

Museums and the Management of Complexity

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This paper reports on the results of recent empirical research on the interaction of structure and agency in the museums sector in England in the context of ideas of complexity. In common with the rest of the public sector the museums policy sector is subject to a large number of political, economic, social and technological pressures and demands that are both externally and internally created: the management of these pressures and demands provides the opportunity for the establishment of multiple responses by the members of individual organisations. The effects of hierarchy, organisational and functional centrality, accountability and professionalism in this process, and the manner in which legitimacy and ideology are employed as central resources by museums staff, are identified. The focus on an under-researched policy area allows for an original evaluation of claims about the management of complex environments and the value of complexity approaches to policy systems analysis.

Paper to the Annual Conference of the Political Studies Association, Manchester, April 2014. This paper was supported by a British Academy Grant (SG 111848). Thanks to all of the museum staff who allowed me to interview them. Responsibility for the paper rests with the author. Please do not quote the paper without the permission of the author.

‘Management is never easy, and managing a museum in the current environment can be especially challenging’ (Davies *et al*, 2012, 345)

Introduction

Amongst the many truisms that exist in the worlds of public management, administration and policy, the idea that there is a great deal of complexity involved in them is one of the most obvious and least objectionable (Cairney, 2012, 355-6; Morcol, 2012, 1). Indeed, a great deal of the literature in these fields attempts to identify: the difficulties of working in such problematic environments; potential solutions to these; and explanations of both the causes and effects of environmental complexity for individual managers and entire organisations. In these cases the idea of ‘complexity’ is really nothing more than a general recognition that there is a lot of ‘stuff’ out there which affects organisational and actor behaviour. In distinction from this rather simplistic approach to issues of environmental complexity it has been argued that ‘complexity’ can itself be understood as being concerned with dynamic, self-organising, contextualised sets of behaviour (Teisman & Klijn, 2008, 288-9) – in other words, with particular sets of structural and behavioural, as well as environmental, characteristics. Pollitt (2009), however, criticises much of the current ‘complexity theory’ literature on the grounds that it is ontologically and epistemologically unclear; it does not give rise to a specific methodology; it does not contain a clear picture of causal relationships; it adds little, if anything, to already existing theories, explanations, concepts and approaches – especially as it also tends to neglect the importance of power relationships for the explanation of relationships and inter-relationships. While these criticisms have been responded to (Morcol, 2012, 12-15) they have yet to be entirely over-turned – with Morcol’s (2012, 191-98) own work demonstrating a magpie approach to methodology - leaving many concerns about complexity approaches still to be dealt with.

The developing complexity literature starts from the position that what is at stake is complexity at the systemic level giving rise to ‘more “holistic” and less “individualistic” accounts of human behaviour’ (Cairney, 2012, 347) than are commonly to be found in approaches that are focused simply on either environmental or behavioural complexity. In particular there are assumptions that causality is non-linear in nature (and requires longitudinal analysis), and that there are no overarching sets of logic that can be used to explain developments in public policy, management and administration given that there will always be multiple sets of inter-actions in operation at any given time, and their products cannot provide the basis for the production of meaningful predictions

about processes and outcomes (Teisman & Klijn, 2008, 288-89). These assumptions side-step some of Pollitt's criticisms, even if they do not directly confront them, and provide an alternative focus for analysis that emphasises the whole rather than the individual parts of any given policy system. The possibility of this developing into forms of structural determinism is recognised in the literature, even if the relationship between agency and structure has not been particularly developed (see Cairney, 2012, 352-3).

This paper picks up on these issues by developing an analysis of the management of complex organisational environments that utilises a critical realist approach to questions of structure and agency. This investigation is concerned with how staff within publically-funded museums in England manage the range of external and internal structural constraints and opportunities that confront them through the exercise of individual agency. The techniques and practices that are used for this derive from the understandings of, and priorities attached to, the significance and meaning of the structural contexts within which staff operate. In this case 'complexity' is understood as being created by the existence of multiple pressures and demands that can lead to both ambiguous and self-contradictory expectations being placed upon organisational members, as well as straightforward and coherently inter-connected ones. The management of this complexity is not seen as raising particularly different questions to those that are raised by the management of much more mundane, quotidian, matters of organisational life. What is important, instead, are the underlying relationships between exogenous and endogenous limits and opportunities and the ability and willingness of staff to exercise choice. Thus the focus of analysis is on the inter-action between a range of structural variables and the precise exercise (or not) of individual agency rather than on the concept of 'complexity' itself. By utilising approaches developed from the structure and agency literature in the context of specific organisational practices the differences between complexity and structure/agency analyses can be identified, and conclusions about the contribution of complexity approaches to the understanding and investigation of public management issues can be drawn. This paper then is concerned with the inter-action of distinct component parts of policy systems, rather than with the holistic analysis of these systems. As such it is not a direct test of complexity approaches *per se*, or of what these can provide in an analytical sense. Instead it directly questions whether these approaches can provide anything to empirical analysis that is not already available through the use of other investigative strategies.

