

Not So ‘Arm’s Length’: Reinterpreting Agencies in UK Central Government

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Near-final draft manuscript published in “Public Administration” in 2014

Abstract

Administrative decentralization to government agencies – so-called ‘agencification’ – has attracted much attention in recent years, increasingly with regard to its endurance or modification after the ‘high’ managerialism of the 1980s, and largely within a neo-positivist epistemology. Drawing on techniques of narrative and discourse analysis, and a model of incremental ideational change, this article argues for the supplementing of those existing large-N analyses of expansion and decline with qualitative attention to the longevity of policy meaning. Specifically, it demonstrates how the original foundations of managerialism, civil service empowerment and decentralization which underpinned the UK’s seminal ‘Next Steps’ programme are largely absent from the idea’s reconstruction in contemporary reform discourse, where agencies are instead advocated as ensuring centralized, politically-proximate and departmentalized governance. This substantial reinterpretation not only challenges existing (large-N) claims of continuity in UK administrative policy, but also demonstrates the utility of interpretive methods for exploring longevity in public management more widely.

Keywords

Agencification; executive agencies; interpretive methodology; post-NPM; public management reform; UK

Suggested citation

Elston, T. (2014), Not so 'arm's length': reinterpreting agencies in UK central government. *Public Administration*, 92, 2, pp. 458-476.

INTRODUCTION

Decentralization from government ministries to arm's-length public agencies – so-called 'agencification' – has attracted much attention in recent years (Pollitt *et al.* 2004; Christensen and Lægreid 2006; Smullen 2010; Verhoest *et al.* 2011; MacCarthaigh 2012; Elston 2013). In particular, this reflects the international ubiquity of 'agency fever' (Pollitt *et al.* 2001), and its collation and combination of multiple new public management (NPM) doctrines. Indeed, striving for bureaucratic disaggregation and de-regulation (Hood 1991), organizational role purification (Christensen and Lægreid 2006), and a shift towards *ex-post*, contract-based control (Hoggett 1996), the agency solution epitomizes several key tenets of new managerialism. Pursued in some measure across countries as diverse as The Netherlands, New Zealand, Japan and the UK, agencification is amongst NPM's 'most frequently adopted and far-reaching' policies (Moynihan 2006, p. 1029).

Given this pervasiveness and intimate paradigmatic association, recent analysis of managerialism's post-2000 endurance has necessarily deliberated the longevity of agencification. Claiming NPM's outright substitution by 'digital-era governance', for example, Dunleavy *et al.* (2006) cite diminished enthusiasm amongst transnational reform advocates such as the OECD, as well as the second-generation, anti-fragmentation measures initiated by governments seeking better control and 'join-up'. More cautiously, Christensen and Lægreid (2007, p. 11) identify a layering of new ideals over enduring managerialist precepts, arguing not for a paradigm shift, but 'a change of emphasis away from structural devolution, disaggregation and single-purpose organizations'. More delimited national and comparative analyses of agencification have broadly supported this latter claim of 'post-NPM' evolution rather than revolution,

reporting continuing administrative dispersal, tempered mainly by agency mergers, new coordination and oversight mechanisms, and only limited formal de-agencification (see Verhoest *et al.* 2011; MacCarthaigh 2012; Elston 2013).

Focused on the preservation of devolved organizational landscapes, much of this longitudinal research involves large-*N*, ‘population’ analysis. Indeed, of the three emergent modes of agency theorizing identified by Pollitt *et al.* (2004, pp. 12-18) – ‘traditional’ organization science, micro-economic and interpretive – the former has come to dominate, largely by virtue of burgeoning population studies (see examples in Verhoest *et al.* 2011; MacCarthaigh and Roness 2012). Borrowing assumptions and techniques from industrial organization ecology (Hannan and Freeman 1989), population analysis attends to aggregate administrative systems. ‘Agency’ is reified as an objective classification which engenders some common structural influence across otherwise disparate governing processes and outcomes. While thus perpetuating the undifferentiated, ‘catch-all’ logic by which NPM’s ‘best practice’ reforms were often pursued during the 1980s and 1990s, the meta-theoretical assumption of a single, essential and ‘univocal’ agency function contrasts markedly with the founding premise of Pollitt *et al.*’s (2004) third, interpretive branch of theorizing, for which social and political phenomena are modelled as intangible structures of meaning, lacking in fixity and sustained through perpetual social re-accomplishment in confined ideational contexts. This alternative epistemology indicates how ‘public management ideas that carry the same identifying label can mask variation in the understanding of the policy’ (Moynihan 2006, p. 1029). In short, the meaning of ‘agency’ is locally and temporally contingent, susceptible to both synchronic and diachronic reinterpretation.

Despite growing interest in post-empiricist policy and organization studies (for example, Burrell and Morgan 1979; Hawkesworth 1988; Wagenaar 2011), interpretive agencification research remains incipient. Exceptionally, in exploring the interplay of local culture and transnational reform discourse, Moynihan (2006) and Smullen (2010) both identify distinct cross-national ‘translations’ of the agency idea, while Smullen (2004) also points to subnational reframing across a single polity. Principally, therefore, this still nascent literature demonstrates synchronic reinterpretations of the agency solution between different locales, rather than its potential diachronic instability over time. As such, interpretive methods have yet to contribute substantively to the question of longevity in agency policy, practice and paradigm.

Against this backdrop, the present article seeks to demonstrate the necessity of supplementing longitudinal population analysis with attention to the diachronic evolution of policy meanings. Drawing on the UK’s seminal ‘Next Steps’ case of agencification, it traces how implicit understandings of an ostensibly enduring organizational classification have reshaped over time. Not only does this indicate the limited sustenance of a mainstay of the UK’s NPM project, but it also highlights how inductive attention to, and comparison of, tacit and embedded knowledge makes for fuller analysis of continuity and change in public management more widely.

