zembylas's (2013) work posits that making space for emotional reflexivity brings to the fore feelings of empathy and care for others, thus mobilizing implicit activism in everyday situations. This necessary and fruitful space for emotion needs to be actively, purposely created through generative listening practices.

### **Listening as emotional labour**

Active, purposeful listening can be seen as a form of emotional work or emotional labour. Hoschild's (1983) seminal work on emotional labour originally conceived of it as the requirement and exploitation of performances or suppression of emotions in the workplace. Emotional work takes place within activist groups, civic organisations and within the home and family and friendship units as much as in workplaces, although the degree to which it is experienced as exploitative may vary. Emotional labour in medical and care work demands carers to exercise high levels of energy and skill to provide kindness and support in often traumatic situations; when support and coping mechanisms are inaccessible for workers, this can lead to burn-out and inability to provide 'good care' (Sawbridge & Hewison 2011; Hewison & Sawbridge 2016; Evans & Thomas 2009). The less-formalised emotional labour which takes place within activist movements and organisations – as it does in workplaces – includes looking after fellow participants when difficulties arise, mediating disagreements and conflict, welcoming new members, making and serving food, and mobilising one's own emotions to inspire action from others (Murray 2016; Franzway 2000; Bosco 2006). Baines (2011) and Shuler & Sypher (2000), in studies of non-profit organisations, note that, contrary to a characterisation of emotional labour as an inherently exploitative experience, some workers seek and find job satisfaction in certain types of emotional labour, perceived as resistance, altruistic service, or even comic relief.

The gendered marginalisation of emotional labour (Evans & Thomas 2009) relates to the observable feminization and marginalisation of skills which

support “community, integrative thinking and connectedness” (Buzzanell 1994, p.339) – often underscored by assumptions that skills like listening are innate or ‘natural’ to some and not others. Rather than being an innate talent, effective listening is a type of skill that can be learned and consciously practiced (by all genders) (Yorks, O’Neil, et al. 1999; Yorks, Lamm, et al. 1999) and which requires ‘commitment’ (Chatterton & Pickerill 2010). Though emotional work such as listening has often been seen as a side-line, or not seen as ‘work’ at all, it is in fact essential to organisational function and particularly relevant to praxis of values within organisations working towards a more just society. Like technical skills sets, generative listening should be valued, recognised, and actively trained and practised within such organisations.

### **Socio-spatial practices of empowering listening**

Making the time and space to notice, express, and listen to each other’s lived experience is valuable because it allows us to give voice and shape to everyday resistance, and strengthens our collective ability to ‘walk in the other direction’ (Holloway 2016). Insightful questions and reflective listening encourage critical thinking and ethical behaviour (Soffe et al. 2011). Having the space to identify and communicate one’s own emotions, feelings, thoughts and beliefs about a situation is empowering in itself (Bond et al. 2000; Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2001). We know, from examples like Rape Crisis helplines, Theatre of the Oppressed, and feminist consciousness-raising, that being heard feels empowering. Active listening is a key component in reflective and collaborative organisational practice, and collaborative processes of listening to and learning from each other further engender feelings of empowerment and growth (Raelin 2006; Cahill 2004).

Cornwall (2008, p.275) describes “[s]paces that people create for themselves” as important sites of empowerment because they allow people to “gain confidence and skills, develop their arguments and gain from the solidarity and support that being part of a group can offer.” However, Kesby, Kindon & Pain characterise Cornwall’s (2004) conception of ‘invited’ versus ‘popular’ spaces as too “polarised”, asserting, “...‘invited’ spaces can facilitate positive

interactions and radical transformations.” Generative listening – a learnable, practicable form of emotional labour – purposely creates a space of receptivity and inclusivity. Attentive, respectful and non-judgemental listening supports the co-creation of space in which people can feel genuinely heard and valued; thus it makes space for the feelings of empowerment, belonging, and ownership which are the bedrock for sustained social action. When used to inform collaborative decisions and action, such purposeful receptivity creates space for empowerment and shared ownership. When the emotional work of listening is valued and consciously practised within organisations motivated by values of social justice, the power of the emotions it makes space for may give rise to empowered action and transformation.

## **Methodological approach**

### **Participatory Action Research**

This paper draws on participatory action research conducted over three years. For one year, I worked alongside Oblong’s team of six part-time employees as an unpaid ‘Resident Researcher’ work placement. I took part in weekly staff team meetings and periodic strategic planning sessions, as well as helping to deliver training, run workshops, develop organisational policies, write funding bids, and peer-manage colleagues as per Oblong’s flat management structure. For two years either side of this more intensive participant observation ‘placement’, I volunteered a few hours each week with Oblong’s Development Collective, contributing to funding bids and other strategic aims. Before beginning this research, I worked as a part-time employee at Oblong, project-coordinating the Community Asset Transfer of Woodhouse Community Centre from Leeds City Council to Oblong<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Community Asset Transfer, a UK policy mechanism established in 2007, enables community ownership or management of publicly owned land and buildings. Oblong was granted a fifty-year rent-free lease on Woodhouse Community Centre in exchange for taking responsibility for its refurbishment, maintenance, and management, and ensuring its continual use as a community centre.

My approach to participatory action research focussed on developing activities with Oblong which would be practically useful for the organisation as well as allowing me to generate academic theory relevant to my interest in Oblong's praxis of social values. As such, I presented early possible options for my 'job role' to staff and trustees, and we decided together that my time would be spent helping to facilitate engagement with organisational values through workshops with volunteers, as well as contributing to other priorities like funding, planning, training and policy development based on my skills and past experience at the organisation. Ongoing peer management – including weekly progress reports during staff meetings, regular reporting to the board of trustees, and quarterly appraisals by all staff members – meant that Oblong participants exercised ongoing oversight and input into my work, helping to shape the research activities as the project developed.

### **A case within a case**

This paper focusses on a specific training event for staff team members, including preparatory reflective interviews (Ellis et al. 1997) and subsequent observations of resulting effects on day-to-day practice. Staff identified a collective need for communications training for the team to improve working relationships and enable better engagement with Oblong's core values within processes of team meetings and strategic planning sessions. We decided that this fit into my role, so I organised a full day training session provided by an external trainer<sup>6</sup>.

The day before the training session, I conducted an individual reflective interview with each of the six staff members.<sup>7</sup> I asked each staff member about their feelings in two scenarios: firstly, when communications between the staff team were going badly; and secondly, when the team was working well together and things felt productive. I then asked each interviewee what they did to support their own contribution to the second, pleasant and

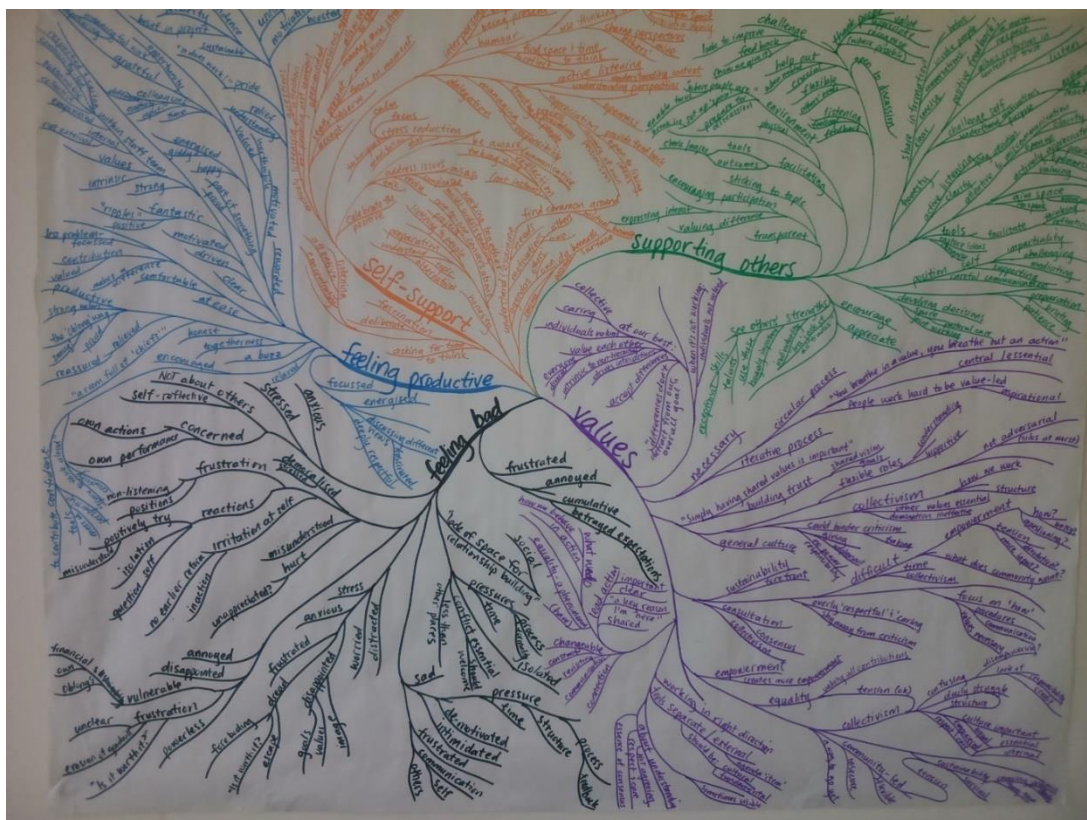
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<sup>6</sup> Lou Mycroft of the Social Learning Collective

<sup>7</sup> I also recorded my own personal reflections based on the same questions, in order to include my contribution in the collective mind-map shared with colleagues the following day, but these data are not considered in this analysis.

productive scenario, and also what they did to support others to participate. Finally I asked how they felt Oblong's core values related to these feelings, practices, and situations. I let each interviewee know I would practise a form of active listening, by giving them an approximate time to talk in response to each question, during which I would pay full attention without speaking, interrupting, or prompting them if they fell silent. After listening, I began drawing the branch of the mind-map for their response to that question, speaking with them about how to distil the thoughts they had shared into simple words and phrases, and checking their agreement with these word choices at each juncture. At the end of each interview the respondent could see the five-branched mind-map of their responses to these five questions. I gave each person a copy of their own mind-map along with a recording and transcript of the interview. After interviewing all six members, and recording my own verbal reflections and mapping them in the same way, I combined the seven resulting mind-maps into one single mind-map on a large sheet of flipchart paper (see Figure 1). Each question had its own branch in a different colour, with seven smaller branches coming off it, showing each respondent's

**Figure 1 – mind-map of all interview responses**



answers. The large, combined mind-map allowed staff members' feelings and ideas to be viewed alongside each other anonymously when I brought it along the following day at the start of the training session.

During the training I took part as a participant observer. Notes from this session, as well as a write-up of the reflection and feedback data collected by the trainer at the end of the session, were shared with me and all participants. I continued my participant observation (Evans 2012) in staff team meetings and strategic planning sessions for several months after the training session until the end of my placement.

### **Experiential learning and analysis**

The learning and analysis shared in this paper is necessarily experiential in nature – i.e., it arises from my lived experience of practices and events as a participating member of Oblong's staff team. It is inextricable from my relationships to Oblong as a former employee, a current community resident, and an emotional and academic stakeholder in its practice of organisational values. My positionality at Oblong shifted along an 'insider-outsider' continuum (Herr & Anderson 2015), depending on the activity and how participants perceived my role in it, although my embeddedness in the organisation meant I was trusted to contribute to decision-making and actively included in all activities relevant to this research during my placement there. My own investment in Oblong's values and in its success as an organisation, as well as the guiding principle of creating 'usefulness' and relevance for Oblong through co-produced participatory action research (Taylor 2014; Antonacopoulou 2010), shaped not only the research design but also my analysis: I have sought to draw conclusions about what practices align with and help to further Oblong's self-defined aims and values – and which might therefore be of interest to other groups seeking to practice and promote similar values – rather than to construct a remotely-observed critique.

At a practicable level, Oblong participants collectively analysed and acted upon our joint 'findings' in real time – e.g., we reflected together on what we learned from the interviews and communications training, decided how to put it into practice in our meetings, tried it out, talked about it, and tweaked it; of

course, the process continues still (without need of an academic researcher!). The post-hoc theoretical and conceptual analysis presented in this paper is indebted to this collective analysis-in-action.

## **Discussion**

### **The perils of poor listening**

Not listening to each other – and not recognising the effort involved in listening well – does not just detract from productivity in a traditional firm (Rane 2011), it is also counterproductive in an organisation promoting social justice. One of the ways Oblong tries to practice social justice is by using a non-hierarchical management structure, in an aspiration to create structural equality across the organisation for staff and volunteers. Although communication issues prompted Oblong staff to seek external help in the case examined here, employees' experiences there generally bear out the well-known individual and organisational benefits of this style of working (Darby 2015; Darby 2011), such as increased feelings of personal empowerment and confidence, a perceived responsiveness to people's needs, heightened motivation and creativity, and loyalty and commitment to the organisation (Herbst 1981; Rothschild & Whitt 1986; Hirsch 1990; Emery 1993; Ackoff 1994). Consensus decision-making inherently requires a greater *quantity* of listening to each other, and Oblong prides itself on making sure everyone has a voice. However, if the *quality* of listening is not there, problems occur.

In reflective interviews before the communication training commissioned by the team, I asked staff to tell me about their feelings during a situation when staff relations were 'as bad as it gets', without describing any specific situation. Many of the same feelings were mentioned by multiple staff members – feelings of frustration and annoyance; anxiety, pressure and insecurity; demotivation, isolation, and disappointment (see Figure 2).