Structure, Agency and Museums

The idea that there is a complex set of relationships in place between individual actors and the contexts within which they are functioning is hardly original, even if understanding these relationships has given rise to numerous debates and a large number of approaches for their investigation. Rather than rehearse the literature on this subject (although see Gray, 2014, for a discussion of the analytical issues that are associated with differing positions on the relationship between structure and agency) it is simply stated that the underlying approach adopted in this paper rests upon the emergent morphogenesis/morphostasis position developed by Archer (1989; 1995; 2003), as modified by the norm circle arguments of Elder-Vass (2010) (Archer & Elder-Vass [2012]). It can be argued that this approach is directly applicable to the examination of complex policy systems as a consequence of the focus that it contains on the dynamic interplay between individual, structural and systemic factors, thus combining the analysis of both holistic and sub-system features of policy systems: an emphasis on well-developed ideas of emergence to organise the analysis of policy systems (Archer, 1995, 135-63; Elder-Vass, 2007; Morcol, 2012, 62-92) is also present – and both of these are seen to be key components of the themes that Cairney (2012, 348) has identified as being central to complexity approaches: in distinction to these themes, however, the morphogenesis/morphostasis approach does not make use of assumptions about either path dependence or punctuated equilibria, either as metaphors or as descriptors, indicating that there are clear differences between the two approaches.

The choice of a small and, in the case of political science at least, politically insignificant policy system such as museums requires some justification. While this status can account for the lack of political science and public policy research on museums (five articles in 413 years of publication in nine leading British journals in the field up to the end of 2010: Gray, 2011, 56) the sector itself does have certain characteristics that make it a suitable location for research on public policy complexity:

- it *is* a small policy environment, whether assessed in terms of amounts spent on it or the number of staff employed within it, and it has become a compactly self-contained policy arena that is capable of being made sense of in ways that larger policy environments (such as education or health) may not as a result of the more complicated inter-organisational and policy spill-over effects that are associated with them;

- it is *not* a politically-central subject for actors in the public sector in Britain¹, meaning that it is subject to a form of ‘normal’ politics that is largely unaffected by large levels of intervention by policy actors beyond those directly and centrally concerned with it;
- it *is*, however, accepted as being something where state actors are expected to have a direct concern with its provision and organisation as a form of public good, meaning that it is tied in with expectations about forms of accountability and public service that are a part of state activity, requiring some fit with more *general* policy expectations than those that *specifically* concern the sector;
- however, it *is* embedded within a *specific* policy universe that directly impinges on what occurs within it, providing the possibility of differentiating between endogenous and exogenous sources of pressure/demand upon policy choices, which allows the identification of the role of sectoral actors/agents in interpreting, implementing and otherwise reacting to systemic and structural pressures;
- it contains well-developed professional networks of actors which are almost entirely independent of other such sets of actors, thus providing a relatively self-contained universe of core policy participants.

While the current paper deals with structure/agency in the museums policy sector in England these sectoral characteristics are not unusual in other countries. Even in cases where museums have a more central political role in public life, either in terms of creating ideas and images of ‘the nation’ or ‘the community’ or ‘the people’ (as shown in the examples in Knell *et al*, 2011) that are then used for political purposes such as the creation of the ‘imagined community’ of nationality and nationalism (Anderson, 2006 [1983]), or as elements for the direct exercise of forms of cultural diplomacy (Nisbett, 2013) and general international relations (Sylvester, 2009), these uses of them are largely secondary and instrumental in comparison with more traditional forms of political activity within nation-states. Certainly direct state control of museum contents, displays and exhibitions is relatively rare: even in states with relatively low levels of direct democratic engagement governmental control tends towards the ‘arm’s-length’ or is based on forms of self-censorship rather than on explicit direction. The consequence of this is that there is a cross-national tendency for the museums sector to be both politically non-central and, quite commonly, a semi-detached part of the overall political system, free to operate in its own way as long as this does not negatively impinge on the larger political and ideological expectations and requirements of national, regional and local governments.

¹ With the exception of occasional arguments about the Elgin marbles, as George Clooney has recently found.

The research which forms the basis for this paper is based on 40 interviews with staff employed in public sector museums within England: 16 in local authority museums and galleries (covering unitary, metropolitan district and district councils); three in national museums; 14 in Trust museums (where local authorities or Boards of Trustees own the collections but they are managed independently); and seven in University museums/galleries. This division rests on the hypothesis that organisational form will affect the ways in which policy is both managed within museums and galleries and how this will be affected by exogenous structural and systemic pressures. A further division hypothesised to be important lies in functional and hierarchical differentiation between staff members, with differing professional expectations and pressures and levels of centrality to overall and operational policy decisions being expected to affect the relevance of exogenous variables. In total 23 'front-line' staff and 17 'managers' were interviewed: the 'front-line' staff were divided between 11 curators, 10 education/outreach officers, and two conservators. The managers, in turn, were divided between eight 'functional' managers (responsible for particular service areas – two curatorial, two conservation and four educational), and nine 'service' managers (concerned with the overall museums service that was offered). Half of the interviewees were located in single-site areas (individual museums [12] and galleries [eight]), and half were located in multiple sites, or had responsibility for cross-service and cross-locational activities. It is recognised that the interviewees do not form a statistically representative sample of the public-sector museums sector in England – with there being an over-representation of University and Trust museums and an under-representation of local authority and national museums – so there is an element in the discussion of the findings that is indicative rather than anything more definitive.