Initially, the article builds a conceptual and methodological framework, drawing on constructivist meta-theory, a model of political ideas as composite discursive structures, and insights from narrative and discourse analysis. Thereafter, textual sources pertaining to the UK’s 1988 Next Steps programme and 2010 Public Bodies Reforms are examined for their separate evocations of the agency idea. Overall, the original emphasis on managerial empowerment, devolution and de-politicization is found to be

largely absent from the contemporary reconstruction, replaced by counter-themes of ministerial control and centralization. Together, this indicates the latter-day departmentalization of the once arm's-length agency concept – a modification of tacit meaning which has occurred without legal redefinition or overt policy change. Thus overlooked by large-*N* system analysis, this development nevertheless signals a considerable departure from the assumptions and priorities inspiring the original Next Steps reforms, thereby demonstrating the necessity of attending to transmutable organizational and policy meanings when analysing longevity in public management.

INTERPRETING AGENCIFICATION

Philosophical beginnings

Interpretive social science proceeds from distinct ontological and epistemological presupposition (Burrell and Morgan 1979). Informed by phenomenology, hermeneutics and symbolic interactionism, this asserts the perspectival character of knowledge and observation, and the ineluctability of negotiated interpretation, including in social research (Yanow 2006). Meta-theory of this kind contrasts markedly with the (often implicit but no less formative) empiricist assumption of a single, unmediated and atheoretical social reality, available for detached, objective observation according to one method of physical science (Hawkesworth 1988). While interpretivists recognize the face validity of such a 'given' ontology, this is theorized as the cognitive objectification of an otherwise plural, negotiated, and thoroughly human world. As Berger and Luckmann contend:

'Social order exists only as a product of human activity. No other ontological status may be ascribed to it without hopelessly obfuscating its empirical manifestations. Both in its genesis (social order is the result of past human activity) and its existence in any instant of time (social order exists only and in so

far as human activity continues to produce it) it is a human product.’ (1971, p. 70)

Interpretive research thus looks to register contextually and reflexively the meanings that continually re-accomplish social phenomena. This destabilizing of objectified reality inspires inductive data generation and the forging of contingent knowledge claims, bound by their situatedness and temporality. Unlike realist studies, interpretivists do not seek triangulation upon a single, objective account through multiple, disparate data points. Rather, by ethnography or the close analysis of ‘texts’, interpretive research aspires for rich but inevitably confined and provisional understandings of phenomena. Methodologists duly advocate specific criteria for evaluating this paradigmatically distinct scholarship, substituting traditional concerns of validity, reliability and replicability with transparency, researcher reflexivity and argumentation (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012). Importantly, though, interpretivism does not relegate social science to epistemological relativism. As Yanow explains:

‘This is what is “social” about ontological constructivism: that it has a shared character, developed in the course of living in common, interacting through the medium of political, cultural, and other artifacts in which the meanings embedded in these artifacts come to be known, tacitly, even when such communication is nonverbal.’ (2006, p. 14)

The implication is that, beneath self-reported subjectivities, there lies a deeper, shared, more stable undercurrent of meaning-making, in dialectic with the subjective surface and similarly a product of (collective) human endeavour, but less consciously available. Wagenaar (2011, p. 18) formalizes this distinction as one between ‘subjective’ and ‘objective’ meaning, the former representing the ‘reasons, motives, and purposes which are part of the actor’s consciousness’, and the latter ‘belong[ing] to the group or community’ as ‘the basic assumptions and conceptualizations that make a particular

activity possible'. It is towards the interpretation of this shared – and partially re-stabilizing – *intersubjectivity* that interpretive research is directed.

Given the lost ontological singularity claimed by post-realist philosophy, interpretive research must orientate towards specific sites of meaning-making. In public administration, this could involve ethnographic studies of organisations, for example, or high-level policy analyses focusing on political and elite discourse. By attending to the evolving politico-administrative construction of the UK's agency idea, the present analysis follows Moynihan (2006) and Smullen (2010) into this second category of agencification analysis, albeit with a new focus on diachronic evolution. The comparison is guided by Carstensen's model of the composite political idea.

Ideational change

Carstensen (2011) understands political ideas as variegated discursive structures, formed from multiple, potentially shifting 'elements of meaning'. Changes in this ideational microstructure, as well as in the wider ideational environment with which it relates, induce diachronic reinterpretation of the composite idea, even while its original label is retained. Significantly, elements of meaning may be 'privileged' or 'peripheral', contributing to a greater or lesser extent to the idea's total meaning, depending on their strength of articulation (Carstensen 2011, pp. 601-602). Therein, evolution of ideational character proceeds either through the reweighed emphases of individual discursive elements, or by outright substitution of particular components (Carstensen 2011, p.607). The latter makes for a more radical reinterpretation of what is, ostensibly, the same idea.

To register and compare elements of meaning for two iterations of the UK's agency idea, and thus form an assessment of continuity and change in overall policy interpretation, a

method of textual analysis is required that is both receptive to taken-for-granted, tacit understandings, and can distinguish between privileged and peripheral contributions. A threefold narrative framework is developed below.

A narrative framework

Narrative analysis has received growing attention in the social sciences over recent decades (Chase 2011; Riessman 2012), and has made tentative inroads into public policy and administration (Ospina and Dodge 2005). A 'methodological repertoire' rather than single, defined technique (Quinn, cited in Riessman 2012, p. 369), narratology explores meaning in stories and story analogues through the interplay of content and structure (Chase 2011). Its concern is not simply subjective perception, however. As Wagenaar affirms, 'the storyteller connects his [sic.] rendering of events with shared cultural knowledge, with the wider meaning structures of the community' (2011, p. 211). In seeking to register these embedded, intersubjective understandings, the following analysis attends specifically to argumentation, narrative voice and discursive differentiation.