Reflecting doubts about being fully heard during staff meetings, one member of staff said, "...when it does get bad I kind of feel quite intimidated...not able to completely, fully get my point across, and I think that is certain things to do



with myself, but, also...the workings of how the group gets sometimes.” Similar frustrations and doubts were expressed by other respondents: one reported wondering, during sleepless nights, “Have I said the right things?”; whilst another described feeling

“..as though we can’t resolve particular issues...because people either have entrenched positions or are unable to listen to each other...sometimes I have felt really misunderstood...It also makes me question myself...Am I really listening to other people, or do I just think I’m listening?”

Despite the difficulties experienced, a couple of respondents pointed out the necessity of conflict, and suggested that resolution comes with improved understanding, stating, “...if something’s not working [procedurally], I’m happy to let there be some frustration, because it means...you can actually get to the, you know, the meat of whatever the problem is,” and, “Discomfort is an essential part of growth...I think sometimes it should be embraced and welcomed as an opportunity to perhaps change direction, or to understand more about each other...” All of these reflections point to the importance of feeling heard, and of feeling able to listen and be listened to, in order to prevent or resolve misunderstanding and to collectively synthesize differing viewpoints productively.

Figure 2 – respondents' negative feelings



When asked about how Oblong's core values fed into working relationships, staff stated that when things were not working well, they felt like the values were "external," "just an item on the agenda," and in need of re-visiting because they were not being practised. Respondents reported feeling disappointed or betrayed during times when they perceived this to be the case, because they felt Oblong's values ought to be "fundamental," "cultural," and embedded in the procedures of collective working. Reflecting on what it felt like when core values were not practiced, one person said, "When it doesn't work, for me, is when...the individual isn't valued," whilst another stated, "I think it's often forgotten that, you know, we're all individual, different people, we don't all think the same, but we should all have the same values in the way that we treat each other." Another respondent said of Oblong's values: "We can't be in a productive space without being those things... if we're not being the values then we're either not behaving correctly or we're not—we must've not chosen the right values." Given that most cited Oblong's core values – equality, empowerment, collectivity, sustainability, being community-led, and respect and care – as a key reason for working there, feelings described during times of perceived disconnection from these values, such as demotivation, disappointment, anxiety, isolation, and personal sadness are easily understandable, and important to acknowledge.

One respondent indicated the importance of hearing others' feelings and thoughts about how to put Oblong's values into practice:

"Listening to how other people interpret those values – reminding ourselves what they are and why we're there – is important in building trust, because you realise people do really care, and it's not about just getting their job done...."

Another person linked the importance of sharing values and feelings to creating shared understanding and benefitting from diversity:

"The values that we created together – they're about having an understanding of everyone. It's...not necessarily being, like, 'We've all got to agree on everything all the time,' it's much more about having that

respect and care and understanding, and going, ‘Ok, well I, you know, maybe don’t agree, but I want to understand.’

As almost all staff members emphasised, practising social justice-oriented values like Oblong’s does not seek or require universal agreement, but does mean that contributors’ different feelings and viewpoints need to be heard, understood, acknowledged, and valued when making decisions together. Without effective listening, these needs go unmet and groups’ goals of creating more equitable relations, on small and large scales, are hindered.

### **Listening well is hard work**

Oblong staff, when asked to reflect during pre-training interviews, already knew the importance of good listening to effective working and values-based praxis. Speaking about self-support to contribute to productive collective working, one staff member stated, “I can’t progress anywhere without really listening to people.” Another described:

“...actively listening to people...in terms of, not just what they’re saying, but trying to get an understanding of where they’re coming from, and even trying to think – whatever the topic of conversation is – how that maybe will impact them.”

Another respondent also felt that listening was particularly important to supporting one’s own contribution, and explained the effort this requires:

“I try and concentrate really well on listening properly, like, attentive, active listening. So I think that word ‘fascination’ – like, deliberately remaining fascinated with a completely different view to mine is kind of— I don’t think it comes completely natural to any human being.”

Staff’s careful considerations of how to support themselves and others in collaborative working – through active listening – underscore the skill and conscious effort required to listen in a way which fosters values-based practice and collaborative change.

Oblong staff’s identification of a training need around communication indicates a collective awareness that listening practices can be learned,

improved upon, and consciously applied. Listening with generative attention – using eye contact, open body language, receptive facial expressions, and an attitude of respect – was the key thread running through the facilitation tools the team learned in our communication training session. The trainer taught Oblong staff several techniques for generative listening, many of which come from the Thinking Environment™ developed by Nancy Kline (1999). These included practices for ensuring everyone’s thoughts and feelings are heard in a group ‘check-in’, for creating productive dialogue in pairs, for holding a decision-making ‘council’, and for creating effective questions and cultivating appreciation. Feedback after the day-long session showed that, while staff generally found the training very positive, the new practices had been hard work! One person was surprised by “how hard I found it not to jump in with ideas, questions, etc.” when listening to others; another was surprised at “how much we’ve covered, and how much further we have to go.” Participants’ responses to a question about difficult points during the day – including distractions, difficulties gathering one’s thoughts, tiredness, and struggling to stay focussed – also indicate that listening and communicating well requires significant effort and the intention to learn and practice.

After the training, we used the tools in weekly meetings by conducting ‘Thinking Rounds’ where each person had time to speak uninterrupted about the topic under discussion; by breaking into ‘Thinking Pairs’ for dialogue when this felt useful to help people explore particular topics; by holding ‘Thinking Councils’ which allowed one person to present a proposal or dilemma followed by uninterrupted contributions from each member of the group; and by posing agenda items as ‘incisive questions’ (see Kline 1999). We sometimes had difficulty creating ‘incisive’, or focused, questions, balancing the complexity of some issues against time pressures, and making decisions when not all staff were present.

Reinforcing Oblong staff members’ recognition that value-rational praxis requires effort, attention and commitment – in this case, through effective listening – Apfelbaum (2001, p.29) writes, “Listening is not a biological

capacity, but rather an emotional relationship between people and requires trust...what is important is a willingness to become part of the transmission” (cited in Cahill 2007a, p.368). As Askins (2009) affirms, reflecting on why she takes action for social change, it is “disingenuous, of course” to say that she ‘just does’ (p. 4), as if this motivation and action were effortless. It would be equally disingenuous to take such a view of the ways organisations practice social values to bring about change. Neither is social justice inherent in a structure, practice, or set of values. As one Oblong staff member said: “I...possibly came in with some fairly idealistic views...And I’ve had some of those images of what it should have been like stripped away...I had to let go of my ideal vision of what it should be like.” Research representations and experiential knowledge of emotional work like generative listening show that people do not ‘just do it’ easily and naturally. Oblong’s collective experience shows that listening is something we can learn to actively do, and purposely embed in organisational practice, as a demanding but rewarding way to respond to change, solve problems, and empower participants.

### **Listening creates change and supports values-based practice**

Examples of the empowerment fostered by generative listening may be most obvious at small scales. In staff meetings post-training, I experienced an increased sense of space for people to express relevant feelings and be themselves, as well as more laughter, social interaction and relationship-building – one colleague remarked that it was refreshing to laugh in a staff meeting. I also observed more regular sharing of more creative ideas for solving problems, as well as continued and deepened sharing of motivations and values – helping to create and increase the desired feelings of belonging and trust mentioned in participant interviews (Marquardt & Goodson 2010). The changes I observed support McDowell’s (1997) argument that being listened to validates (shared) personal experience. Sharing feelings, ideas and motivations – and being heard – strengthens relationships and strengthens shared values, which in turn support Oblong’s practice of its social values.

Increased instances of empowered behaviour by staff members in decision-making processes made the collective benefits of this space for feelings, ideas and shared values more concrete. Staff – particularly those who were newer to the organisation and previously less pro-active – demonstrated confidence in sharing ideas and taking action to make their mark on the space and the organisation, for example by creating new procedures and programmes of engagement; changing the layout of spaces in the community centre; and in some cases practising and sharing these generative listening skills in their meetings with volunteers. Improved listening and communication meant that individuals' jointly-set goals and responsibilities better reflected their feelings and motivations: I noticed improved self-management, borne out in peer-appraisal processes which noted better performance against personal responsibilities. Personal empowerment of individual staff members translates into improved organisational capacity and power, as resources which pay for staff time are mobilised into actions which promote Oblong's core values through day-to-day practices, broadening engagement, and strategic planning.

Demonstrating this enhanced ability to turn values into action, and building on individual staff members' increasingly empowered contributions, I observed that organisational decisions got made more quickly and more effectively when Oblong participants used generative listening skills in regular meetings. For example, long-standing plans that had got stalled – such as responding to building users' suggestions for more social space in the community centre and community members' requests to access space free of charge – progressed and were implemented with success. At Oblong's strategic planning day, staff and trustees used listening rounds and thinking councils to discuss and decide on long-term plans for the organisation. This included strategizing to spread Oblong's values through expansion – not by taking responsibility (and power) over more premises, but by supporting other organisations to “re-invent their own wheels” in taking on the running of community centres. Oblong could provide this support through offering training and guidance in collaborative processes of defining values, setting up operational structures and policies, and day-to-day decision-making.

Although the time-scale of my observation was limited and these plans were not implemented during this research project, these small but significant (Pain 2014) observable differences indicate that, at least in the short term, improved listening practices increased Oblong's organisational effectiveness by improving its ability to mobilise resources and skill sets for self-defined values, and by affirming its identity and purpose by strengthening praxis of these values (MacKinnon & Derickson 2012). Listening, as a specific example of emotional labour and of the purposeful creation of space for emotion within work for social change, generates positive organisational change and can be seen as essential to Oblong's organisational values, mission, and success. By making space for participants' emotional experiences, bolstering shared values, and enhancing feelings of empowerment, these practices heightened the group's ability to focus on its social values as driving motivations for action whilst simultaneously harnessing the ingenuity of all contributors to creatively mobilise resources to promote Oblong's vision of social justice.

## **Conclusions**

Purposeful practice of generative listening skills creates essential space for praxis of social values within organisations and supports participants' empowerment to enact and promote social justice more widely. Research across disciplines shows that effective listening – which can be taught and developed through training and practice – enhances organisations' and participants' creativity, responsiveness and effectiveness.

A tension exists, however, between notions of emotional labour as a form of worker or self-exploitation, and my argument that some forms of emotional work – namely, generative listening practices – are essential to social change. Clearly there is great potential to employ practices of emotional labour like active listening for profit-oriented exploitation. Within the non-profit economy, another tension exists between further professionalising emotional work for social change, and adequately valuing, recognising, and prioritising it in organisations. Whilst formalised, trained processes of emotional labour like generative listening can act as a method of managerialising and capitalising

on emotional work, they can equally be nourishing: such practices can re-inject an element of emotional reward which professionalised non-profit workers, who are often motivated by social values and social change, may crave (Baines 2011). Just as the pursuit of ‘participation’ or ‘empowerment’ is not unproblematic, I do not conceive of the emotional work of generative listening as inherently positive for social justice. However, processes like generative listening which “deepen the honesty and humanity of...relationships” (Campbell & Vanderhoven 2016, p.53) help to identify and promote intrinsic values and motivations – such as affiliation with community, care for others, and social justice – thus challenging alienating, extrinsic values promoted by capitalist social relations such as wealth, social status and power over others (Holmes et al. 2011).

Generative listening is key to embodying and practising values like Oblong’s – values of empowerment, respect & care, collectivity, equality, being community-led, and sustainability. Generative listening enables both listeners and speakers to value each other’s and their own thinking, viewpoints, and ideas, and to grow more comfortable expressing them. It also makes space for the feelings and emotions which can block, or facilitate, the sharing and co-creation of ideas. Rather than demanding intellectually rational opinions in a pressurised environment of debate or hurry, generative listening practices make space for people to notice the underlying emotions and values which may affect what they think; to choose what they share, with an expectation of being heard; and to change their minds without sacrificing dignity, if they feel moved to do so based on the deeper understanding made possible in a listening environment. These experiences create feelings of empowerment, of being respected and cared for, and of being treated as an equal. These processes enable robust collective decisions, which take their lead from a community of participants, and which are more likely to be sustainable because they are based on the needs and priorities of those who will be implementing them. Without the space created by effective listening, dominant narratives of competition, financially-driven prioritisation, and scarcity threaten to drown out Oblong’s real reasons for being. But “recognition of the significance of emotion...is anathema to...dominant



neoliberalising processes (Askins 2009, p.11). When generative listening instead creates the space for Oblong participants to bring more of their “full selves” (Kline 1999) to decision-making processes, then their emotional motivations and values, as well as their intellects, can contribute fully to turning Oblong’s values into responsive, creative actions. Purposely training and practising generative listening increases Oblong’s organisational ability to challenge dominant values, respond resiliently to contextual changes, and exercise self-determination and power within its sphere of influence.

Admittedly, the case studied here takes place on a small scale: it has focussed on a team of seven at a single organisation. This research cannot and does not intend to predict the concrete results of similar processes with different groups. Indeed, the intention of generative listening is not to achieve a predestined goal, but rather to make space for expression, comprehension, and consensual synthesis of multiple interpretations, ideas, and emotional responses. Rather than insist that generative listening would promote social justice values in every case, I invite readers to imagine what might happen if Oblong alone used these processes in all its collective decision-making, beyond staff meetings and strategic planning sessions. How might generative listening contribute to volunteers’ experiences and personal development? How might it affect decision-making about community gardening projects, learning environments, fundraising events, or running reception at the community centre? How might enhanced decision-making on actions, policies and long-term organisational plans – already initially demonstrated by generative listening at staff meetings and strategic planning sessions – in turn create effects in the neighbourhood Oblong serves and in the city-wide networks in which it participates?