While the distinctions between the staff who were interviewed were derived from hypotheses covering organisational form, professional function and hierarchical location, further hypotheses were involved in the analysis of the interview data itself. In total seven hypotheses were examined, with these operating at an individual, a locational, and a systemic² level. These hypotheses detailed the different anticipated inter-relationships between sets of structure/agency variables that would affect their relative impact on the overall patterns of policy activity that exist within the museums

² Concerning the relationship of: individual staff members to internal organisational structures; museums/museum services to external organisational environments; and organisations/individuals to overall policy environments.

sector³. Their examination, however, also requires a clarification of what, exactly, is meant by 'structure' in the context of the research.

In crude terms 'structures' refers to variables that affect the actions, choices and beliefs of individual actors and which cannot be reduced to the level of individual determination. A distinction can be drawn between *endogenous* variables (internally derived organisational ones) and *exogenous* variables (externally determined contextualising ones). The one exception to this lies in the case of power where its distribution and uses are assumed to have endemic and all-pervasive effects rather than simply being endogenously/exogenously determined, even if there are specific endogenous/exogenous dynamics associated with it. Structural variables are assumed to have differences in terms of their centrality to individual organisational settings and agent behaviour, giving rise to distinct sets of effects. At a macro-level the variables concern ideology, rationality and legitimacy; at the meso-level, externally-located political choices about policy priorities and preferences, how policy should be managed, policy ideas, the policy instruments that will be utilised (Howlett, 2011, 41-59), and the formal and informal allocation of functions and organisations; at the micro-level, specific organisational policies and policy instruments, staff resources and expertise, and financial resources are included (see Gray, 2012, 6-12).

As the research is based upon qualitative interview data it is only dealing with the perceptions that staff have about the influences on their behaviour, and the open-ended nature of the interview process did not involve a detailed examination of pre-ordained categories of potential influence, relying instead on the identification of categories of opportunity and constraint by staff themselves. The consequence of this is that it is not possible to be definite about whether these influences *did* have an actual effect in terms of practical policy consequences (which could only be determined by an examination of policy outputs), or in terms of specific museum practices (which would require an ethnographic approach to be undertaken: Macdonald, 2002; Bouquet, 2012). As the concern, however, is with how staff managed the multiple pressures and demands that they perceived as affecting both the limits to their choices and their opportunities for policy determination and innovation this does not form a barrier to the identification of the complexity of the policy

³ These hypotheses concern: professional/functional background of staff; hierarchical location; career trajectory of staff; museum type (national, Trust, local authority, University); museum size (both absolute and relative); accountability relationships; inter-relationships between variables. Full details of these (and the justifications for them) are available from the author.

environments within which they operated, or how this complexity was dealt with. By developing from the perceptions of staff the identification of common patterns of influence, strategic choice and management can serve to establish whether such commonality is related to particular sets of behavioural and structural variables. These can then be used to account for the nature of the complexity of policy systems within the museums sector.

Structures, Agents, Variables and Hypotheses

Rather than simply report on the findings generated from the research interviews simply in terms of each of the hypotheses, the following discussion is couched in terms of the inter-relationships between structural variables and hypotheses⁴. In this way the dynamic nature of the relationships between variables and their specific contributions to multiple sets of causal linkages can both be identified. This, in turn, can demonstrate whether there are single or simple sets of effects and consequences that the variables give rise to at the systemic level, and whether the reality of policy complexity is dealt with in multiple ways across a variety of organisational locations as a consequence of the concatenation of circumstances that exist in any given case.

In terms of the macro-level variables of ideology, rationality and legitimation there is no doubt that these have a significant and enduring effect upon how policy pressures are understood and managed by museum staff. The professional and functional backgrounds of staff have a direct impact on how sense is made of the environmental context within which they are operating, with 15 of the 40 interviewees referring directly to professional ‘standards’, ‘specialisms’, ‘judgements’, ‘autonomy’, ‘knowledge’, ‘skills’ and ‘values’ as the basis upon which their policy decisions are based. Of the other 25 staff, 12 made explicit reference to ‘the collection’ as the key to understanding museum/gallery policy – and this is generally understood as being a form of shorthand for referring to a particular museological ideology that is closely related to views of professionalism within the sector⁵. The ‘new museology’ that later formed the core of this criticism

⁴ Dealing with each hypothesis in turn would serve to confuse the manner in which individual and sets of variables have multiple effects across a number of hypotheses, and as it is the variables, and how these are managed, that are the main foci of the research a concentration on them is seen as preferable. Covering each hypothesis in turn would also be, frankly, rather boring for the author, let alone for any potential readers who would have to cope with large amounts of repetition in such discussion.