Argumentation

Narrative approaches to argumentation pay particular attention to implicitness, recognising that 'what is left out [of a narrative] is often what the teller takes to be literally unremarkable, so commonplace or obvious that it is not worth remarking on' (Patterson and Monroe 1998, p.329). Feldman *et al.* (2004; also Feldman and Sköldbberg 2002), have developed an approach which, by attending to 'enthymeme' as a rhetorical component of argumentation, makes explicit such communal, taken-for-granted meanings. Characterized as a 'truncated' syllogism (Jasinski 2001, p. 206), enthymeme is an Aristotelian device whereby part of an argument remains latent or unarticulated.

Interpretation thus rests on the listener's inference of missing component(s). An example is: 'John will fail his examination because he hasn't studied' (taken from Corbett 1990, p. 61). This incomplete syllogism contains one premise (that John hasn't studied) and a conclusion (that he will fail the exam). The unarticulated middle premise is: 'Anyone who doesn't study will fail his [sic.] examination'. This implicit understanding connects the given information so as to render the overall argument complete.

Enthymeme first acts as a device of rhetorical persuasion, inhibiting refutation of the substantive claim by engaging the audience in its co-production (Jasinski 2001, p.205). Given Carstensen's (2011) concern with the articulatory strength of elements of meaning, therefore, enthymeme signals a 'privileged' component of the ideational microstructure. Furthermore, because enthymeme involves 'a plausible, likely, or probabilistic inference, rather than a logically binding one' (Feldman *et al.* 2004, p. 152), its interpretation is guided by 'commonplaces – commonly held beliefs that are usually true' (Feldman and Sköldbberg 2002, p. 276). For this reason, close attention to enthymematic construction is able to surface some of the taken-for-granted intersubjectivity – the tacit, objective and embedded meanings – that inform and enable sensemaking within particular contexts.

Narrative voice

Narrative 'cannot be voiceless' (Patterson and Monroe 1998, p. 316). As Bal (1985, p. 100) explains, events 'are always presented from within a certain "vision" ... a point of view ... a certain way of seeing things', so that even intentional and overt objectivity remains perspectival. As such, attending to narrative voice provides insights on

authorial evaluation and meaningful yet often implicit groupings and divisions (Fairclough 2003; Pentland 1999, pp. 714-715).

Discursive differentiation

Fairclough (2003, p. 88) argues that ‘the “work” of classification is constantly going on in texts, with entities being either differentiated from one another, put in opposition to one another, or being set up as equivalent to one another’. Meaning thus registers in how ‘people, objects, [and] organisations ... are differentiated in texts, and how differences between them are collapsed by “texturing” relations of equivalence between them’. For example, as well as the divisions implicated through narrative voice, analysts can look to contrastive (‘but’, ‘however’) and additive (‘and’, ‘which’) relations within and between discursive units (Fairclough 2003, pp.88-91). Moreover, again, differentiation need not be explicit; for ‘when a storyteller describes a situation, one way to uncover meaning is by looking closely at what he or she is implying is its opposite’ (Feldman, *et al.* 2004, p. 151). A discussion of good management, for example, implicitly defines poor management.

In combination, argumentation, narrative voice, and discursive differentiation offer an analytic framework that is both sensitized to implicit meaning and enables the weighing of different ideational components according to their rhetorical force. This is now applied to original Next Steps documentation and contemporary Parliamentary transcripts and bureaucratic interviews pertaining to the 2010 Public Bodies programme.

THE NEXT STEPS PROGRAMME

Executive agencies were first introduced by the Thatcher Government in 1988 as the latest in a sequence of measures aimed at improving Whitehall’s efficiency and

effectiveness. The proposing report, *Improving Management in Government: The Next Steps* (Efficiency Unit 1988), gave its name to the programme, and is analysed below. Drawing on the narrative analytic framework, this first expression of the agency idea is shown to rest upon enthymematic reference of the prevailing managerialist ideology of the day, and adjoining claims of frontline empowerment and decentralization.

Argumentation – the managerialist enthymeme

The Next Steps Report’s argumentation rests upon two founding syllogisms, relating to problem diagnosis and policy remedy (see Boxes 1 and 2). The first, diagnostic syllogism is enthymematic, containing two explicit components [labelled #1a and #1c] and one implicit connector [#1b]. Hence, whereas the report explicitly identifies a series of deficiencies in bureaucratic practice, and is adamant that management be improved, the reasoning behind this prescription is left implicit, requiring enthymematic inference to render the overall argument complete and meaningful. Box 1 collates the three components of this truncated syllogism. The implicit premise is double underlined, and the explicit material is illustrated beneath.

Box 1: Problem diagnosis

Enthymeme:

[#1a] Service delivery is being hampered by overly-centralized controls, institutional rigidities and poor local responsibility. **[#1b]** Overly-centralized controls, institutional rigidities and poor local responsibility represent defective management. **[#1c]** Therefore, management must be improved.

[*Implicit premise]

Illustrations of explicit premises in Efficiency Unit (1988):

[#1a]: *‘There are controls not only on resources and objectives, as there should be in any effective system, but also on the way in which resources can be managed. Recruitment, dismissal, choice of staff, promotion, pay, hours of work,*

accommodation, grading, organisation of work, the use of IT equipment, are all outside the control of most Civil Service managers at any level.’ (p. 5)

[#1c]: *‘The substantial gain we are aiming for is the release of managerial energy.’ (p. 16)*

In making this argument, the report describes many practices as antithetical to effective service delivery. The Findings chapter, for example, lists seven key issues, including centralized personnel and management controls. Further evidence is then presented in a large appendix. Together, this provides a strong grounding to the Efficiency Unit’s contention that bureaucracy is hampering service delivery – the first component of the argumentation [#1a]. Moreover, the call for improved management capability [#1c] is similarly emphatic: for instance, as well as aspiring for ‘the release of managerial energy’ (Box 1), there is the report’s title, *Improving Management in Government*. What is missing from the narrative surface, however, is a similarly explicit connecting premise explaining why Whitehall’s apparently manifold bureaucratic deficiencies represent an issue to which improved management is the solution. Rather, this prescription requires enthymematic inference of what constitutes ‘good management’ vis-à-vis problematic bureaucracy [#1b].