The changes created by generative listening may take place on small scales, but such changes are significant because they are grounded, context-relevant, and they respond to real-life circumstances. Indeed the kind of action which generative listening supports may be all the more applicable on broader scales because of this grounded responsiveness. Processes of generative listening enable decision-making which fuses values with

contextual relevance. Of course, listening and facilitative tools alone do not uphold any particular set of values; articulation and intention to practise social values must, too, be a conscious effort. However, such tools and practices strengthen praxis by making space for the emotions, interactions and relationships which underlie values-based decision-making and action – essential to contesting neoliberalized governance and finance processes which emphasise economic rationality over value-rationality. If we want to create a just society, generative listening must be a key part of our practice and interactions.

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## Chapter 5 – Dynamic Resistance: Third-sector processes for transforming neoliberalization

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### Abstract

This paper proposes a holistic framework called *dynamic resistance* for analysing and animating third-sector organisations' contestations of neoliberalization. It argues that the third sector constitutes a rich terrain for transforming neoliberalization processes to promote human flourishing and social justice. Dynamic resistance comprises four elements – rejection, resilience, resourcefulness and reflexive practice – within a cyclical process which can occur simultaneously at different organisational scales. Four vignettes, drawn from participatory action research, illustrate these processes at Oblong, a grassroots community group in Leeds which now runs a community centre. Despite engagement with neoliberal mechanisms, Oblong provides an example of dynamic resistance in practice, avoiding 'mission drift' and prioritising self-defined core values of equality, collectivity, empowerment, sustainability, respect & care, and being community-led. Dynamic resistance suggests third sector organisations' capacity to construct transformative social empowerment through ever-changing practices which are proactive and self-directed as well as responsive.

**Keywords:** third sector, neoliberalization, resourcefulness, resilience, social change, participatory action research

### Alternative abstract

This paper takes a close look at Oblong, a community organisation in Leeds which has fought hard for twenty years to survive and thrive without selling out. Third-sector organisations like Oblong find creative ways of meeting human needs where there is no profit to be made. But as the third sector is

increasingly pressured to deliver contractual public services, compete for funding, and generate income, 'mission drift' and co-optation can creep in. This paper proposes a framework – based on Oblong's everyday practices and long-term development – for working through these pressures in a way which sustains and promotes social values, not monetary value. It's not a model to follow but, rather, a holistic way of thinking about how organisations can practice 'dynamic resistance'. This means engaging with processes of rejection, resilience, resourcefulness and reflection in order to challenge capitalist logic, put people over profit, and create power for civil society.

### **Social change through the third sector? Towards a framework of transformation**

Critiques of third-sector development work describe it as apolitical, exploitative, or reinforcing inequalities (Cleaver 2001; Kaldor 2003; Ballard 2012). Ruptural social change movements are characterised by "highly charged acts of resistance" (Brown & Pickerill 2009, p.24) or "disruptive and emotive interventions" (Routledge 2012, p.429), but the comparatively mundane third sector appears to have succumbed to "incorporation...into a hegemonic neoliberal model" (Jenkins 2005). Neoliberal social and economic policy seeks to integrate community activity into a state-sanctioned, market-based economic paradigm (Mayer 2007).

However, subversive practices lurk beneath apparent co-optation. Within and despite neoliberal structures, such practices contribute to interstitial and symbiotic transformations of neoliberalization (Bondi 2005; Trudeau 2008; Panelli & Larner 2010; Meade 2012; Glasius & Ishkanian 2014). This paper proposes a framework for two purposes: analysing and informing third-sector practices for transformation. It responds to calls for more political and processual analysis of third-sector work (Corry 2010; Wagner 2012) and to debates about resilience in the context of resistance (MacKinnon & Derickson 2012; Cretney & Bond 2014). I propose *dynamic resistance* as a holistic framework for perceiving the intertwined processes through which third-sector organisations can resist capitalist recuperation and advance social justice.

While the case examined here may be rare, I hope this framework will illuminate contestation in other cases and argue that third-sector organisations can draw on dynamic resistance processes to exercise power as vibrant sites of social transformation.

Third-sector organisations possess great potential to construct interstitial and symbiotic transformations of neoliberalization through social empowerment over economic activity (Wright 2010). If, however, we think any concession of an organisation's social goals means defeat by a neoliberal 'enemy', we will inevitably feel dominated by hegemony. Transformation requires conscious creation of social relations and values-based practices, as well as strategic engagement with state and commercial actors. Peck et al (2010) distinguish between neoliberalism as an ideological project and neoliberalization as a constantly changing, relational process. Neoliberalism, conceived of as a hegemonic reality, "normalises the logics of individualism and entrepreneurialism"; instead, we can view contestation and neoliberalization as drawing upon each other, using each other as tools, prompts, or justifications (Leitner et al. 2007, p.2). A view of the state-community relationship as mutually constructed – through interactions between individuals in multiple roles (Meade 2012) – provides a rich understanding of the interplay between neoliberalization and third-sector work. We must continue to note the powerful influence neoliberalization has on civil society, but it is equally important to recognise civil society organisations' own power.

Perceiving this power as a process helps to counter defeatism and reveal actually-existing, workable strategies for cultivating civil society's influence. It also helps to dispel a notion of civil society as an unproblematic, unified actor marching against a clear enemy of neoliberalism; rather, both are complex sites of constantly-negotiated power relations and inherent contradictions (Eisenschitz & Gough 2011; Harvey 2014). Potential for transformation lies within these negotiation processes, even at the scale of third-sector organisations. Gibson-Graham's diverse economies (2008) and Murray's civil economy (2012) portray 'the economy' as much broader than market-driven activities alone. Community and organisational social relations remain

embedded in global economic processes. Therefore, small-scale, everyday relations can innovate, produce and reproduce alternatives to the individualism of market logic just as powerfully as they can reproduce a capitalist status quo (Chatterton & Pickerill 2010). Social and environmental goals drive myriad “new versions of the economy from below” (Murray 2012, p.144), especially strong in the past decade. In this autonomous, interstitial economic activity – driven by civil society and creating “both spaces of survival and platforms for contesting the existing order” (Murray 2012, p.144) – we can see the significance of dynamic resistance by third-sector organisations.

The dynamic resistance framework contributes to a body of holistic conceptualisations of social change which contrast ‘human flourishing’ with globalised capitalism (Wright 2010; Korten 2006; Macy & Brown 2014). It draws on systems thinking, which recognises the dynamic organisation, interconnectedness and intricate balance of living systems at any scale (Macy & Brown 2014). Whilst ‘naturalization’ of neoliberalism is a key critique of mainstream applications of resilience and systems thinking to social processes (MacKinnon & Derickson 2012; Cote & Nightingale 2012; Walsh-Dilley et al. 2013; Cretney 2014), we can draw conceptual parallels between natural and social systems without legitimising capitalist rationales and effects. Neoliberalism is “a highly dynamic, open system” (MacLeavy 2012, p.250), and processes of neoliberalization are “always incomplete...inescapably contradictory”, and “[a]bove all...open-ended” (Peck & Tickell 2012, p.247). Local innovations produce “wildly unpredictable strategies” which can reproduce but also destabilise or transform factors previously taken for granted (Wilson 2012, p.255). Processes of rejection, resilience, resourcefulness and reflexive practice – like processes of neoliberalization – have different practical forms and conceptual contexts at different scales. The dynamic resistance framework draws parallels between these processes at personal and organisational scales in order to suggest the significance of practices of empowerment at small scales to resistance at larger scales, without seeking to conflate these scales or to privilege the local as a site of resistance. I situate dynamic resistance within notions of open systems in order to humanise the actions and social relations which produce

neoliberalism *and* its others, and to suggest a view of transformation which embraces possibilities at varying scales.

This paper draws on ethnographic participatory action research at Oblong, a small charity based in an inner-city neighbourhood of Leeds, England. Set up in 1996, it now employs five part-time staff and runs Woodhouse Community Centre, mental well-being courses, and a volunteering scheme in which sixty adults participate yearly. After working at Oblong for two years as an employee, I began a three-year research project with Oblong as sole case study. As an embedded Resident Researcher, I spent a year working within the cooperatively-managed staff team fifteen hours per week. As well as participating in organisational decision-making and co-managing colleagues, my work included in-depth interviews with eighteen volunteers and six staff members, development of organisational policies and funding bids, and facilitation of several volunteer forums and two strategic development sessions.

My positionality within Oblong moved along a continuum (Herr & Anderson 2015). Participation in the staff team drew and built upon my 'insider' knowledge and, though my status as a researcher was 'outside' staff and volunteer groups, this distinction did not exclude me from discussions or decision-making. My long engagement with the organisation and stated commitment to practical, collaborative research meant I was trusted with access to organisational data and participants responded frankly to my interventions. My own stake in the organisation's values and development enriches the empirical data with experiential knowledge at the same time as shaping my interpretation of it to propose a recognition of third-sector organisational practice as a significant part of social resistance.

Exploring in-depth aspects of Oblong's work, I present four vignettes to illustrate dynamic resistance, comprising four distinct elements – *rejection*, *resilience*, *resourcefulness*, and *reflexive practice* – occurring cyclically within organisational processes and simultaneously as this cycle repeats at different organisational scales. The first section of the paper argues for a process view of neoliberalization and resistance. Next I examine the four conceptual



elements of dynamic resistance, arguing that each represents a distinct and necessary component of third-sector organisational resistance to neoliberalization. Presenting examples of Oblong's practices, actions and development to illustrate rejection, resilience, resourcefulness and reflexive practice, the following section emphasises a holistic conception of these elements as processes within a broader, cyclical process. The final section discusses the significance of dynamic resistance for how we understand third-sector work and for organisational practice.

## **Transforming neoliberalization: Processes for dynamic resistance**

Kaldor (2003) characterises neoliberal third-sector organisations as “essential ingredients of good governance and properly functioning markets” (p.10). In neoliberalized civil society, concepts like participation and empowerment become hollow ‘buzzwords’ – invoked in “management, rather than empowerment” of community players (Clayton et al. 2015, p.5) – and third-sector organisations ultimately become ‘tamed’, employed instrumentally to cushion market-driven structural adjustment, austerity measures and corruption (Kaldor 2003; Mayo & Craig 1995; Coote 2010). Organisations find themselves constrained by state policies and funding criteria (Hoggett 1997; Gilchrist 2004).

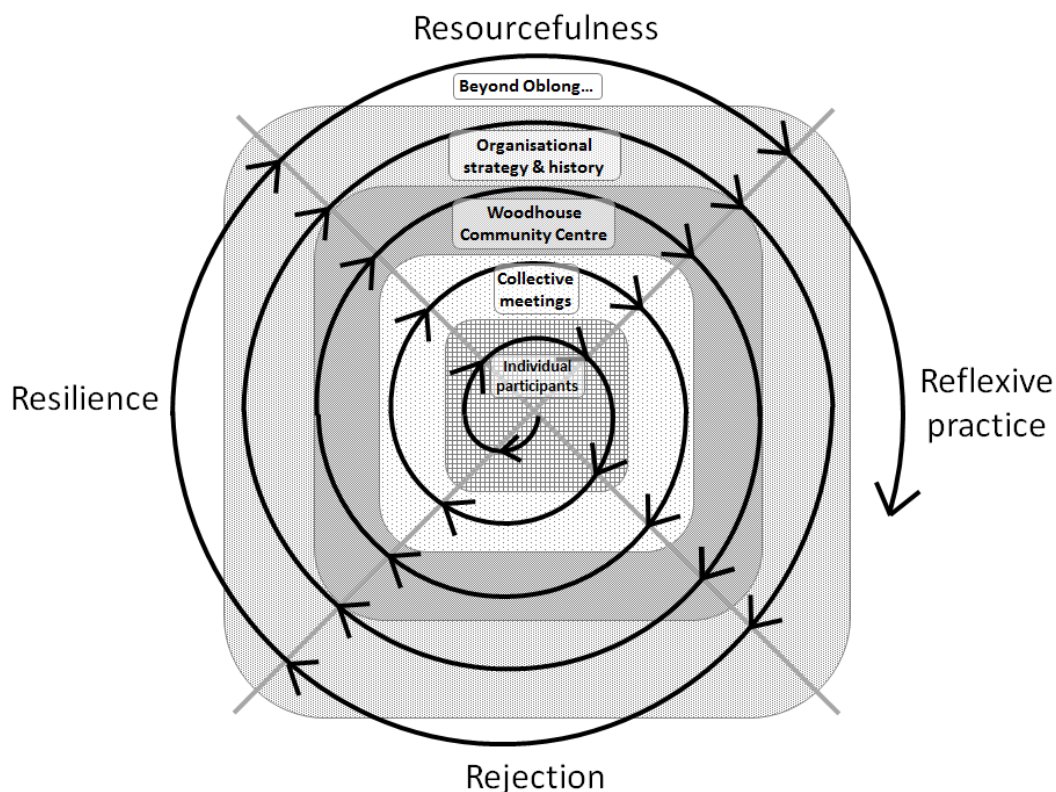
Through growing provision of public services by non-public entities, the ‘Shadow State’ influences civil society (Wolch 1990; Mitchell 2001), and civil society organisations become increasingly market-driven and professionalised (Bondi & Laurie 2005; Jenkins 2005). As commissioning replaces direct state funding, third-sector organisations become more vulnerable, compelled by market priorities which conflict with their social priorities (Clayton et al. 2015). Over time, small policy shifts become entrenched as social norms (Mitchell 2001). Professionalization of community work further blurs lines between perceived bottom-up initiatives and top-down imposition of state agendas (Bondi & Laurie 2005).