⁵ And this being subject to criticism from the 1940s onwards following the publication of reports in the United States and the United Kingdom that were significant for the development of a new community focus for museum work: Bourke (2011), 274.

in the 1960s and 1970s attempted to change the focus of museums towards more outwardly/socially inclined concerns - although the extent to which this has actually occurred is subject to some debate (McCall & Gray, 2014). Another 10 museum staff members made reference to specific internal, functional policies (ranging across policies for exhibition, audience development, access, knowledge provision, and human remains, amongst others) as being central, with seven of these being, probably not surprisingly, functional specialists rather than general managers, and of the three managers who specifically referred to this, two were managers of functional specialisms within their own services. Thus, in total, 37 out of 40 of the staff interviewed made conscious reference to sets of ideas that were either professionally or functionally-based indicating that somewhat traditional ideas about the basis upon which decisions are made in the publically-funded museums services of England have yet to be replaced by the newer models of public management, based upon generic management principles, that have been developed since the mid-1980s. Alongside this museums-centred set of ideological views was a more general belief that museums were important for societies in ways that extended into the terrain of the 'new museology' and emphasised the educational, social and community roles of museums. This perspective was commonly held across organisations, specialisms and hierarchical locations and was used as a mechanism to reinforce the centrality of professional and functional values. The emphasis upon an internally-derived perception of forms of ideological effect should not be taken, however, to mean that staff do not recognise the importance of the external pressures that ideology can give rise to. There is certainly a recognition that museums are 'in a constant state of justification' (District Council, Service manager) to ensure their survival⁶⁶, with this necessitating 'ticking the council's boxes' (District Council, Service manager), and doing 'what you have to do to get your Grant-in-Aid' (National, Conservation manager), with this leading to a position where 'you give us the money and we'll jump through your hoops' (Unitary, Service manager). In this position it might be thought that museum staff are adopting a simple instrumental relationship to the demands that are generated by ideologically-driven external policy requirements, with these being hurdles to be negotiated rather than direct determinants of internal activity. Certainly some staff operate in this fashion saying, in reference to national government policy, that 'you change the language but you still do the same stuff' (Trust, Education manager) indicating a clear distinction between internal and external ideological effects.

A distinction can be drawn in terms of who museum staff see themselves as being accountable to, with implications for ideas of legitimacy within the system. In this respect the *general* position is that

⁶⁶ Particularly in local authorities where museums are a discretionary service.

central government actors 'are not particularly interested' in museums as 'their minds are elsewhere' (Trust, Service manager) and therefore had limited impact on day-to-day museum operations (Trust, Conservator), and that there is 'no real national museums strategy' (Unitary Council, Service manager) anyway, and that the effect of Arts Council England (ACE), which now acts as the distributor of central government money to a range of museum services, tends only to be felt at 'stratospherically high' levels within them, and has minimal *direct* effect on most staff (Trust, Education manager). In *specific* museums, however, the picture is somewhat different. In these cases direct accountability is largely towards non-national groups of actors (Boards of Trustees, local councillors and University Councils/Boards of Governors) and while 'professional values tend to over-ride those of the employing authority when they differ' (Metropolitan District, Education manager) there is a much greater acceptance of the legitimacy of those to whom accountability is owed to make policy decisions that have to be abided by. This was strongly expressed in local authority museums where party political control had shifted after local elections, with this leading to both policy changes and changes in service support and management style, with a firm expectation that museums needed to toe the party line. Local councillors were seen as particularly important in this respect, with individual councillors being recognised as vital for the generation of support inside the machinery of the local authority, and without this there would be an increased vulnerability for museums services, particularly in the conditions of financial constraint that have existed in recent years.

A consequence of the significance that is attached to accountability has been an acceptance of the importance of the general organisation-wide policies and expectations that exist in local authorities, in particular, in affecting museum service policy. In this case the need to fulfil the requirements of various local authority plans, strategies and policies (to contribute to regeneration (Metropolitan District, Curator), for example), was specifically mentioned by all 16 of the local government respondents – even when it was often pointed out that some of these policies required considerable re-interpretation to ensure that they fitted in with the particular circumstances of the museums services involved. In a similar vein, six of the seven University interviewees referred to the importance of overall University policies and expectations for the specific policies that their museums and galleries pursued, particularly with regard to widening engagement with the University's collections for both external audiences (including other museum services) and staff and students within the Universities themselves. In the case of Trusts, eight out of 14 respondents mentioned Trust strategies and policies as being important, with three singling out the targets that

were set for the service as being particularly important – even if there is a tendency for these to ‘go up regardless of staffing and resources’ (Trust, Education).