According to the narrative analytic framework developed above, it is because centralized controls and diffuse accountability are *so obviously* symptoms of poor management that explicit establishment of such is redundant or even banal. That bureaucracy should be remedied with improved management is thus a ‘commonplace’ within the ‘ideology’ of the day, to use Feldman and Sköldbberg’s terminology (2002). This is supported by existing research on the institutionalization of managerialist doctrine in the 1980s and 1990s. As Clarke and Newman (1997, p.86) suggest,

‘managerialism can be viewed as an institution: a set of rules of action, *shared typifications* of the world, shared cognition, which produce *regularities of thought* and action’. Similarly, for Pollitt (1993, pp.6-10), ‘managerialism is a set of *beliefs* and practices, at the core of which burns the *seldom-tested assumption* that better management will prove an effective solvent for a wider range of economic and social ills’ (all emphases added). In the case of the Next Steps argumentation, then, what its enthymeme reveals is the interconnectivity of the original agency idea to these shared beliefs and tacit assumptions. That wider reform discourse provides the essential interpretive context for reading Next Steps, and is an important contrast with contemporary agency discourse.

The second of the report’s two structural syllogisms proceeds from problem diagnosis to policy remedy, although it remains firmly connected to the prior diagnostic enthymeme through the restating of its conclusion as the new starting premise [#1c/#2a] – a common device within sequenced arguments (see Feldman *et al.* 2004, p. 152). There is extensive discussion of the benefits of agencification [#2b], and the recommendation for adoption [#2c] is reinforced through the listing of necessary implementation strategies; for example, the appointment of a senior project manager. Together, this makes for a perfect – if sequentially dependent – second syllogism (Box 2), where all components are explicit.

Box 2: Policy remedy

Perfect syllogism:

[#2a] [Previous conclusion:] Management needs to be improved (because of centralization, processual rigidities and non-devolved responsibility). **[#2b]** Agencies facilitate relaxed controls, innovation and local responsibility. **[#2c]** Therefore, agencies should be introduced.

Sequential interlinking:

[#2a] Previous conclusion (#1c, above)

Illustrations in Efficiency Unit (1988):

[#2b] *'[O]nce the policy objectives and budgets within the framework are set, the management of the agency should then have as much independence as possible in deciding how those objectives are met. ... [T]here must be freedom to recruit, pay, grade and structure in the most effective way as the framework becomes sufficiently robust and there is confidence in the capacity of management...'* (p.9)

[#2c] *'We recommend that "agencies" should be established to carry out the executive functions of government....'* (p. 9)

Overall, then, the Next Steps argumentation proceeds in two stages. The first diagnoses the policy problem rhetorically by recourse to contemporaneous ideology and its presupposition of management's superiority over bureaucracy; and the second prescribes agencies as a policy solution via a perfect syllogism. Rhetorically invoked, managerialism is thus established as a 'privileged' element of meaning according to Carstensen's (2011) microstructural model.

Narrative voice – empowering the frontline

Often, the Next Steps narrative is voiced not by a dissatisfied political or bureaucratic elite, but from the perspective of a self-critical, frustrated and constrained civil service. As well as granting bottom-up legitimacy and aiding crucial civil service 'buy-in', this makes for a wider narrative of forthcoming empowerment. Specifically, coming as a response to the concerns and desires of managers themselves, the granting of frontline autonomy is framed as emancipatory – agencies are about '*letting* managers manage' rather than '*making* managers manage', to coin the much-cited NPM tension. The following extract exemplifies this function of the subjective vocalization:

'[T]he management and staff concerned with the delivery of government services (some 95 per cent of the Civil Service) are generally convinced that the developments towards more clearly defined and budgeted management are positive and helpful. The manager of a small local office in the north east said that for the first time in 20 years he felt that he could have an effect on the conditions under which his staff worked and therefore on the results they produced. But this kind of enthusiasm is tempered by frustration at constraints. ... Middle managers in particular feel that their authority is seriously circumscribed both by unnecessary controls and by the intervention of Ministers and senior officials in relatively minor issues. People who had recently resigned from the Civil Service told us that frustration at the lack of genuine responsibility for achieving results was a significant factor in encouraging them to move to jobs outside.' (Efficiency Unit 1988, p. 3)

The underlined words highlight the report's overtly subjective and bottom-up – not objective nor political – presentation. The passage begins with a sweeping statement on the attitudes of those whom Next Steps, if implemented, will most affect – the '95 per cent'. It then focuses on 'the manager of a small local office' and what 'he' considered helpful, before broadening once more to identify wide-spread 'frustration at constraints'. A division is erected between constrained 'middle managers' and interfering 'ministers and senior officials'. Thereafter, the closing reference to 'people who had recently resigned' implies regret at their disaffection. In this manner, the diagnosis of defective bureaucracy is narrated on the basis of what the Efficiency Unit were *told* by the frontline, rather than what it observed directly. The impression is that there can be no greater assurance of the urgent need for change than from within the (faulty) institution itself.

In addition to this subjective critique, the report's absolving of civil servants' prior responsibility for Whitehall's dysfunctionality also contributes to the agency idea's emancipatory framing. This is revealed in the emotive language:

'[Departments will define] a rigorous policy and resources framework within which the agency management is set free to manage....' (Efficiency Unit 1988, p. 10)

'The FDA [a trade union] confirmed that ATs and HEODs [junior civil servants] were clamouring for management jobs.' (p. 25)

'A common source of frustration in many local offices is the inadequacy of the service staff feel they are giving.' (p. 26)

Once again, 'inadequacy' – the report's meta-theme – is diagnosed not by the Efficiency Unit directly, nor by dissatisfied ministers, but by frontline 'staff' in 'local offices'.