However, many seemingly ‘tame’ organisations do further political aims and

contestation without appearing to do so (see, e.g., Larner & Craig 2005; Trudeau 2008; Gibson-Graham 2008; Jupp 2012). Meade’s (2012) nuanced exploration of professionalization questions an assumed dichotomy between state and community and challenges the idea of co-optation of the supposedly discrete community group by the hegemonic state. Considering state-nonprofit relationships, Trudeau (2008) emphasises dynamic interactions, with influence travelling “in multiple directions...across multiple scales” (p.684). Relational approaches – viewing third-sector organisations not as static entities defined by characteristics, but rather as “processes of negotiation” between civil, state and economic powers (Corry 2010, p.16) – allow for broader conceptions of the power of third-sector work to effect change instead of only conforming to it.

Dynamic resistance is a cyclical but evolving process driven by smaller processes which take place at different times and scales according to the organisation’s needs. Figure 3 gives a pictorial representation of the cycle of dynamic resistance and its simultaneous occurrence at different organisational scales. Each element is explored conceptually below, then analysed empirically in the vignettes in the following section.

**Figure 3 – dynamic resistance**



## 1. Rejecting neoliberal values

Resistance can be seen as “a mode through which the symptoms of different power relations are diagnosed and ways are sought to get round them, or live through them, or change them” (Pile 1997, p.3). Most third-sector organisations exist because of an unmet human or social need: thus their existence reveals insufficiencies in a capitalist paradigm. Even though a third-sector organisation may not portray itself as explicitly resistant, making visible the harm done by neoliberalization constitutes a key element of building autonomy. Dynamic resistance thus encompasses a crucial rejection of processes of neoliberalization.

Holloway characterises rejection, dramatically, as a “scream of refusal” (2010a p.1):

“...a refusal to accept the unacceptable. A refusal to accept the inevitability of increasing inequality, misery, exploitation and violence.... There is certainly no inevitable happy ending, but...we refuse to accept that such a happy ending is impossible” (p.6).

This rejection of ‘there-is-no-alternative’ neoliberal dogma is one essential element of dynamic resistance. A third-sector organisation may purposefully reject profit-centric relations of inequality and exploitation, or it may find itself rejected by mechanisms governing the sector when its values conflict with theirs. Rejection might take the form of subtle efforts at non-compliance, outright refusal to obey policy, or rejection by potential funders because of incompatible objectives. Practising rejection alone leads to burn-out (Brown & Pickerill 2009); but unwillingness to reject ‘business as usual’ erodes autonomy. Rejection is crucial to dynamic resistance because “...out of our negation grows a creation, an other-doing, an activity that is not determined by money...” (Holloway 2010, p.3). To draw on and move beyond rejection to become influential and self-directing, an organisation must also engage in complementary processes of resilience, resourcefulness and reflexive practice.

## 2. Reacting resiliently

The mainstream popularity of resilience, as well as its contestation and mobilization by movements for social change, signify its importance within a broader framework for resistance. Since its origination in ecology (Holling 1973), applications of the term as a measurement of 'development' and, conversely, its appropriation by grassroots and activist groups have raised questions: resilience 'of what, to what?' (Carpenter et al. 2001), and 'for whom?' (Cote & Nightingale 2012; Cretney 2014). Critiques of resilience problematize several issues, including: the de-politicization of a descriptive concept with normative implications (Weichselgartner & Kelman 2014; Welsh 2014); the concept's inherent conservatism and employment in further entrenching neoliberal structures (Watts 2011; Walker & Cooper 2011; MacKinnon & Derickson 2012; Reid 2012); the privileging of local-scale resilience without recognition of global influences (Katz 2006; Olwig 2012); and the 'perverse' resilience of systems, like capitalism, which undermine necessary change and threaten ecological and social stability at all scales (Phelan et al. 2012; Walsh-Dilley et al. 2013). Arguments for inserting notions of wellbeing, reflexivity, transformation and root causes of vulnerability into resilience frameworks (McCrea et al. 2014; Walsh-Dilley et al. 2013; Weichselgartner & Kelman 2014; Cretney & Bond 2014) rightly attempt to infuse resilience with visible, contestable values. However, the concept itself falls short of according agency to those who are resilient, beyond the pursuit of resilience itself.

Resilience is one distinct element in the framework of dynamic resistance because it is reactive. Although demonstrably helpful in some socially progressive groups' resistance to neoliberal encroachment (Mason & Whitehead 2012; Cretney & Bond 2014; Pink & Lewis 2014), resilience, in essence, connotes survival through coping strategies (Katz 2012; Pink & Lewis 2014) and limits the ability to 'speak back' to neoliberalization processes (Walker & Cooper 2011; Reid 2012). Resilience, within a dynamic resistance cycle, constitutes an indispensable process for a third-sector group coping with the ramifications of its rejection of (or by) neoliberal mechanisms. When

focusing on resilience, an organisation might take stock of its means, perhaps downsize, and prioritise what is important to preserve of its work in order to carry on existing. Its practice often means engagement with neoliberal mechanisms which conflict with an organisation's social values, but this compromise may be crucial to help it survive to practice its values longer-term. A focus on resilience alone neglects agency and autonomy (Katz 2006); but to neglect resilience undermines longevity and stability. Resilience is both critical to and dependent upon other processes of rejection, resourcefulness and reflexive practice within the broader process of dynamic resistance.

### **3. Taking action resourcefully**

Mackinnon and Derickson (2012) propose 'resourcefulness' as a framework for understanding relational processes often hidden by normative employment of the resilience concept. They elaborate four processes of resourcefulness: problematizing exploitation and inequality when seeking access to "resources"; capacity-building through developing "skill sets and technical knowledge"; co-producing knowledge and identity through "indigenous and 'folk' knowledge"; and collective self-legitimation and confidence-building through commanding "recognition" (pp.12-13). Thus, as it develops practices of resourcefulness, an organisation: 1) finds, challenges and creates ways of accessing resources, 2) develops its skills, 3) builds or strengthens its foundational narratives, and 4) demands or consolidates its recognition and legitimacy. Resourcefulness, unlike resilience, is proactive rather than reactive. Neither is it a static endpoint to be reached, but rather a process.

Resourcefulness helps to understand and shape third-sector transformations of neoliberalization, but it neither negates nor replaces the need for reactive resilience. Furthermore, an organisation focussing on resourcefulness alone could overlook the importance of purposeful reflection on the values and values-based goals driving organisational practice. Still, processes of resourcefulness strongly support the development of reflexive practices as well as building upon processes of resilience and rejection to strengthen an organisation's ability to advance alternatives to capitalist relations.

#### **4. Practising reflexivity**

Reflexive practice underlines the importance of all four processes of a dynamic resistance cycle to creating “self-reinforcing dynamics” (Wright 2010, p.369) which can continually engender organisational empowerment and social relations of justice, autonomy and well-being. Reflexive practice indicates a notion of reflexivity directly applicable to action: a questioning of practices to understand the social values underlying them, and an awareness of the sources and effects of those values. The concept has been extensively developed within critical management discourse by Ann Cunliffe (2002; 2004; 2005; 2009), and it becomes crucial in the increasingly professionalised and marketized third sector precisely because reflexive practice “offers a way of surfacing [ethical] pressures by encouraging us to examine...assumptions that decisions are justified solely on the basis of efficiency and profit...” (Cunliffe 2004, p.408). An engaged and evolving third-sector organisation, to maintain integrity, regularly re-evaluates its position and purpose in the world, “deconstruct[ing]...ideas and professional practices for the interests they serve” (Brookfield 2009, p.298). It reflects on its relational context and reasons for being, daily practices, future plans, and the values underlying those reasons, practices and plans. Practising reflexivity in isolation – or as a self-referential, purely academic exercise – could be “paralyzing”, preventing engagement (Derickson & Routledge 2014, p.4); but a “reflexivity of purpose” (Purkis 1996, p.212) in the context of dynamic resistance generates empowering praxis: daily practices and long-term action remain values-based, feasible and grounded in conviction.

#### **Dynamic resistance in action**

##### **Introducing Oblong**

Analysis which did not consider the self-consciously political charge running through Oblong’s processes and practices might depict it as a ‘tamed’, instrumentalized NGO serving to further neoliberal notions of civil society. Initially a do-it-yourself resource-sharing organisation, Oblong developed over time into a charity and de facto social enterprise. It accesses money through

grants and, more recently, loans, commissions and charging rent. Oblong operates within an environment shaped by capitalist and profit-centric state interests and competes with other organisations to deliver target-based work driven by these interests (Hoggett 1997; Gilchrist 2004), but these circumstances and characteristics do not wholly define its work.

In 2011, Oblong completed Community Asset Transfer<sup>8</sup> of Woodhouse Community Centre. To fund required refurbishment of the centre, Oblong took out an interest-bearing loan from a quasi-autonomous non-governmental organisation, which also provided grant monies. Oblong accepted financial responsibility for the building's upkeep, insurance, management and loan repayments for fifty years, though Leeds City Council retains ownership of the building. Engaging with nationally-led urban governance policies designed to devolve responsibilities to communities, Oblong entered the 'market' of community services provision in reaction to an increasingly distant state. Oblong charges fees for use of facilities in order to meet immediate financial responsibilities; through this non-profit income, it hopes to eventually command resources independent of state and philanthropic funding.

Oblong employs paid staff and delivers community development training and volunteering opportunities which help participants gain paid third-sector work. These examples of third-sector professionalization also highlight its nuances: people committed to community work or social aims respond to their needs for satisfying, sustaining livelihoods by seeking third-sector employment, thus positioning themselves between 'activist' and 'authority', shaped by and shaping both roles (Meade 2012).

Oblong's work – driven by goals of helping “people and communities flourish” (Oblong 2015a) through developing disadvantaged people's capacity, skills and agency, and by running a community centre – can be seen as part of the socially- and politically-driven civil economy (Murray 2012) or Gibson-

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<sup>8</sup> Community Asset Transfer is a UK policy mechanism established in 2007 to enable community ownership or management of publicly owned land and buildings. Oblong was granted a fifty-year rent-free lease on Woodhouse Community Centre in exchange for taking responsibility for its refurbishment, maintenance and management, and ensuring its continual use as a community centre.

Graham's 'non-capitalocentric' diverse economies (2008). Oblong grounds its work in self-defined values of equality, collectivity, empowerment, sustainability, respect and care, and being community-led (Oblong 2015b). Amongst staff, Oblong uses peer management instead of traditional hierarchical management. Volunteers and staff make decisions by consensus about strategic and practical actions. Viewing Oblong's work through the framework of dynamic resistance reveals examples of negotiation of power and resources, politically subversive potential, and transgressive approaches to market and state logics as emphasised by a process-focused approach to the third sector (Corry 2010). Seen through a 'process' lens, third-sector organisations like Oblong create spaces of 'everyday revolution' (Pickerill & Chatterton 2006) and possess significant capacity to transgress dominant market-driven logics even as they engage with those logics to access resources.

### **Working the spaces of Woodhouse Community Centre: claiming a resource for resistance**

Though it created frustration with governmental and financial procedures and cost considerable time and money, Oblong's Community Asset Transfer of Woodhouse Community Centre demonstrates the organisation's resourcefulness and resilience: through mobilising technical skills and capacity, Oblong secured an asset to support longevity, stability and sustainability. Accessing this resource required a step-change in financial expertise, administration and reporting by staff and trustees. Despite operating at the edge of its capacity, Oblong continues to improve uptake, accessibility and income at the centre whilst winning repeat grant funding for volunteering projects and community development training and contracts for mental well-being courses. Though engaging with Community Asset Transfer has diverted more of the organisation's resources into financial management, it has also increased its capacity for strategic decision-making. One staff member stated,

"I definitely think the more we understand the 'rules of the game', which could be perceived as professionalising I suppose, then the more we



can predict other actions or empathise with their positions, which strengthens our hand when negotiating for resources” (correspondence, 07/2015).

Oblong’s successful completion of Community Asset Transfer also bolstered other processes of resourcefulness. Now taken more seriously as a partner in local strategic sector networks, Oblong is developing its capacity to influence policy and promote alternatives outside the organisation. Yearly surveys with stakeholders, as well as less formal mechanisms, seek indigenous knowledge and influence Oblong’s strategic planning for the centre. The building itself bears witness to local history and folk knowledge with room names suggested by centre users to honour local activists and artists. Developing Oblong’s identity around the centre – thus strengthening its ability to build organisational confidence and demand recognition – is evidenced by recent publicity materials including leaflets stating Oblong’s values, trustee recruitment posters declaring, “Oblong is not business as usual,” and blog posts by staff reflecting on Oblong’s values and practice (Collins 2015; Southwell 2015; Lightfoot 2015).