The effect of these accountability concerns is felt at the level of legitimacy rather than in terms of matters of ideology. As such, the professional and functional ideologies of staff are tempered by the clear recognition that other, non-museum, actors have a valid role to play in establishing the policy context within which professionals can undertake their functions. Professional values and practices can also serve to defend the autonomy of museum staff to manage the demands that are made upon them by external actors, and as long as the requirements of these external actors are seen to be met then a degree of independence can be preserved: one museum's service being effectively left alone because ‘we’re seen not to have screwed up yet’ (District Council, Service manager). To this extent the picture becomes more complicated: there is clearly a policy concern here (rather than simply a legitimacy one) but the extent to which this policy effect is a matter of ideology or legitimacy, rather than one of managerial competence, is open to question – a detailed examination of the content of organisational policies would be needed to answer it. Again, however, the current focus is on staff perceptions so the question is simply being raised in this instance.

The second set of variables to consider are the externally-generated, meso-level, ones, with these covering more than simply the specific policies that national governments may have concerning museums and museums services, being more concerned with the policy contexts that national governments establish for the management of public policy as a whole. Given that central government has minimal direct control over the functioning of any of the museums – including the nationals – that exist within England this contextualisation function is the closest that it gets to affecting museums policy: even under the Labour governments of 1997-2010 the array of Funding Agreements that were reached with national museums only served to provide extremely broad-brush outlines of policy expectations and allowed the centre no direct role in policy implementation: the ending of these Agreements has not made a direct role for government in affecting the policies and practices of individual museums any easier to achieve.

The first of the meso-level variables – national government policy priorities and preferences – is one that might be expected to have an obvious effect on day-to-day policy in public sector museums through the centrality of expenditure constraint to them and to the current coalition government.

The Museums Association (MA), the major professional body representing museums and museum staff in the United Kingdom (UK), has produced three survey reports (Newman & Tourle, 2011; Evans, 2012, 2013) on the impact of recent cuts in public expenditure on museums and, while there are exceptions, the general picture is of consistent and, in some cases, large-scale reductions in museum expenditure across the UK, with over 50% of museum services reporting budget cuts in each of the first two years, and 49% in the third. It is hardly surprising then that funding and budget cuts were seen as major issues for the majority of interviewees. In most cases questions of finance were seen as being largely concerned with the local working-out of national decisions in which a 'strong streak of opportunism' (Trust, Education manager) is made use of to manage the consequences of these meso-level decisions. Little of this management was concerned with changed expectations in terms of income generation (mentioned specifically by only three respondents), but much more of it was expressed in terms of the impact of reduced (and reducing budgets) on staff resources and time. A persistently expressed view was that museums were something of 'a Cinderella service' and 'nobody wants to give you the money' (University, Service manager) as they were not central to the concerns of the larger organisations with which they were associated, leading to a persistent need to justify their existence. The consequence of this was that there was a good deal of pressure inside museums to find the means to demonstrate their relevance in terms of the policy preferences of funding agencies. In this respect either an active instrumentalisation or 'attachment' of policy to other policy areas (Belfiore, 2012; Gray, 2002, 2008) had become a defensive strategy adopted *within* the sector, rather than being something that was consciously *imposed* by external actors. This was particularly evident in the case of the education function of museums where the major determinant of what was to be provided to school-children was determined by the contribution that the museums service could make to meeting the demands of the national curriculum⁷. Longer-serving museums staff, however, indicated that defensive instrumentalism had always been a tool for managing external policy demands 'particularly when there's money attached to it' (District Council, Service manager). Shifts in the focus of internal museum policies from dealing with matters of social inclusion ('always where the money was') to those of mental health ('it's where the money is', Metropolitan District, Education manager) demonstrate the manner in which a filtering exercise takes place that is not concerned with the specifics of external policy detail but is more concerned with organisational and functional survival. In this respect meso-level demands become something to manage rather than inescapable pressures that must be conformed to.

⁷ The extent to which this will continue given the changes to the national curriculum that are currently in train, and the consequent effect of this on education services within museums and galleries, are both open questions at the moment.

It is largely accepted amongst the interviewees that the impact of larger-scale preferences for managing public policy has been much diluted with the advent of national-level coalition government, even though some of the preferences introduced by the previous Labour governments are still seen to be important. In particular, an emphasis on the provision of evidence of policy impact is seen to be significant for generating support amongst those to whom museum staff are accountable, something which serves to reinforce the tendencies towards policy instrumentalisation that have been generated by funding pressures. A similar picture can be seen with the manner in which the macro-policies (such as social inclusion under the Labour governments of 1997-2010) of central government are played out. It is noticeable that the Conservative Party's 'Big Society' idea was never explicitly referred to by interviewees (while social inclusion was often referred to as an influence on the justification for policy developments within individual organisations) unless prompted⁸ and then the views expressed about it were hardly supportive – 'nobody can afford it and nobody can be bothered' (Unitary, Curator), 'I have never seen it clearly articulated as to what it means' (Trust, Service manager). This may well be a consequence of the shift from single-party to coalition government leading to a lack of clear central direction of the overall policy context within which the public sector is operating and so not too much should be made of this point - except to indicate that, as might be expected, policy legacies persist even after governments change, and policy desires do not always directly turn into policy effects.