Moreover, all three extracts suggest that it is not for want of trying that government is suboptimal; rather, due to factors beyond their control, officials are constrained. Hence, if management is to be 'set free to manage', the implication is that it is presently constrained; if junior officials are 'clamouring' for management positions, these must presently be rationed; and if staff are themselves frustrated at their inadequate service, there must be other, inhibiting factors.

This de-blaming of officials is furthered by the characterizing of government institutions as narrative antagonists, personified with sociological agency and voice, and acting to preclude effective management:

'The main rule imposed by the Treasury is that there should be no movement of money from non-running costs to running costs. Rules about moving money between different running costs items are generally imposed by departments themselves.' (Efficiency Unit 1988, p. 28)

Again, it is not that individual officials are apathetic about improved management; rather, these institutions are causing unnecessary obstructions.

In sum, by proposing agencification through subjective, bottom-up critique, the Efficiency Unit narrates its policy solution as emancipatory or empowering, sponsored

by a concerned politico-bureaucratic elite determined to aid the frustrated frontline. An acknowledged NPM theme (see Peters and Savoie 1994), civil service empowerment is thus a second component of the original agency idea, complementing the rhetorically privileged managerialist element.

Differentiation – the decentralization narrative

Discursive differentiation involves the forging or collapsing of distinctions. The foregoing analysis of argumentation and voice has already identified several such paired oppositions. Most significantly, there is the coupling of the policy-remedy syllogisms – a common pairing in policy documents (Fairclough 2003, p. 91). Mapping onto this structural dualism are many subordinate examples; for instance, the constrained versus empowered frontline, and the dysfunctional versus effective Whitehall (see Table 1). Another important opposition comes in the report's narrative of decentralization. This is explored below.

[*ADD TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE***]**

In formulating agencification as a mode of decentralization, the report constructs an opposition between the governing 'centre' and 'periphery'. Its discussion of framework documents illustrates this discursive differentiation:

'The setting of a policy and resources framework is needed not only for agencies but also in situations where the department has to proceed by influence rather than by direct control. It applies therefore to the relationship with any organisation which is providing services for which the department carries some responsibility, whether agency, nationalised industry, local authority, or public body... In any of these relationships the department's task is to set a framework, tailored to the job to be done... It will also need to ensure that indicators of effective performance are developed and used for regular monitoring. For directly managed agencies, Ministers and civil servants must then stand back from operational details and demonstrate their confidence in the competence of their

managers and the robustness of the framework by leaving managers free to manage.' (Efficiency Unit 1988, pp. 10-11)

The underlining in this passage identifies the collapsing of discursive boundaries to form equivalences between new executive agencies and pre-existing forms of arm's-length governance. For example, framework documents are said to be necessary 'not only' for agencies but 'also' for 'any' other decentralized organizations, 'whether ... nationalised industry, local authority or public body'. This unifies the governing periphery by positing inter-organizational equivalence through the connective 'also', 'whether', 'or' and 'any' (see Fairclough 2003). Opposing this is central government, implicated through the grouping of 'Ministers and civil servants' (as opposed to '*their* managers' at the periphery), and the organizational personification of 'the department's task'. Further centre-periphery separation is then suggested by the contractual terminology – 'framework', 'relationship', 'services', 'indicators' and 'monitoring' – and the call for ministers to 'stand back' and demonstrate 'confidence' in their now arm's-length managers.

Interpreting the Next Steps agency idea

In applying the tripartite narrative framework to the Next Steps Report, three elements of meaning have been identified as the microstructure of the original agency idea: managerialism, implicated enthymematically; frontline empowerment, evoked through the subjective vocalization; and decentralization, asserted by differentiating the governing 'centre' and 'periphery'. Rhetorically, the presumption of management's superiority over bureaucracy registers as a 'privileged' component within Carstensen's (2011) model. What remains now is to consider whether similar ideational foundations underpin the contemporary agency idea.

THE PUBLIC BODIES REVIEW

The Coalition Government elected in 2010 has embarked upon major arm's-length body reform, aimed at enhancing ministerial accountability and reducing administrative cost (Cabinet Office 2010). Its cross-governmental 'quango' review proposed 496 closures, mergers and other major restructures (National Audit Office 2012, p.13), but, significantly, excluded executive agencies, given their legal equivalence with core government departments. Furthermore, in seeking to bring functions 'closer' to ministers, several new agencies have been created, most notably in the Department for Education (Elston 2013).

Given their previously accepted interpretation as a mode of arm's-length, decentralized governance, the Coalition's assertion of essential difference between laudable executive agencies and problematic quangos has prompted some consternation (Committee of Public Accounts 2012; Flinders and Skelcher 2012). What follows explores this conceptual reframing in documentary and interview materials. In contrast to Next Steps' predication on implicit managerialist doctrine, an enthymematic narrative of constitutional propriety is identified as the new reform context. This frames departmental administration and ministerial control as essential to the Westminster tradition, and facilitates a considerable reinterpretation of the motivation for, and character of, agencification.

Argumentation – constitutional propriety

Contextualized by major fiscal retrenchment and declining public confidence in the establishment, the Coalition's policy of increasing the accountability and efficiency of public bodies has enjoyed broad political consensus since 2010, to the extent that something of a shared account has emerged on the problem of the oversized 'quango

state'. Distilled from parliamentary debate, this bipartisan and enthymematic narrative of constitutional propriety is formalized in Box 3.