Entwined with these processes of resourcefulness is a further element of self-awareness through reflexive practice; this important process focusses not just on the organisation’s rights, capacity, history or identity but also on keeping Oblong’s values central to its work as the organisation grows in power. At a recent strategic review, participants discussed a potential opportunity for involvement in running other community centres in the city. A central question was, “How could we do this in a way that promotes our social values?” The group discussed how to use such an opportunity to help other organisations develop autonomous, values-based practices. Staff emphasised “the importance of re-inventing your own wheels”, demonstrating Oblong’s intentions to empower and support within the third sector instead of compete and encroach. This evident focus on values within strategic decision-making demonstrates the purposeful, relational reflexive practice which is crucial to advancing alternative practices and values whilst the organisation

simultaneously positions itself to access resources and interact advantageously with processes of neoliberal governance.

Although Community Asset Transfer of Woodhouse Community Centre increases Oblong's resilience to other vulnerabilities created by neoliberalization and bolsters processes of resourcefulness, engaging with asset transfer took Oblong to the brink of financial collapse. During the process, a large grant supporting volunteering activities and employing most staff members ended; a decision on further funding was awaited. Whilst a gap between grants is common for small charities, funders of the centre refurbishment feared non-repayment and stopped funding mid-project, leaving about £100,000 owed to building contractors and a potentially empty building without utilities mid-winter. The disparity between Oblong's long experience of securing grant funding and the expectations of the loan-giving organisation highlight how financialization creates vulnerabilities and disrupts the social aims of third-sector work (Clayton et al. 2015).

Facing potential insolvency, staff remarked that, had Oblong been a 'traditional' organisation – with a boss and 'subordinates' – staff team unity would have disintegrated: workers would be made redundant, someone with power over others would have to allocate blame to justify redundancies, and these would reduce staff capacity. Instead, staff took collective responsibility for decisions made collectively and reduced everyone's weekly hours rather than eliminate positions. The organisation not only stayed intact but drew on contributions of all staff members to deal with the crisis. Once additional grant funding materialised, refurbishment funding re-started. The crisis over, Oblong adapted operations to new conditions without having lost the collective experience and cohesion in the team.

Oblong's rejection of hierarchical capitalist management models enabled the organisation to shape resilience to crisis on its own terms. By engaging with Community Asset Transfer without compromising these terms, Oblong transgressed expectations of the compliant third sector and transformed a potential process of co-optation into one of resourcefulness for the organisation. The reflexive practice underlying Oblong's decision-making

structure complements its resourcefulness, enabling it to focus on growing in power whilst also promoting relations and practices for social justice within and through third-sector work.

### **Dynamic staff meetings for dynamic resistance**

The distinct but interdependent elements of dynamic resistance function symbiotically within the microcosm of each single staff meeting at Oblong. Staff meetings take place weekly and, during my research placement, included seven people. A warm-up round asks, 'How has another staff member acted out one of Oblong's values this week?' Sometimes people speak quickly with ready responses like: "Thanks to Emma for running the Reception and Bookings meeting. That facilitated lots of collective decisions getting made." Sometimes silent moments pass before someone realises: "Helen's been working with [volunteer]...he seems much more confident answering the phone and sharing ideas about what we could do better...I guess that's empowerment...and equality?" The 'values round' prompts reflexive practice to reinforce Oblong's core reasons for being and prioritise recognition of these before moving on to business.

Updates from each person on progress towards jointly decided targets prompt staff to monitor their own and others' work to ensure Oblong's continued resilience. One member might say, "I've made the arrangements for seven new Head Space courses to be completed by April, but we still need to run three more to meet commissioners' targets, so I'm talking to [contacts]..." Another might probe: "Did you input the volunteer supervision info on the database? We need figures for the funders' monitoring." In times of crisis or potential difficulty, updates and questions focus on targets deemed 'critical'; in times of relative plenty, staff expect each other to have progressed 'aspirational' goals. Staff know if Oblong does not meet funders' targets and generate income from the building, they will not have jobs, volunteers will not have this safe space to build skills, and local residents will not have Woodhouse Community Centre to use. This awareness of vulnerability at each meeting does not stop staff focussing on values-based practice and

strategy, but it does drive Oblong to react to change, challenges and crises to maintain the resilience underpinning its existence.

Communication skills training boosted processes of resourcefulness within the staff team. After learning tools for active listening and creating space to value others' thinking, we remarked upon noticeable differences in staff meetings. These tools – for example, introducing equal speaking time in rounds, formulating agenda items as 'incisive questions', and conducting Time To Think<sup>©</sup> Councils<sup>9</sup> – create both more structure and more openness in contributions to discussion and consideration of ideas. They encourage maximum inclusion and minimum micro-management. Depending on the topic, staff decide what communication tools to use. Once consensus is reached on business-critical aspects of the issue, practical details will be decided by the relevant project collective. For example, in discussing the agenda item "How will we create [more] communal space in the centre?" as requested by users, staff decided the available budget and considered health and safety and safeguarding responsibilities; then volunteers and staff in the Reception and Bookings Collective discussed, consulted on, designed and implemented changes to the space. Oblong's meeting facilitation tools build upon existing staff resourcefulness, such as accessing resources and employing technical skills sets, and they deepen capacity for valuing difference as well as commonality, creating "shared ways of knowing generated by experiences, practices and perceptions", and valuing each other's experiential knowledge (MacKinnon & Derickson 2012, p.13).

The reflexive practice of centring decision-making and important discussions around Oblong's values – using facilitation tools which reinforce those values – is key to creating solidarity and identity. This gives rise to the organisational confidence to promote Oblong's recognition and legitimacy. For example, staff discussion about the agenda item "How should we respond to departing trustees' feedback?" generated a decision to more overtly emphasise

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<sup>9</sup> This tool and others learned on the training provided by Lou Mycroft of the Social Learning Collective are part of the Thinking Environment<sup>®</sup> created by Nancy Kline and Time To Think.

Oblong's alternative values and practices in advertising for recruitment of trustees. (See Figure 4.) The reflexive practice engendered by a values-based, listening approach is key to Oblong's growing resourcefulness, to its ability to exercise agency within resilience-building actions, and to its ability to reject 'business as usual' yet still pursue the sustainability and empowerment necessary to promote alternative ways of working. Without ignoring the need to be reactive to its financial and practical context, Oblong counteracts the dominance of neoliberal values by refusing to allow this context to overshadow its social values and by reclaiming space within meetings and communications to reinforce and assert its values.

Figure 4 – trustee recruitment fliers



### Volunteers' experiences: everyday praxis of dynamic resistance

Though anyone can get involved, Oblong's volunteering programme is aimed at people recovering from mental ill health and/or unemployed long-term; for many, getting involved at Oblong constitutes an effort to cope with difficulties. The discussion here draws on data from my evaluation of Oblong's most recent volunteering programme (Darby 2015). About half of respondents included personal and social reasons for volunteering – needs for confidence-

building, life skills, social, emotional and mental well-being – such as: “I’d been ill, and was trying to get back into society,” and, “I had lost my job... [what I do at Oblong is] the absolute highlight of my week.” Whilst Oblong’s values and practices explicitly reject capitalist competition and problematize inequality, insecurity, and austerity, many people get involved simply because they need to develop strategies for dealing with personal manifestations of such ‘neoliberal epidemics’ (Schrecker & Bamba 2015).

The environment created by Oblong’s values – and the implicit rejection of inequalities and competition – makes it “a safe place – not scary!” where participants can develop personal resilience. Participants stated, “I feel welcomed...and remembered as if valued,” and “I have never been a part of an organisation which gives so much respect to people.” Through engaging with volunteering, almost all participants report growing in knowledge, confidence and communications skills.

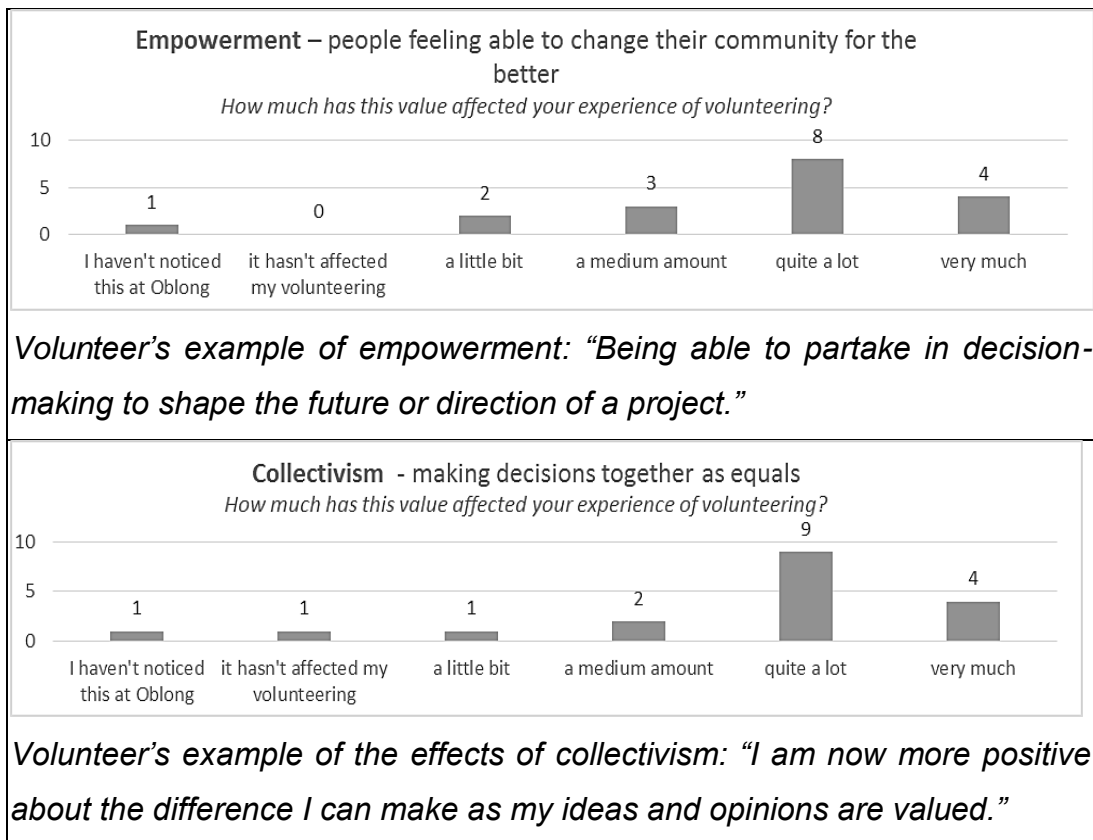
Volunteers are supported to join an existing project collective – including everything from gardening to centre reception – or begin a new collective, like the Woodhouse Food Co-op. Within collectives, volunteers and staff make decisions together, thus engaging participants in attempts to create equal access to power and resources. Volunteers increase skill sets and technical knowledge including “working on funding bids”, “graphic design skills”, and English skills. One volunteer stated, “I am now self-employed because of the filmmaking experience I gained at Oblong,” whilst another said, “I gained the experience of running a small community team, running a project and producing results together.”

Volunteers contribute to creating knowledge and practices at an organisational level too, stating, “There’s always an option for things to change and move on...The system’s constantly improving.” Collaborative discussion at the Oblong Bob-along volunteer forum effected changes to security measures, marketing strategies, community engagement, funding allocation and internal communications infrastructure. The Bob-along shaped and validated Oblong’s successful application for repeat major grant funding. Volunteers expressed the sense of identity and legitimacy they experienced

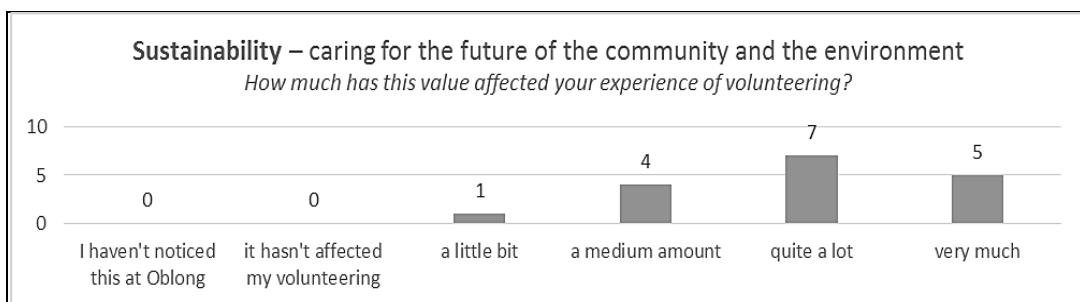
as part of Oblong, with one describing Oblong as “an identifiable collective effort and collective success” with which she feels proud to associate herself. Processes of exercising control over resources, building skills, co-creating knowledge and building group identity demonstrate how volunteers develop proactive resourcefulness through and alongside reactive resilience.

Volunteers’ assessment of how Oblong’s values pertain to their experience at the organisation underscores the importance of reflexive practice to everyday dynamic resistance. For each of Oblong’s six core values, volunteers rated its effect on their experience and were invited to share their own examples of each value in practice. (See Table 1.)