It is also evident that there is a strong effect generated by the location of staff inside organisational hierarchies. While both 'front-line' and managerial staff make reference to similar sets of influences on their policy choices, with a very strong functional dimension to this (so both learning officers and education service managers almost always make frequent reference to the importance of the national curriculum for what they do, and conservators and conservation managers always refer to the BS and PAS standards that apply to their work), there is a clear view amongst most of the 'front-line' staff that their senior general and functional managers will, and do, act as a form of buffer to absorb and mediate the demands that are made by external actors and organisations, thus clearing the way for the exercise of professional judgement over the day-to-day issues that are involved in matters of direct service delivery. 'Front-line' staff are well aware of the external political and policy demands and pressures that exist – not least as these mean that 'I spend a lot of time doing council crap' (Metropolitan District, Curator) – but the meaning of these in terms of their practical work is

⁸ Which happened in five cases as a direct development of what was being said by the interviewee.

not central. With managers, the requirements for close contact with those to whom accountability is owed serves to broaden the perspective of policy relevance – even if this is only as a result of the hierarchical links that they have with more senior levels of management inside their own organisation. This is particularly marked in the case of local authority staff, where museum services are not only a discretionary service but are also seen as a relatively unimportant one in terms of contributing to the overall objectives of the local authorities concerned, leading to the position where not only are services ‘run on a shoe-string’ (District, Education Officer), and the museum service is ‘in a constant state of justification’ (District, Service Manager), but also where ‘we’re constrained by lots of policies from constrained areas but... the policy sometimes gets in the way of doing the job’ (Metropolitan District, Education Manager).

Exogenous policy influences, however, are not simply restricted to those generated at the national or organisational level – European and wider international policies, treaties, conventions and standards have an effect on the sector, as do the standards of professional practice that are supported by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) (see Ambrose & Paine, 2012), and which underpin the requirements for museum accreditation within the United Kingdom. The specific impact of these more wide-ranging – and far-reaching – influences, covering everything from the Washington Conference Principles on Nazi-Confiscated Art to the SPECTRUM standards for museum documentation, is hard to identify as it is ‘largely second nature’ (Unitary, Curator) for museums professionals to have regard to them. The lack of explicit discussion of these supra-national influences could be taken to be simply a reflection of how far they have been incorporated into the professional perspective that museum staff have developed and have been transformed into an endogenous source of policy influence rather than being an exogenous one. At the very least this indicates that an attempt to draw a clear boundary between the nature of structural constraints and opportunities as being either strictly endogenous or exogenous is likely to be difficult in any absolute sense as the nature of agency serves to intercede between all structural variables and the practices which are undertaken within organisations.

The allocation of functions and responsibilities by governments, not only between government departments, local authorities and the world of quasi-governmental organisations but also between the public/private/voluntary/community/charity sectors, is anticipated to have an effect on museum practice by providing a demarcation of control of policy implementation as well as of formal policy

making. The importance attached by museum staff to where accountability lies is reinforced by the patterns of organisational and functional distribution that are present within the overall policy system and this then extends to incorporate control of policy practice, and the dynamics of the relationship between the museums sector and the wider governmental policy environment. In effect there is a form of organisational hierarchical differentiation tied to these issues of accountability whereby organisational form affects patterns of accountability which, in turn, affect the perceived and actual room for manoeuvre that staff will have in terms of managing their external policy environments. This was particularly marked in the case of the Trusts where the perceived constraints on action that existed under previous organisational arrangements (largely associated with local authorities) were expected to be replaced by shorter chains of decision-making, independence of financial choice (largely tied to access to different sources of finance than those available to local authorities), and freedom for the exercise of professional judgement⁹.

What is clear in terms of these organisational arrangements is that central government is in an extremely weak position – even when dealing with the national museums – concerning policy implementation and control. The default position is one where there is very little capability for the centre to influence what precisely occurs across the range of publically-funded museums or within them, thus leaving the exercise of agency to other actors within the system. Indeed the most commonly identified roles for central government departments were the provision of advice (specifically mentioned were human remains, licensing of firearms collections, and the operation of the Portable Antiquities Scheme), or the establishment of broad policy preferences that museums could attach themselves to for funding purposes or the gaining of political support to justify their decisions. For these a number of government departments had a practical effect for museums/museum services: not only was the Department for Culture, Media and Sport mentioned, but so also were the Departments for Children, Families and Schools, Business, Innovation and Skills, and the Home Office. To put this into context though, it should be noted that the most commonly mentioned national organisation was HEFCE, which was referred to by every single one of the University museums. This was usually in terms of the direct and indirect funding that it provided to universities in general - and some museums/galleries in particular – but also to how it could be used as a justificatory device for the making of particular policy decisions.

⁹ It should be noted that most of the Trusts involved had only recently taken that form and so these views were usually in the form of expectation rather than established fact. In practice the new Trusts are constructed as management arrangements rather than being completely independent organisations in their own right and the manner in which they function cannot be divorced from the demands and requirements of their parent organisations. The effect of this on museum practice has yet to be examined.