Box 3: The constitutional default

Truncated syllogism (enthymeme):

[#3a] Departmental delivery, overseen by ministers, is the legitimate mode of state administration and the Westminster system's default.* **[#3b]** The Public Bodies Reforms are *returning* functions to departments (although these may not have originated in departments in the first place). **[#3c]** Therefore, the reforms represent a return to the constitutional default.*

[*Implicit premises]

Illustrations from Hansard, 14th October 2010:

[#3b-i] *'...we are bringing a host of functions back into departments....'* (Minister's statement)

[#3b-ii] *'...the high point of the unaccountable quango state was under the Major Government...'* (Opposition frontbench question)

[#3b-iii] *'How will the Minister ensure that quangos handed back to the Government do not generate more costly parliamentary questions?'* (Government backbench question)

Illustration from Hansard, 15th December 2011, 108WS:

[#4b-iv] *'These triennial reviews will ensure that never again will the quango state be allowed to spiral out of control.'*

Box 3's argumentation is strongly enthymematic, with both the first premise [#3a] and conclusion [#3c] remaining largely implicit, their sense extrapolating from the explicit middle premise [#3b]. This situation is frequently encountered by Feldman *et al.* (2004). Hence, the narrative's overall argument that the abolition and reintegration of 'quangos' serves to reinstate constitutional propriety [#3c] is inferred from the explicit

contention that devolved functions are being *returned* to departments. The emphasis on 'returned' is crucial, and can be seen in all four illustrations. In [b-i], the minister speaks of bringing functions '*back* into departments'; in [b-ii], the opposition spokesperson cites the 'high point of the unaccountable quango state', implying there was also a low point; in [b-iii], the backbencher refers to quangos being 'handed *back*'; and in [b-iv] the minister promises to ensure that 'never *again*' will they 'spiral out of control' (see Box 3). Despite these references to return, many quangos originated in their independent, arm's-length format, rather than first belonging to a department only to be subsequently hived-off. By implication, if not originally established within government, talk of *return* refers less to chronological reversal than to a return to constitutional propriety – that is, to the way it *should* be done, according to doctrine [#3a]. In other words, it is a matter of principle that state administration belongs in departments overseen by ministers, and the reforms are *returning* to this obvious and agreed default. According to the analytic framework, then, this rhetorical and intersubjective constitutionalism replaces managerialism as a 'privileged' element of meaning in the contemporary agency idea.

Voice – ministerial control

The narrative of constitutional propriety is told from an explicitly political perspective, whether ministerial or parliamentary. Ministers desire controls over executive administration which are commensurate with inevitable public perception of their direct responsibility. Parliament wants levers to influence and challenge state activity. As such, and contrary to Next Steps, the Public Bodies Reforms are overtly empowering to politicians.

Discursive differentiation – centralization

The narrative of constitutional propriety propagates an opposition between appropriate and inappropriate – default and deviant – governance, while the deliberate exclusion of executive agencies from the Public Bodies Reforms indicates contentment with their conformity. Agencies have in fact always been non-statutory bodies staffed by departmental civil servants, but their new characterization as essentially indivisible from departments contrasts markedly with the Efficiency Unit's original framing of agencification as a mode of decentralization and de-politicization. As previously demonstrated, agencies were formerly narrated as part of the governing 'periphery', akin in character, if not constitutionally, to local authorities, nationalized industries and public bodies. The extent of the Coalition's latter-day deviation from this is evident in both political and bureaucratic discourse on the current reforms. As the minister explained, first in his opening parliamentary statement:

'I stress that departmental agencies – executive agencies – are not in the review's scope. They are directly controlled by Ministers who are accountable to Parliament for what they do.' (Hansard 14th October 2010)

Then, in response to an opposition question:

'I think that [the right hon. Gentleman] confuses the role of executive agencies with the function of a quango. It seems to me perfectly proper that when Members of Parliament inquire about an activity they receive a reply from the executive agency's chief executive. That does not mean that the agency is not accountable to Parliament through what a Minister says and does.' (Ibid)

And similarly, when questioned in committee:

'[W]e deliberately exclude executive agencies on the basis that those are already accountable. Ministers take responsibility for what executive agencies do.' (Public Administration Select Committee 2010, ev. 12)

All three citations frame agencies as substantively different to arm's-length bodies, first through individualization ('they' and 'those') and then by direct comparison ('are not', 'confuses', 'does not mean' and 'are already'). Complementing this explicit differentiation, the extracts also contain implicit opposition. For example, in describing agencies as 'directly controlled', 'accountable' and 'perfectly proper', the implication is of uncontrollable, unaccountable and improper non-agencies, as the narrative of constitutional propriety claims.

Aside from political discourse, this reframing of agencies as centralized, politically-proximate governance resurfaces in bureaucratic accounts of the Public Bodies programme. For example, there is the following interview conversation:

Official: *'[T]here is a very clear case through Public Bodies Reforms, and this is what we talk about with accountability for public functions, about there being a [emphasis] very strong centre who sets strategic direction on particular policy areas. So that's why, in a number of cases, we're moving things from a public body, either to an agency or in the central department – because the ministers have taken a view that it should, rightly, be a minister who is responsible for the final decision. And so I think that does refer to the nervousness about policymaking arm's-length bodies, and a lack of accountability. So you've actually got bodies that are making policy – at least, they are deciding things that influence citizens' lives – but they don't have an elected mandate to do so.'*

Interviewer: *Yeah, okay.*

O: *So I think that does then lead to a direction where you pull more policymaking decisions into the centre....'*

As previously, this interview passage is predicated on a centre-periphery opposition, with the emphatic description of 'a very strong centre' (singular) implicating a peripheral non-centre. However, departing again from the accepted understanding of the arm's-length executive agency, the official populates the centre by discursively collapsing department-agency distinctions – 'either to an agency, or in the central

department’ – and contrasting this with ‘policymaking arm’s-length bodies’ that lack an ‘elected mandate’.