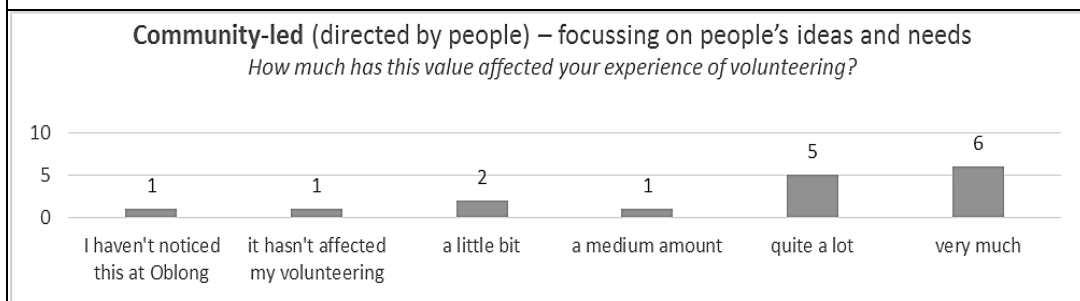
**Table 1 – volunteers’ experiences of Oblong’s values**



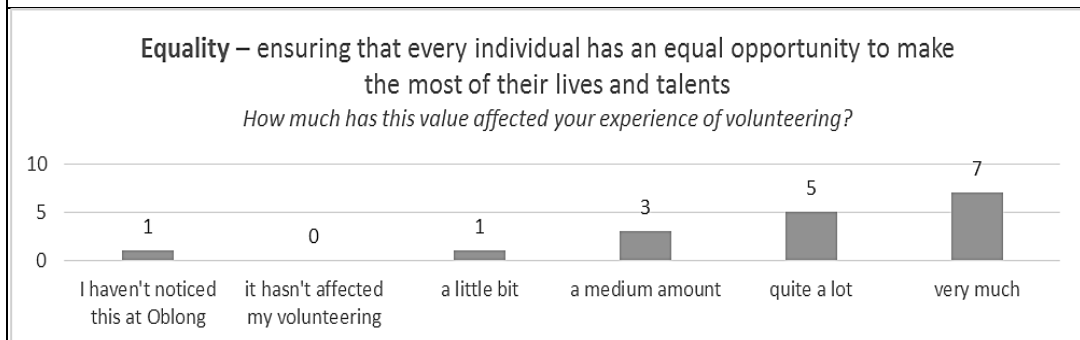
**Table 1 – volunteers’ experiences of Oblong’s values**



*Volunteers’ examples of sustainability: “The food co-op and gardening collective”; “the building itself”; “The fact that [ESOL] students do come back, and with friends!”*



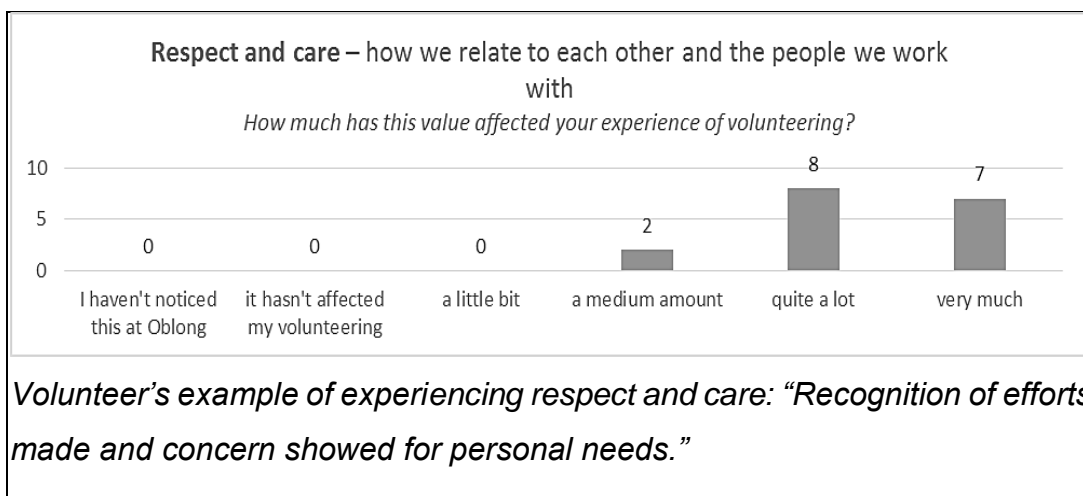
*Volunteer’s example of Oblong’s being community-led: “The sheer scope and variety of [activities] available.”*



*Volunteer’s example of equality: “All those involved in [a project] are able to put their views and have equal weight.”*



**Table 1 – volunteers’ experiences of Oblong’s values**



(graphs taken from Darby 2015)

Most responses indicate volunteers engage significantly, through their participation in project collectives, in the reflexive practice essential to Oblong’s broader dynamic resistance to neoliberalization.

Oblong’s rejection of the conditions which create inequality and insecurity, combined with organisational reflexive practice of how to put social justice into practice on a day-to-day level, contribute in essential ways to creating a third-sector environment where participants can develop resilience and resourcefulness and transgress expectations of the individualistic, competitive ‘good neoliberal subject’ (Diprose 2014) on personal and collective levels.

### **Dynamic resistance through organisational history and strategy**

Oblong’s long-term strategic development demonstrates instances of rejection, resilience, resourcefulness and reflexive practice present in Oblong’s ethos and shared understanding over the life-course of the organisation. The ‘Tree of Community’ exercise I facilitated with staff and trustees crystallises some of these processes, alongside data from my participation over time. (See Figure 5.)



rights”, “care for people”, and “valuing people as equals.” These ‘roots’ depict Oblong’s long-standing rejection of capitalist norms and support for social change.

For twenty years the group has maintained a strong ideological commitment to creating and upholding practices which “combat the wider inequalities that exist in society” (text from funding bid, 2014). In strategic planning sessions, contributors have acknowledged Oblong’s ‘underdog status’ and ‘DIY vibe’ as reputational strengths within the local community; the trade-off is a lack of ‘friends in high places’ and perceived difficulty accessing funds and assistance from authorities. Some of the difficulties caused by these rejections, and the need for survival strategies for resilience, are articulated in the tree’s ‘leaves’ – representing issues or problems – and ‘raindrops’ – representing external circumstances. These include “tension with need to make money”, “resistance from the norm”, and “perceived as inefficient”. Questions and visits from funders scrutinising Oblong’s structure suggest disadvantages Oblong faces because of its rejection of hierarchical norms, but its successes also highlight how Oblong creates resilience in line with its values.

The ‘fruits’, or positive accomplishments, on Oblong’s tree include articulations of varied practices of resourcefulness. For example, “access to resources”, “‘efficient’ management systems”, and “economic – flexibility – speed” suggest processes of overcoming unequal distribution of resources and building skill sets. Contributions such as “Everyone learns from everyone,” “People are participating in decision-making,” and “established thinking challenged” indicate ways Oblong fosters co-produced knowledge and builds upon critical origin stories. Fruits which say, “traditionally disempowered people have a sense of efficacy”, “anti-capitalist future model”, “community hub”, and “confidence to go for dreams :)” show Oblong’s developing “sense of confidence, self-worth and self- and community-affirmation” (MacKinnon & Derickson 2012, pp.12–13).

Other contributions to the diagram demonstrate the reflexive practice inherent to Oblong’s ways of working. “Things are in a constant state of flux,” written on a fruit, indicates a positive perception of organisational change. Others

say “personal development”, “people feel valued”, “staff buy-in”, and “less conflict”, relating to participants’ reflections about the aims and results of practices like non-hierarchy and consensus decision-making. Others, like “effecting real social change” and, “There’s a consistency between values and actions,” make explicit the reflexive link between values and practice at the heart of Oblong’s work. Discussing the possibility of extending Oblong’s work city-wide, participants said: “The starting point is not doing this to people...We don’t want to make money or rule the world; these values inform everything we do,” and, “Our values...are the reason we do this well [run a community centre], and also the reason we do get money in.” This reflexive practice is key to translating Oblong’s rejection of capitalism into alternative visions. It also highlights the links between these processes and the resilience and resourcefulness necessary to enact alternative visions for the future.

## **Conclusions**

The relational process of dynamic resistance means we can see organisations like Oblong as forces for transformation even though they engage with, experience and sometimes reproduce neoliberal social relations. Processes at work on smaller and larger organisational scales show that, holistically, Oblong’s progress and development – though non-linear and subject to outside influences – advance human flourishing and relations of social justice both in intention and in practice. But how might we analyse or practice dynamic resistance in third-sector organisations of different scales and political backgrounds to Oblong?

Explicit rejection of neoliberalization may be a rare starting point, not least because it makes a less-than-inspiring mission statement. But – given that most third-sector organisations exist to fill human needs ignored by neoliberalization processes – a sense of this rejection could arise through reflexive practice. This might be similar to the way volunteers notice something ‘different’ about Oblong, or the way Oblong’s anti-capitalism becomes more visible in reflective, values-based strategy sessions. An organisation’s sense of purpose can clarify what it rejects. From a broader

viewpoint, the considerable ire provoked by the 2010 Conservative Big Society agenda points to a clear rejection within the UK third sector of the use of empowerment and community values rhetoric as a 'smokescreen' for austerity measures rolling back the welfare state (Coote 2010; McCall 2011; North 2011; Stott & Longhurst 2011; Wyler 2011; Twivy 2012).

Developing a reactive resilience to vulnerabilities created by neoliberalization involves engaging with processes of neoliberalization, like Community Asset Transfer. Oblong's non-hierarchical organisational structure is unusual, and has been key to its organisational resilience in certain circumstances, but has contributed to a lack of success in others. The empirical data here cannot establish a particular organisational structure as more likely to engender resilience or more conducive to broader processes of dynamic resistance. Across organisations – characterised variously as 'Below the Radar' micro groups, rural organisations, large charities or social enterprises – resilience practices, like processes of neoliberalization, respond to and manifest a "complex array of circumstances" (Macmillan 2011, p.10).

Resourcefulness processes help organisations proactively maintain identity and build empowerment while accessing necessary resources: we see this in Oblong's development of its values-based identity on the back of Woodhouse Community Centre, secured thanks to participants' skill sets; in its methods for ensuring participants influence strategy and day-to-day procedures; and in its growing influence in local networks. However, just as organisations' resilience is affected by unique combinations of circumstances, uneven geographies of austerity and localism can limit organisations' abilities to practice resourcefulness (Clayton et al. 2015).

Thus conscious reflexive practice remains indispensable within a broader process of dynamic resistance. While such practices – from everyday facilitation tools for collective decision-making to values-based strategic planning and evaluation – may not change the circumstances to which an organisation must react, they allow an organisation and its participants to exercise autonomy in defining the terms of engagement with its

circumstances. Self-definition of values and praxis empowers proactive advancement of alternatives within and beyond reflexive practice itself.

The 'no' of rejection puts into relief the 'yes' of an organisation's social values; therefore dynamic resistance processes mean that creation of transformational alternatives arises not just in spite of, but also, in some ways, because of engagement with processes of neoliberalization. If we see resistance as a process of diagnosing and challenging unjust power structures, engaging with neoliberalization aids that diagnosis. A cycle of dynamic resistance creates a purposeful way of engaging which helps third-sector organisations base their analysis of neoliberal capitalism on their own experience; this experiential knowledge, combined with resources and self-directed reflexion, empowers them to create concrete transformations of social relations at an organisational level. Developing, experiencing and practising empowerment in one context also empowers actors in other contexts (Kesby et al. 2007). Thus improving people's lives through practices which resist neoliberal social relations and prioritise socially-just relations helps to spread these alternatives (Pickerill & Chatterton 2006).

While practices of resilience and resourcefulness facilitate access to resources, engagement with neoliberal governance structures also opens up relational spaces between the individuals involved. Interacting with people in powerful state and economic institutions helps to break down unhelpful conceptions of 'us' and 'them' and creates contexts and relationships where third-sector organisations can exercise influence.

Exercising influence in a way that can transform neoliberalization processes depends on reflexivity about why and how to take action or structure relationships. Reflexive practice requires us to ask, 'Why do we want to do what we want to do?' instead of simply, 'What can be done?' Both reflexion and rejection help an organisation use its resources and influence to focus on, and expand, transformative practices. Each process within dynamic resistance supports and is supported by the other processes, producing a holistic and generative resistance which fosters interstitial and symbiotic transformation.

How can we expect third-sector organisations to counter processes of neoliberalization which seem to draw on every creative innovation to feed an ultimately self-destructive and contradictory logic of constant growth (Harvey 2014)? Perhaps a combination of rejection, resilience, resourcefulness and reflexive practice can help to break from this destructive linear growth value-system to create, on a variety of scales, self-amplifying dynamics of democratic social empowerment. Wright (2010) identifies such cyclical dynamics as key to civil society's taking control of economic activity – though such a transformation would be far from straightforward. Dynamic resistance, like neoliberal capitalism, manifests as a process rather than a fixed model: thus it comprises repeated choices to reflect on practice and direction as well as reactive responses to context and circumstance. Social empowerment – though facilitated by organisational structures – does not 'just happen' once structures are in place. Resistance must be sustainable on personal and organisational levels, because individuals and groups make up and drive civil society. A third-sector organisation's ability to practice a flexible, workable, dynamic form of resistance gives hope for its ability to grow, adapt and transform relations within its own sphere of work and to inspire and support others. The transformations achieved by third-sector organisations represent cyclical, qualitative change rather than constant quantitative growth – a 'spiralling out' rather than a linear progression.