In terms of policy instruments it is not the particular instruments that exist in their own right which matter, but the manner in which their exercise is controlled and made use of by actors. This has a clear relationship to the ideas of resource dependency proposed by Rhodes (1981): instruments are not simply, from this perspective, used directly in a top-down fashion but are, instead, subject to matters of unequal resource distribution and negotiated settlements for their effect. In the case of museums the balance of informational instruments rests heavily – but not entirely - with individual museums and museum services, as does the control of technical instruments. Financial instruments, on the other hand, are largely controlled outside of the museum sector itself¹⁰ by a range of funding organisations, including central government departments, quangos and local authorities. Regardless of the precise detail of these arrangements the manner in which instruments are utilised has important implications for how the complexities of the policy environment will be both made sense of and be managed by system participants, with this being affected by unequal access to necessary resources.

At the micro-level of individual museums/galleries/museum services the structural frameworks that are in place for their management are clearly understood to be examples of spaces for negotiation and arenas for the exercise of agency rather than as entities that exercise a role that is independent of individuals, even if their impact is greater than that which can be exercised by individuals alone (Elder-Vass, 2007, 2010). While reference was made in individual cases to the importance of organisational re-structurings for the manner in which institutional policies were made, this was couched in the context of the role of particular individuals (usually new heads of museum services but occasionally in the context of changes in political control of local authorities, or changes in the lead councillor for the service) rather than being seen as the strategic outcome of policy or service reviews. The creation of new Trust arrangements – which might be thought to provide the opportunity for large-scale reviews – was usually couched in the language of creating room for manoeuvre and opportunities to manage services independently of meso-level structural constraints rather than in terms of allowing such reviews. In general, however, there were differences at the level of individual services and museums as to how this affected practice: in some cases the person at the top ‘makes a huge difference’ (Trust, Head of Service), while in others the practicalities of management involve ‘endless discussions with other people’ leading to ‘many conflicts of interest

¹⁰ Reference does need to be made to the quality of the cakes in museum cafes which can become an important device for the attraction of members of the public (and their money), regardless of their interest in the contents of the museums and galleries themselves. A guide to museum cakes is available from the author.

and on your time' (Trust, Curator) indicating the importance of team-working and the involvement of 'external stake-holders' (University, Collections Manager) to museum functioning, rather than the role of the individual *per se*. In addition the functional and hierarchical divisions between staff members had the effect of mediating the role of individuals *qua* individuals, particularly in the light of the importance that was attached to professional values as a core under-pinning of policy decisions and choices.

The importance of the specifics of individual cases for understanding the broader pattern of the relationship of structure and agency in museums/museum services is reinforced if a closer examination is undertaken of one of the key variables - functional differentiation – in the context of micro-level structural factors. In this respect there are clear differences in perception about the importance for policy choice of different functional groups. A common criticism of how museums function has always been the dominance of 'the curator'¹¹ in terms of the internal pecking order that exists within the sector, and the non-curatorial interviewees were commonly in accord that this significance was still in place in many institutions¹². This perceived importance extended beyond more general professional values – the importance of 'the collection' (which could be seen as a necessary explanation for the status of curators given that it is expected to be the focus of their work), for example, was seen as central for explaining the work of museums staff across all functional groups in all types of museums – and appears to be as much a matter of engrained expectations of centrality as it is a factual statement. Discussions of team-working and the inter-relationships between functional categories within individual museums often indicated that the reality was much more complicated than this simple hierarchical view of functional significance would assume, with many examples of staff co-ordination and inter-action in the making of exhibitions and displays and in the direct provision of functional specialisms being evident. In a similar fashion the importance of the managerial tier as a buffer between the demands of exogenous agents and structures and the exercise of endogenous agency only captures a part of the complexity of the managerial role that is undertaken. Managers do have a clear role to play in the downward mediation of exogenous demands and pressures but they also usually have to manage a

¹¹ This was a common criticism, for example, made in the new museology literature: see Harrison, 1994; Stam, 1993; McCall & Gray, 2014).

¹² It is worth noting that one curator (National) referred to their role as being a combination of 'the keeper of the knowledge' and a 'fact monkey', depending upon what role they were fulfilling and which audience they were dealing with, which indicates that curators do not necessarily see themselves as simply being in an exalted position in the museum hierarchy but are, instead, fulfilling multiple roles for multiple purposes for multiple groups of people (whether line managers, visitors, the press, external stakeholders, professional peers or their organisational colleagues – amongst many others).

variety of specific functional demands, as well as the upward mediation of endogenous pressures and demands arising from the deliverers of services, as well as undertaking their own role in the construction of organisational policies. In other words museum staff at all levels perform multiple functions within their organisations, with these roles being as much a consequence of the internal management structures that exist as they are to do with professional specialisation.