Another official similarly differentiated agencies and public bodies on the basis of the latter’s decentralized position:

O: ‘I think it’s just maximizing ministerial accountability, and there’s a range of ways in which that is happening. And the agency model is an important part of that, because unlike, for example, an NDPB [a quango], an agency is part of a department; ministers are, I think, held to be more directly involved and responsible and accountable where it happens within that structure, than if it’s a sort of para-statal arm’s-length body – a satellite on the outside.’

Here, discursive differentiation is again effected through comparison (‘unlike’ and ‘more’), with agencies being identified as ‘part of a department’ and therefore within a minister’s responsibility. This differs from a ‘para-statal arm’s-length body – a satellite on the outside’. By extension, agencies are neither ‘on the outside’, nor ‘para-statal’ and ‘arm’s-length’, as was later confirmed:

O: ‘The dividing line between what’s an agency and where it becomes an NDPB?’

I: Yeah?

O: I mean, I think they are different beasts. As you say, an agency’s part of a department. I think, as I said, the term ‘arm’s-length body’ is fairly umbrella like and within that there will be a variation in the distance – in the length of the arm – whichever sort of analogy you want to use. I think they are a business unit, of a kind, within a department. They are staffed by civil servants; they are usually headed by a chief executive who is also a civil servant, who has a direct line of accountability not to an independent board but to the minister.

I: And that’s a key distinction, is it?

O: It is a key distinction. And it’s not a separate entity in any sense.’

Despite referencing a gradation of ‘the length of the arm’, this passage is primarily about differentiating agencies and quangos by the latter’s decentralized position. They are ‘different beasts’, with agencies being ‘staffed by civil servants’, headed by a chief executive with ‘a direct line of accountability’ to ministers, and ‘not a separate entity in any sense’.

Table 2 summarizes the explicit and implicit opposition within the political and bureaucratic discourse reviewed above. Against the argumentation of constitutional propriety, the suggestion is of the discursive departmentalization of the agency idea, effected through the collapsing of department-agency distinctions and the forging of new non-equivalence with arm’s-length public bodies.

*****ADD TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE*****

The foregoing analysis primarily utilized anti-quango discourse. By turning now to the creation of a new executive agency, argumentation more fully concerned with contemporary agencification is examined to test whether the observed reinterpretation and departmentalization extends beyond this anti-quango rhetoric.

The Standards and Testing Agency

The Department for Education (DfE) previously owned 17 public bodies and no executive agencies (Cabinet Office 2010). Reflecting both the central Public Bodies programme and major internal policy change, the Education Act 2011 transferred many of these formerly delegated responsibilities to ministers. To deliver this expanded departmental remit, four executive agencies have been established, employing some 1,350 officials. The Standards and Testing Agency (STA) was the first of these, assuming

functions from the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA) – an abolished quango. The published business case is analysed briefly below.

Following the narrative of constitutional propriety, the STA business case claims a strong ministerial mandate:

'Ministers made it clear that not all functions currently carried out by QCDA will cease. They indicated that statutory assessment ... would continue.... [T]he Secretary of State signalled his intention to establish a new Executive Agency, the Standards and Testing Agency, within the Department for Education....' (DfE, 2011, p. 1)

This political ownership contrasts markedly with Next Steps' overtly bottom-up, emancipatory vocalization, which framed agencification as a response to the disempowered and frustrated frontline. Here, alluding to the overarching narrative of constitutional propriety, agency status rather fulfils requirements of ministerial responsibility and accountability:

'Ministers are clear that they are accountable to Parliament for delivery of this important part of the Government's education agenda. Bringing the work into an Agency within DfE provides for that clear line of accountability.' (DfE, 2011, p. 5)

Again, this inside-outside, centre-periphery dualism relocates agencies to a ministerially-proximate position – 'an Agency *within* DfE'.

The interpretive repopulating of the governing centre to include both core departments and centralized agencies is bolstered by the STA business case's reference to corporate integration, whereby new organisational singularity and wholeness is to be achieved from previous dispersal and multiplicity. For example:

'Delivering the current programme of statutory assessment and testing through an arm's-length delivery model is considered inefficient and less effective. In particular, as a non-departmental public body (NDPB) QCDA delivered its own

corporate services. There are economies of scale to be gained from merging those functions ... with those in the Department to create a single shared services approach for all proposed DfE Executive Agencies....’ (DfE, 2011, p. 2)

The differentiation here is between multiple corporate service centres in arm’s-length bodies, and a single, integrated back office in the department. Thus, not only are agencies laudable for being departmental rather than arm’s length, but their creation also represents a move towards consolidation (‘merging’, ‘single’, ‘all’).

The business case makes no reference to agencification assuring managerial independence and de-regulation – the key drivers of the original Next Steps programme. However, there is a slight challenge to the prevailing departmentalization trend in its discussion of the chief executive’s autonomy in sanctioning school test standards (DfE, 2011, p.8). Indeed, it is largely this requirement of political impartiality – a relic of the former QCDA’s statutory independence – that leads to the favouring of agency status over full structural integration:

‘The development and delivery of tests ... require[s] high levels of public confidence. Giving direct responsibility ... to a Directorate in the Department – as opposed to an Executive Agency – would create reputational risks. The Government could be open to accusations of political interference... [Therefore] although option three – bringing the function in-house – has the same NPV [net present value] as option two, the risk to the statutory assessment and testing system are too significant to make option three the preferred option.’ (DfE, 2011, pp. 5-6)

In differentiating the new STA from “in-house” delivery, this passage re-erects Next Steps’ familiar department-agency distinction. Nonetheless, and crucially, the necessity of independence in this small area of operation is rationalized by the need for technical, apolitical standard setting, rather than to protect against monolithic bureaucracy. In short, ‘agency’ does not ‘let the managers manage’, but instead prevents newly-empowered ministers from exceeding their constitutionally-defined authority.