Further research – addressing, for example, larger organisations, organisations with more traditional management structures, or third-sector organisations operating at a global level – would help to illuminate the dynamic resistance framework's weaknesses and nuances and provide evidence-based analysis of its applicability to a broader range of third-sector organisations. Dynamic resistance, as an analytical framework, can help to situate third-sector work within notions of the civil economy and diverse economies (Murray 2012; Gibson-Graham 2008). The lens of dynamic resistance encourages researchers to focus on third-sector organisations' contributions to a reconceptualised 'economy' which prioritises human and social gains instead of monetary ones. This framework provides a process-based vantage point which makes visible not only the challenges third-sector

organisations face but also their potential, power and influence. Researchers can help empower organisations by posing questions which address the different aspects of this framework. A participatory action research approach places the researcher in a particularly helpful position to encourage organisational reflexivity and development of practices of dynamic resistance through an engaged and practical research process.

By endeavouring to foster all the processes of dynamic resistance in its own practices and circumstances, a third-sector organisation could develop the capacity to engage with neoliberalization from a standpoint of strength, integrity and self-determination. Groups that resist accessing resources via neoliberal mechanisms, but consequently find their effectiveness limited, could find this cyclical combination of processes useful for accessing resources and strengthening (not relinquishing) their values. Groups experiencing 'mission drift', or feeling powerless to challenge neoliberal mechanisms and institutions, could draw on the cycle of dynamic resistance processes to re-invigorate their social values and challenge the dominance of market logic in ways which allow them to remain resilient.

Dynamic resistance is not a roadmap to a destination but rather a framework of concepts and practices for navigating, responding to and creating ongoing stories of change, and for recognising processes of holistic resistance where we might otherwise see defeat. It represents an interactive process of developing power-to in resistance to a perceived power-over, without having to defeat and repeat it. The cycle of dynamic resistance can empower third-sector organisations to shape, model and promote praxis for empowered social economies, because it is a set of processes which maintains a focus on social relations, experiential knowledge and practical transformation rather than ideological victory.

A holistic process of dynamic resistance, however transformative, means continually re-engaging with existing circumstances, practicalities, and power relations; testing conflictual values; coping with difficulties; developing and enacting power; and continuing to turn, transformed and transforming, towards future encounters. We cannot 'implement' dynamic resistance and



then relax. We must stay open to the “impure, messy politics of the possible” (Chatterton, 2010 p.1210) rather than attempting to create certainty. Dynamic resistance suggests a realistic and holistic cycle of engagement which can help us do the iterative, inspiring work of co-creating social justice through the third sector just as passionately and effectively as we do through radical activism.

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## **Chapter 6 – Discussion and conclusions**

Through an account of participatory action research at Oblong, this thesis has explored the values and praxis of this grassroots organisation working for social justice. In my introductory chapter I articulated three key research questions, and I return to them later in this chapter to reflect further on how this research responded to these questions. First, I consider the relationship of this work to the primary bodies of literature which it references, and its original contributions to knowledge in this field. Finally, I suggest wider implications of the research.

### **Situation and originality**

This work draws heavily on, and affirms, Gibson-Graham's (Gibson-Graham 2006; 2008a; 2013) approach that diverse economies already exist and possess significance, positing Oblong's work as one such example. My theoretical approach is consistent with Holloway's (Holloway 2002; 2010) assertions that it is not necessary – or desirable – to take over dominant power structures to create change, and that small 'cracks' are significant in counteracting capitalist social values. My analysis is congruent with work which characterises the third sector, and more broadly power, as process (Corry 2010). Whilst recognising the value of critiques of neoliberal governance and economic policies (Peck & Tickell 1994; Larner 2000; Harvey 2005; 2007), my analysis challenges notions that professionalization, financialization, and engagement with neoliberalization processes render organisations working for social change subjugated or ineffective (Mitchell 2001; Jenkins 2005; Bondi & Laurie 2005). This analysis challenges a view of power as a zero-sum game (Alinsky 1971), instead drawing on notions of power and resistance as mutually constitutive (Kesby 2005; Kesby et al. 2007). This work does not refute the idea that it is important to build empowerment of those traditionally excluded – with, alongside, or against 'influential decision-makers' (Pigg 2009) – but challenges a seemingly common inclination that the power and significance of localised work can most usefully be measured against the dominance of capitalist power. Such

comparisons are instructive, but do not necessarily provide the most meaningful analysis theoretically, nor the most fruitful practically. As an approach to evaluation, such a comparison is intellectually rational but fails to account for the significance of lived experiences of values-based practices. My research approach thus attempts to provide a tentative foil, or small counterbalance, to an amorphous but pervasive sense that social action for justice is a constant, yet losing, battle (Smith 2000; Castree 2010; Slater 2012). Critique is invaluable in helping us see what is unjust and incongruent – we must never give it up. But the necessary and equally-valuable complement to critique is to look for what is just, articulate in what ways it is just, and examine how it effectively works towards justice (Fincher & Iveson 2012). Interrogating and articulating what we should oppose in the name of social justice is just half the puzzle – a useful half, but incomplete without its complement. This work therefore challenges any assumption of the unilateral usefulness of critique. This may be only an assumption, not often stated outright – and perhaps therefore all the more influential because of its implicitness – but it seems, in my perception and experience thus far, to be borne out by the dominant ‘discourse within the discourse challenging the dominant discourse’ that is critical geography.

I am loath to argue for the originality of this work without qualifying any assertion of ‘new knowledge’ as inextricably intertwined with, and indebted to, more conversations, experiences, readings, and histories than I can call into awareness. This work joins other studies of small-scale resistance to variegated processes of neoliberalization (Wakefield 2007; Pink & Lewis 2014; Noterman 2015) in that it looks closely at the detail of what one grassroots organisation does to resist capitalism, perhaps going further than most in its affirmation of practices of resistance and transformation. Rather than investigating the organisation’s objective ‘resilience’ or ‘capacity’ (McCrea et al. 2014; Cinderby et al. 2015), this work takes a broader perspective and frames one group’s small-scale work in terms of its theoretical significance to global change. Inherent in such an approach is, of course, an inability to claim empirical generalizability. This work does not claim to be empirical science but rather offers conceptual and experiential insights.

This research account weaves a holistic perspective of the day-to-day and long-term work of a small organisation which formed around the basis of social justice values. For all that it may be professionalised, entangled, compromised or financialised, Oblong carries on promoting these values and attempting to practise them through its engagements and actions in the world. The account I present attempts to convey the ongoing, iterative qualities of Oblong's work and, in so doing, to subvert analyses of such work which would judge a group's degree of success on its characteristics and its entanglements with antithetical processes at a given point in time. However, my socially constructionist approach (Cunliffe 2004) would lack a basis without others' valuable deconstructions of neoliberalization and its spatial and temporal effects (Elwood 2002; Peck 2004; Leitner, Peck, et al. 2007; Larner & Laurie 2010). I chose to approach this work from a less-common perspective for practical reasons as well as a desire to construct affirmative theory.

This research is rooted in practice and therefore relevant to practice (Antonacopoulou 2010). At the very least it has been relevant to the practice of the partner organisation, which lends it both originality and irreproducibility. While the aim was not to create a reproducible 'experiment', I have attempted to convey the specific nature of this work with a degree of transparency that allows it to be useful to others on their own terms. I offer a theoretical interpretation of this work not with any expectation or suggestion that this theory ought to be applied based on good faith in the theory itself. Instead, I have tried to provide a detailed-enough description of the experiences and processes that my analysis is based on to enable those who read this account to decide for themselves how it applies to their own work.

This project uses an in-depth look at one particular organisation – in contrast to, for example, Gibson-Graham's work on diverse economies which looks at a much broader range of organisations less closely – to show how this particular work matters to social change at a local and personal level, and how this is linked to global issues. I argue for the crucial link between Oblong's recognition of the importance of articulating, and purposefully practising, its values, and its consequent ability to maintain resilience, resourcefulness,

reflexivity, and a sense of what it does *not* want to be (Darby 2016). In examining Oblong's practices, this work emphasises the iterative yet always evolving processes involved in laying out a set of theoretical principles and then working out how to put them into practice, over and over again, over decades. Through this emphasis on iterative evolution, I construct a conception of day-to-day practice which does not progress along an upward trajectory but rather spirals out, always embedded and relevant to its context but likewise interconnected with broader contexts (Darby 2016, p.6). By portraying both the narrow detail and a broad perspective of Oblong's work, this research attempts to construct a recognisable and relatable example of concepts of interconnectedness and non-linear change, and of real-life practice which responds to complex and emergent circumstances.

### **Value-rational decision-making and values-based social action**

My first research question asked: what role can shared values play in shaping the practices and actions of a group or organisation working for social justice?

To address this question, I explored notions of hope and social values as motivating and sustaining factors in action for social justice. Often, emotions of anger or grief, or a sense of injustice, fuel our desires to take action for a different future (Rodgers 2010; Bosco 2007). This rejection of 'the way things are' – this 'No!' of refusal – signals a hope for a different way of organising ourselves, hope for ways of relating to each other which are not arbitrated by money and by the domination and competition for power driven by the goal of profit (Holloway 2002; 2010). Channelling powerful emotions into hopes for specific alternative outcomes, victories which solidify more socially just principles, or utopian ideals often mobilises ruptural social action as well as participation in less-ruptural 'third sector' work (Kyle et al. 2014; Baines 2011). This strong motivation can produce impressive results and valuable improvements to people's lives. But goal-focussed campaigning and protesting experiences may eventually leave activists burnt out or depressed, if and when goals are not reached (Solnit 2004; Cox 2011) – just as less

ruptural work for social justice, such as in the third sector, can be draining for participants despite strong beliefs in creating a 'better world' (Franzway 2000). Hopes for different futures demonstrate a sense of what is valued: experiences of injustice, or unmet needs or ideals, highlight what we consider more important than whatever it is we are resisting. Thus, in-between a motivating emotion and an action to bring about change, exists a social value. A shared sense of what is socially important – what values ought to be prioritised in the way we live, work and interact together – is crucially important to sustainable and empowering social action. When achievement of our material goals is uncertain, difficult, or unimaginable, shared values can provide the 'radical hope' needed to take action based on ethics rather than expectations (Lear 2006).

I argue that focussing our hopes not only on material goals but equally on the practice of shared values offers a more sustaining and generative approach to social action. Oblong's practices demonstrate practical and strategic thinking to accomplish material goals, but at the same time the organisation considers practising its values as a goal in itself. Processes of *phronesis*, whereby we deliberate and negotiate what is desirable and how it should be acted upon, support the co-production of shared social values and engender value-rational decision-making. Whereas instrumental rationality focusses on what can be achieved – leading us to concentrate on goals, destinations, or end-points – value-rationality points to the importance of processes and praxis (Flyvbjerg 2001; 2009). Oblong's articulation and reinforcement of its core organisational values provide participants with something to hope for which is within our control regardless of external circumstances: because we know what our values are, we can decide how to best put them into practice, whatever the context.

In the context of the unpredictability and emergence inherent to the complex living systems we form a part of (Macy & Brown 1998), foregrounding shared values alongside material goals empowers groups to self-determine their actions and practices despite ever-changing circumstances. Implementation of neoliberalization processes is just as vulnerable to unpredictability and just

as dependent on the acceptance and enactment of shared social values as action and movements for social justice. By articulating values of social justice and using these as a basis for social action, we also make visible the role of values in our action and create space for the contention and deliberation of the values at play in dominant discourses.

Oblong articulates its hopes for a different future through its core values. By drawing on these core values to guide organisational practice, Oblong gives valuable space to processes of value-rational deliberation and negotiation in both day-to-day operation and strategic action and planning. Oblong's commitment to practice its values requires iterative reflexive practice. This reflexivity contributes to self-reinforcing dynamics of inclusive self-organisation, democratic decision-making, and empowering action, which increase groups' agency and potential (Wright 2010; Chesters 2004). Oblong's focus on values does not prevent disagreements, dilemmas or difficulties; rather it privileges processes of decision-making as a focal point for political praxis (Chesters 2004).

This focus on values and praxis empowers Oblong to respond to processes of neoliberalization on its own terms, enabling it to transform neoliberal policy effects and resources into values-based practice through its own organisational processes. Furthermore, Oblong's values and organisational processes and practices make its actions noticeable, prompting reflection, debate and awareness of social justice values amongst participants, partner organisations, and broader networks.

This research contributes a deeper understanding of the role of social values, and the emotions that go with them, in motivating and shaping our practice. It also suggests how collective practice can benefit from making more space for these emotions, and for alternative types of intelligence and rationality within our work for social justice. Furthermore, this work contributes an affirmation of the importance of explicitly-stated values to social justice work. If people and organisations taking actions which promote neoliberalization and capitalist values were to explicitly state the social values (not just the 'economic value') which these actions were based on, there might arise more

dialogue around such actions, and potentially more resistance to them. By explicitly stating the values that social justice work aims to promote, groups open up this dialogue and open up an implicit comparison to the values which are not stated by others. This empowers the reflection and critical thinking which is important for identifying the values and actions we wish to reject. Thus it is worthwhile to communicate clearly the values we wish to promote (and to revisit and revise these), rather than assuming that desirable values are obvious because of the strength of critiques against the currently dominant system.