Conclusions

As can be seen there is a complex web of intersecting expectations, demands and pressures in operation within the museums sector in England, and the relationship of these to general organisational characteristics of functional and hierarchical differentiation, professional status, organisational form and patterns of accountability indicates that similar patterns of response could be anticipated in other political systems where these also exist. The manner in which a variety of structural features are managed by – and manage – the participants within the system serves to provide a set of contexts within which policy choices are made and demonstrates the inter-play of structure and agency in these processes. The analysis of complexity through the lenses that are provided by ideas derived from considering structure and agency provides a way of making sense of the relationships of systems, individual agents and interaction that are seen to be central to complexity theory (Klijn, 2008, 301), but which does not rely upon complexity ideas of self-organisation and systemic co-evolution to make sense of what is occurring. Indeed, the structure/agency approach assumes that there are ways of not only explaining change and stability in patterns of organisational behaviour and structuring in a *post-hoc* fashion, but also of predicting likely directions and patterns of future change and stability, and this is quite distinct from the complexity theory assumptions of unpredictability at the systemic level (Teisman & Klijn, 2008, 288). It may be the case that the museums sector simply does not display the characteristics that complexity approaches are dealing with (but this effectively relies upon empirical evidence for the case to be made) and this raises the question of how complex does complexity have to be before complexity approaches become applicable. As a general analytical strategy it assumes that systems are ‘more dynamic’ than is commonly assumed, that internal actors have a role to play, that context matters and that there is no single model of actor behaviour (Teisman & Klijn, 2008, 288-9). None of these are particularly original insights and they are shared by other approaches to the analysis of policy systems, but they do not explain how to differentiate complex from simple systems in any meaningful way.

In this paper 'complexity' depends upon an identification of component elements of structure to organise the discussion. In this case complexity is not perceived as a generic label concerned with a notion of continuously chaotic organisation attached to policy systems, but as a specific set of constraints and opportunities that both affect organisational behaviour and are, in turn, affected by it. The understanding of the recursive nature of this relationship underpins much of the argument in structure/agency debates (Giddens, 1984; Hay, 2002; Gray 2014), and changes the complexity emphasis upon the lack of clear causal relationships between component elements of systemic organisation to one of causally explicable inter-relationships between them. In both cases the emphasis is upon the longitudinal analysis of change and stasis within policy, organisational and social systems as a whole – even if the means for undertaking this analysis differ, and the epistemological basis upon which analysis is to be undertaken is markedly different between them. The consequences of these analytical differences are that complexity approaches are unlikely to be able to provide fully generalisable claims about how and why systems function as they do: the specifics of contextualisation mean that the emphasis is upon the individual case, and the findings from this will not, and probably cannot, be transferable to others except in the form of approximations (Morcol, 2012, 191). In this case the underlying idea of evolutionary change in both environmental conditions and consequent adaptive behaviour provides only a metaphorical account of change on the basis of contingent sets of arrangements in individual cases (Teisman & Klijn, 2008, 289). This metaphor does provide for a level of systemic generalisation - but this is very different to generalisations about the component parts of the system themselves, or to the provision of a coherent analytical account of these evolutionary processes. In structure/agency analysis, on the other hand, generalisability is a necessity for the explanation of the inter-relationships between the complex behavioural and structural phenomena that give shape to the overall system, and it is the understanding of these inter-relationships that then allows for the making of generalisations from the specific example to the overall systemic level, and *vice-versa*.

Complexity approaches are intended to focus on situations that are non-linear (having multiple causal component parts to them) and dynamic (containing multiple sets of relationships and inter-relationships within them) forming an analytical preference for non-parsimonious forms of investigation and a preference for non-simplifying assumptions about the interplay of the structural and behavioural elements of systems. This preference then becomes used to differentiate complexity approaches from other forms of analysis by making assumptions about their nature –

with these assuming that they are either not equally as concerned with the systemic level, or simply ignoring it in favour of the analysis of the component parts of the system. At the very least this is claiming somewhat more than is fair about other approaches, with structure/agency approaches, for example, being equally concerned with both. The criticism that Pollitt (2009) makes about how little is original in complexity analysis in comparison with already existing approaches may be equally as unfair given the relatively underdeveloped nature of complexity as an organising idea. However the current application of structure and agency to the English museums sector does lend some support to Pollitt's claim: the complex nature of the interplay between organisational structures, professional values, patterns of accountability, and the individual choices that staff within museums make, produces a picture of complexity that is not dependent upon assumptions of chaotic behaviours, but which does produce a picture that allows for the identification of dynamism in organisational life and non-linearity in the shape of clear, if complicated, causal relationships between variables. If anything this could be taken to simply mean that complexity approaches require further development, and that there is no consistent language or coherent set of conceptual understandings to draw together the findings and arguments that have been established across widely different disciplinary boundaries (Cairney, 2012, 354-5). While this would provide scope for further theoretical and conceptual discussion and debate it also, however, raises questions about whether such approaches are currently capable of extending knowledge, analysis and empirical investigation beyond the stage that other approaches have already reached and, therefore where the benefit of complexity as an organising analytical idea lies.

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