Interpreting the contemporary agency idea

In applying the narrative analytic framework to the 2010 reform discourse, three new elements of meaning have been identified: constitutional propriety, narrated in accounts of state powers returning to the executive; ministerial control, evoked in the reform's overtly political instigation; and centralization, effected through the emphatic differentiation of agencies and arm's-length quangos, as well as the claim to organizational consolidation. Constitutional propriety is the rhetorically privileged element.

DISCUSSION: REINTERPRETING AGENCIES

The modelling of political ideas as amalgams of unequal 'elements of meaning' directs longitudinal analysis to register changes in either microstructural substance or elemental weighting (Carstensen 2011). On this basis, the article has looked to rhetorical argumentation, narrative voice and discursive differentiation to generate two ideational configurations of what is, ostensibly, the same politico-administrative idea. These are illustrated in Figure 1, where larger circles indicate privileged (enthymematic) elements. Given that no element repeats across the two episodes, including at the rhetorical, 'privileged' level that is most seminal to an idea's overall meaning (Carstensen 2011), the indication is of major diachronic reinterpretation. Next Steps' original enthymematic dependence on wider managerialist ideology reaffirms its intimate association with NPM. The Efficiency Unit neither defined good management, nor explained its preference to traditional bureaucracy; rather, these were taken as obvious and uninteresting, to be readily inferred by a culturally-competent audience. Conversely, in 2010, protection from monolithic, unitary government featured nowhere in the Coalition's advocacy of agencification; instead, the new basis for reform pertained

to constitutional propriety, with agencies representing a suitably centralized, politically-proximate and accountable mode of governance. Illustrating this, the single mention of independence in the STA business case concerned the assurance of apolitical decision-making in properly technical matters – less a neo-Next Steps valorising of management decentralization than a further invocation of the necessity of constitutional propriety.

*****ADD FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE*****

This analysis carries three principal implications. Firstly, despite the agency model's continuing importance to UK public service delivery, its conceptual departmentalization challenges existing claims of the fragmented nature of central government, as well as the methods and assumptions facilitating that continuing description. Amongst the few available 'post-Next Steps' studies, Elston (2013) points to only partial structural reaggregation through organizational mergers and limited de-agencification, while James *et al.* (2011, p. 67) suggest that, despite adjustments, the essential agency model 'remains intact'. Both deploy large-*N* methods akin to organization ecology. To a similar end, Flinders and Skelcher (2012, p. 332) denounce the Coalition's exclusion of agencies from its quango review as propagating 'a constitutionally dubious distinction between executive agencies and executive NDPBs' which previous governments found to be 'meaningless'. Each analysis therefore assumes broad continuity of meaning and practice against the original Next Steps precepts of managerialism, empowerment and decentralization, and yet close attention to implicit understandings in modern agency discourse strongly challenges this assumption. The Coalition's narrative of the constitutionally-correct, politically-empowering and centralized agency is thorough and mutually-reinforcing, strongly confounding the Next Steps image. For this reason,

renewed fieldwork engagement with contemporary agency practice is a requisite if claims for either continuity or reversal are to be properly substantiated.

The second implication broadens to the question of paradigmatic testament. Although, as demonstrated, Next Steps epitomized multiple NPM doctrines, whether the idea's contemporary reinterpretation continues to do so is dependent on the (much contested) delimitation of managerialism and its purported successors. Unlike some more radical representations, Christensen and Lægreid (2007, p. 14) interpret 'post-NPM' as a managerialism that, although 'by no means over', has been challenged, hybridized and partially reversed. This suggestion of within-paradigm evolution befits the case narrated above; for, while key managerialist notions of decentralization and management empowerment (Hood 1991; Peters and Savoie 1994) disappear from contemporary agency discourse, the continuing – albeit differently manifested – assertion of political primacy over public institutions signals the endurance of another key NPM tenet (see Aucoin 1990). In combination, then, this does indeed suggest a layering and asymmetric evolution of former doctrinal precepts: that is, a strengthening and redefinition of the accountability function, but a loss of the management autonomization logic. Whether this extends to paradigm change again requires fieldwork evidence on day-to-day agency practice.

The third implication pertains to the efficacy of population studies and organizational ecology for exploring continuity and change in public administration. This article has shown that, beneath the ostensible endurance of a salient public management reform, its on going enlivenment via tacit and embedded understanding testifies to profound diachronic transformation since the high NPM era. Occurring with neither legal redefinition nor overt policy change, this reconfiguration and interpretive

departmentalization is necessarily overlooked by large-*N* landscape profiling, thereby demonstrating how continuity of policy and paradigm can be readily misread in such analyses. In short, while the agency population may have outwardly sustained, this is not to preclude the possibility of substantial conceptual and functional redefinition.

CONCLUSION

The intimate association between administrative decentralization and NPM should secure agency research an eminent position in the pan-disciplinary debate on paradigmatic (in)stability. The last decade has indeed witnessed a considerable burgeoning of studies; particularly those examining agency ‘populations’, and almost entirely within a neo-positivist framework. While this has certainly advanced the field, especially in gauging the international scale of administrative fragmentation, there is much to be gained from eschewing the epistemological and methodological strictures that modernist empiricism imposes, and focusing less on quantifying and more on interpreting agencification. Indeed, if the study of administrative decentralization is to even partly meet its potential as a paradigmatic barometer, the question of enduring policy meaning is unavoidable. Moreover, methodologically, the particular cost of population ecology is its insensitivity to the social ontology of agency policy and practice. If, as a social construct rather than a reified, pseudo-materialist ‘object’, the meaning of agencification is fluid both synchronically and diachronically, high-level population tracing will only ever allow limited insight into the nature of (post-)managerialist public administration. Exemplifying this is the fact that, to date, studies of the UK’s agency population have suggested broad continuity since Next Steps (Elston 2013; James *et al.* 2011), and yet it remains far from clear that the agency idea necessarily *means* what it did twenty-five years ago.

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