Furthermore, stating explicitly the values we are trying to promote, as opposed to a particular model we are trying to promote, opens up dialogue. This allows discussion about the best way to practice shared values, rather than promoting attachment to a particular model for the sake of the model. So, we can say, 'We want to do things differently because we value [dignity / social justice / equality]. We're not sure what to do but we think we value these things, so let's start from there.' This creates a more democratic engagement than saying, 'We do things in this particular way because we are trying to create a particular vision of [dignity / social justice / equality]. Are you with us or against us?' An explicit statement of values as a starting point also opens the way for better solutions and actions because it opens space for creativity and collaboration. It allows interested participants the space to say they are not happy with the way things are, without having to have already conceived an alternative way of doing things in order for their input to be recognised. If we all have to pretend we know how things ought to be done just in order to say we dislike the way things currently are, then discussions by-pass value-rationality and tend to focus on the logistics and feasibility of particular alternatives (often in the form of an argument between a few dominant characters to the exclusion of others who might not be prepared to present their ideas so forcefully). A statement of values, while it might promote heated debate, opens a space for working out what is important to each of us and finding others who share those feelings and values, as a first premise to working together for change. This research contributes a perspective on the



role of values in social change which opens up possibilities for this productive space of co-creation.

## **Transformative practices and processes**

My second research question asked: what practices and processes can support a group or organisation to make space for and prioritise social justice values in the context of neoliberal capitalism?

This research identified specific practices that Oblong uses, as well as larger processes that these practices are a part of, to promote its values. This thesis shares experiential and practical knowledge in the hope that the practices and processes we explored at Oblong may be interesting, inspirational or helpful for others working to promote social justice. I argue that these values, practices and processes contribute to resistance and transformation of the dominant values of neoliberal capitalism which prioritise monetary value over social justice.

Practices at Oblong which create space for reflection, deliberation, and sharing different interpretations of its core values are crucial to its effectiveness as an organisation. These include things which are built into Oblong's operations on an ongoing basis, such as iterative cycles of reviewing plans and making new plans; processes of self-evaluation and adaptation of practices in response; participant forums; a structure based on collective decision-making; and a system of peer-management based on regular collective target-setting and peer appraisal. These processes, in part because of their contrast to 'traditional' hierarchical management styles, create an overarching reminder to participants that Oblong does things differently for a reason – thus making visible and reinforcing Oblong's organisational values.

In addition to structurally-embedded processes, micro-practices also play a significant role – such as those discussed in 'Listening for social change', and the practice of reviewing examples of values-in-action at each weekly team meeting discussed in 'Dynamic Resistance'. This regular practice of articulating and explicating organisational values acknowledges and

reinforces those values in both day-to-day and strategic contexts, as well as creating space for individual participants to interpret and share their interpretations of Oblong's values with the collective. Generative listening practices demonstrate Oblong's values in action – creating an experience of equality and empowerment for participants, helping them to feel respected and cared for, facilitating community-led and collective decisions, and generating sustainable action through affirmative inclusion. This practice of listening creates space for participants to identify and share elements of their own emotional experience which relate to the values of the organisation. It also allows organisational values to exist as fluid entities, by validating participants' right to interpret, question and explore the values through their own thinking.

Practices which permit a fluid, iterative approach to collective values contribute to effective praxis because they make space for ongoing ethical choice-making and experimentation (Gibson-Graham 2008c). In a context of continual change, as evinced by systems thinking, creating this space for ethical experimentation empowers self-direction. Practices which support collective decision-making cede control of this ethical experimentation to the collective, and open up space for multiple approaches and interpretations of values. Multiple viewpoints and ideas strengthen the collective's ability to be responsive and resilient to change, and also to identify and create opportunities for resourcefulness. Through processes of reflexive practice, rejection of destructive social values, resilient responsiveness to change, and creative resourcefulness, Oblong creates space for its values as priorities, drivers of practice, and 'living', fluid aspects of organisational action.

As part of Oblong's structural and habitual practices, responsive action is necessary to its ability to prioritise organisational values. For example, when staff team communications were not working effectively, the group decided to take action and seek outside help through training. Although processes of democratic decision-making can be seen to create self-reinforcing feedback loops (Chesters 2004; Wright 2010), this does not preclude a need for ongoing awareness and interrogation of the values driving them. Practices which

support participatory and inclusive decision-making within a given collective do not necessarily promote social justice; this depends on the group's explicit intentions. Just as the articulation of social justice values requires a complementary focus on practice and process to put them into action, democratic practices and processes also require conscious engagement with values to be effective for social justice.

Values-based practices and processes like those demonstrated at Oblong provide a basis, but not a guarantee, for transforming neoliberalization processes into more socially just relationships and interactions. To focus on values and processes – not to the exclusion of material goals, but as an equal priority – requires constant practice and review. But practices which make those values and processes visible also help to make visible, and call into question, the constantly-reproduced social values which put neoliberalization into practice. Thus, a focus on values-based practice has the potential not only to strengthen and empower work for social justice, but also to confront and undermine the values upholding processes of domination and inequality.

This project aimed to co-create grounded knowledge which would be useful for Oblong and inform practice throughout the process of the research. It has achieved this aim to the extent that Oblong – through the process of asking questions together about how we put our values into practice – has developed some new practices, reinforced some old ones, adapted some, and continues to do this. The research prompted participants (including myself) to think about Oblong's values: how they play out in practice, what they mean to how we act and interact day-to-day at Oblong, and how we can make space for these values in those actions and interactions. The project did not aim to implement a definitive result, but it did contribute meaningfully to an ongoing process.

### **A holistic, non-linear conception of resistance**

Finally, my third research question asked: how can we challenge dominant discourses of neoliberal capitalism in the ways we conceptualise and analyse the work of groups and organisations working for social justice?

My analysis of this research focusses on cyclical processes of transformation at Oblong, micro-processes of generative listening, and relational, emergent impacts through collaborative research. Through this analysis, I suggest a conceptualisation of resistance to neoliberalization which links key features of systems thinking – complexity, non-linear change, emergence, and interconnectedness – to Foucauldian notions of power as decentred, relational and dynamic. This is not to argue that relations of domination are ‘all in our heads’ or to remove accountability for systemic violence, but rather to challenge perceptions of hegemonic dominance as static, fixed or absolute (Hammond 2003; Routledge 1996, p.511, citing Foucault 1980 & 1983 and Gramsci 1971).

With this conceptual framework of movement and dynamism in mind, I argue that an over-emphasis on the material goals of social movements, both in practice and analysis, undervalues and diminishes their power. When neoliberalism is theorised as a set of unfolding, reactive, and uncertain processes (Peck & Tickell 2012), resistance to these processes of neoliberalization can be seen as equally open-ended and unpredictable – not necessarily doomed to ‘failure’ or ‘co-optation’. This perspective helps to destabilise perceptions of neoliberalization as a ‘natural fact’ or an inevitability, and we can see both neoliberalization and contestation as drawing ideas and power from each other (Leitner, Sheppard, et al. 2007). Notions of co-optation or ‘tamed’ non-governmental organisations (Kaldor 2003; Mayo & Craig 1995) derive from an ‘ontological’ view of such organisations as static entities defined by characteristics (Corry 2010). A systems thinking approach suggests a view of civil society activity in terms of process, involving ongoing and ever-changing relational interactions and negotiations of power (Corry 2010; Kaldor 2003). This view accommodates a conception of so-called third-sector organisations as part of a broader movement for social change, and also suggests that an organisation’s material circumstances at a given point in time might not be entirely indicative of the interests and aims it seeks to promote. In a process view of organised action for social change, we might consider an organisation’s power in terms of its quality and effects – i.e., how

does the organisation use its power, and what for? – not simply in terms of its origins and quantity.

Gibson-Graham (2006; 2008c) draw on feminist politics to demonstrate the potential of a politics grounded in the personal. This emphasis on grounded relevance at the human scale supports the significance of social justice work by grassroots groups. A conception of social change that relies on consolidation of power and influence in the hands of identifiable representatives or members of a particular movement overlooks the significance of lived experiences. As the historical and ongoing development of feminism shows, practices of shared values which affirm human relationships and transform alienation into solidarity have the potential to manifest power and relevance in hugely diverse and variegated circumstances across space and time. The fact that such practices do not always proceed in a linear fashion towards adoption as mainstream norms, does not mean they are ineffective or insignificant. This notion of constant growth and linear progression towards a defined goal is a driving force behind capitalism's destructive effects. I posit that to judge the success of social movements combatting this behaviour against its own logic serves, perversely, to perpetuate that logic. A conception of capitalist social relations as immovably hegemonic gives the false impression that to contest capitalism requires an equally behemoth force; in fact, the effects of neoliberal capitalism manifest at the human scale just as do those of resistance. Practices which affirm values of interconnectedness and justice – like those at Oblong and countless other, diverse examples – are manifold here and now, and are already functioning, developing, adapting, expanding, contracting, fading out, and metamorphosing (Gibson-Graham 2008b; Holloway 2010). They do not need organising or mobilising or upscaling to properly compete with capitalism, but rather recognising and valuing for their own worth.

This research thus contributes an encouragement (or perhaps a provocation!) to try and look at small-scale work for social justice from a perspective which seeks out its significance, rather than pointing out its non-competitiveness with an incongruent dominant system. This research prompts an approach to

small-scale social justice work which seeks to value and affirm – and, where appropriate, adapt, reinterpret and/or apply – practices which are effective for social justice work. Furthermore, I hope this research contributes an analysis which fosters deeper understanding of the potential of small social action groups to work towards change in a non-linear fashion. Thus, when we observe such a group engaging in activity which appears incompatible with a linear procession towards a notion of social justice, this does not necessarily mean the group has given up, ‘sold out’, or been permanently diverted from its aims. Rather such engagements can be part of a larger process which requires periods of regrouping, resting, reviewing, taking stock, or reinterpreting values and aims. In fact, such processes are crucially important, and when they are avoided for fear of diversion, this may pose a greater risk to long-term integrity. The contribution of this research sees ‘progress’ towards social justice aims as cyclical and non-linear – a perspective which may, paradoxically, give reason to hold out hope when things look dire.

## **Wider implications**

Through this research, I aimed to generate theory offering a view of resistance to neoliberalization processes which could illuminate the significance of small-scale action for social justice. I have achieved this aim to the extent that I have convincingly articulated a framework for thinking about the social resistance enacted by small, grassroots groups like Oblong which counteracts critiques portraying such work as too small, unimportant, and vulnerable to pose a significant challenge to neoliberalism. The degree to which this framework is convincing will vary according to the reader, but my analysis of this case suggests a holistic, process-focussed conceptualisation of resistance to neoliberalization processes. By drawing on systems thinking and theories of neoliberalization as process rather than entity, this thesis argues that values-based practices and processes at a small third-sector organisation demonstrate significant power and potential to resist and transform neoliberalization processes at their sites of impact. Recognising the

complexity, non-linearity, and interconnection of processes of neoliberalization and contestation, I further argue that a focus on values and processes must necessarily balance goal-oriented social action in order to create sustainable and empowering change for social justice.

Through a participatory action research approach I sought to engender research processes which would be worthwhile for my research partners at Oblong and congruent with the organisation's core values of equality, empowerment, collectivism, being community-led, sustainability, and respect and care. I intended neither to create a model of practices for others to follow, nor a critique of Oblong's integrity or viability. Rather, I sought to create space for a grounded example of "justice-thinking" in practice (Fincher & Iveson 2012). I judged that an analysis which sought to affirm the effects, power and potential of an organisation like Oblong would contribute most meaningfully to both practice and theory in my field, and I have framed this research consistently in terms of the social justice values it aims to espouse and promote. I argue for a view of power in participatory research processes which takes ownership of researchers' potential influence, and respects participants' own power, by focussing on the deliberation and negotiation of responsible use of power rather than attempting to deny or 'escape' power. Exploring the limitations and tensions of this project's processes of co-production, this thesis draws parallels between processes of transforming neoliberalization in social justice work and creating grounded, co-produced and values-based research within the academy.

Although Oblong represents a single, very small case, applying these theories to Oblong as an example represents a device to make this thinking more relatable – to show how it relates to 'real life', on the ground. This is significant because, in my experience, there is often a disconnection between theory and practice. Those immersed in practice feel that theory is not in their realm; others, excited by theory, find things do not seem to be as they had hoped when they get involved in day-to-day practice. For myself at least, and perhaps for others with similar experiences or reflections, this research contributes a framework of thinking which remains flexible, and allows theory

and practice to make sense in a loose harmony with each other. My analysis draws on value-rationality to bridge this divide and presents Oblong as an example of what value-rationality can look like in practice. This analysis does not imply that any problems have been 'solved'. Instead, this framework of thinking counteracts intellectual notions of purity, perfection and resolution and opens up space for the affirmation of value-rational action for social justice alongside contradiction.

We humans do some beautiful things quite without need of motivation by the goal of profit, so why not start affirming the value of the innumerable creative, co-operative, life-sustaining collaborations already existing right where we are, however small they may be? By acknowledging, valuing, promoting and participating in practices like Oblong's, we begin to make visible Gibson-Grahams's (2006) 'iceberg beneath the surface' symbolizing the vast array of non-capitalist activities which already sustain practices of social values, counteract the social alienation and environmental destruction of capitalism, and affirm the non-monetary value of our lives, relationships and communities. Thinking about resisting and transforming neoliberalization in terms of values, practices, and processes could be an essential step towards turning the tide of capitalist destruction. Working towards specific goals is valuable and achieves many important improvements to people's lived experiences. I am not saying we should stop doing that. But focussing primarily on goals – without affirming the processes, values and relationships that animate our interconnectedness – can make us lose hope when we don't achieve what we expect to. Perhaps even more importantly, it can limit our imaginations. Through processes which make space for people to decide what we really value in our interactions and relationships with each other, we can generate possibilities that we believe in, at the same time as harvesting the practical ingenuity to put them into action.



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