Social & Cultural Geography

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rscg20

Beyond ‘the paradox of our own complicity’: the place of activism and identity in ‘voluntary sector’ stories from Manchester and Auckland

Richard G. Kyle\textsuperscript{a}, Robin Kearns\textsuperscript{b} & Christine Milligan\textsuperscript{c}

\textsuperscript{a} School of Nursing, Midwifery and Health, University of Stirling (Highland Campus), Old Perth Road, Inverness, Highland IV2 3JH, UK
\textsuperscript{b} School of Environment, the University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand
\textsuperscript{c} Division of Health Research, Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK

Published online: 26 Nov 2014.

To cite this article: Richard G. Kyle, Robin Kearns & Christine Milligan (2014): Beyond ‘the paradox of our own complicity’: the place of activism and identity in ‘voluntary sector’ stories from Manchester and Auckland, Social & Cultural Geography, DOI: 10.1080/14649365.2014.983148

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2014.983148

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the “Content”) contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms &
Beyond ‘the paradox of our own complicity’: the place of activism and identity in ‘voluntary sector’ stories from Manchester and Auckland

Richard G. Kylea, Robin Kearnsb* and Christine Milliganc

aSchool of Nursing, Midwifery and Health, University of Stirling (Highland Campus), Old Perth Road, Inverness, Highland IV2 3JH, UK; bSchool of Environment, the University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand; cDivision of Health Research, Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK

(Received 17 December 2013; accepted 9 October 2014)

This paper problematises ‘sectors’ as the core organising concept for spaces within social policy and ‘third sector’ theory and practice. It does so by drawing on (auto)biographical narratives from a cross-national study of activism in the UK and New Zealand that explored activists’ experiences of, and motivations for, movement between the statutory and voluntary sectors. We argue that the perpetuation of sectoral thinking represents a paradox with which scholars have largely been complicit. That is, by embarking on ever more refined definitional exercises, the concept of sectors in general, and the tri-sectoral map (comprising state, market and third sector) in particular, remains uncontested. Through identifying reasons behind inter-sectoral shifts, we show how sectors are both enlisted and ‘erased’ by activists to achieve their aims, thus demonstrating the fuzziness of sectoral boundaries. (Auto)biographical approaches allow us to unpack the importance of time and place in shaping people’s activism. We conclude that if researchers can learn from activists, and tread a fine line between the utility and futility of sectors as a conceptual and empirical reality, then we might escape the paradox. Thus, new pathways through ‘third sector’ spaces can be explored and alternative policy solutions, free from myopic ‘sectoral’ thinking, can be envisioned.

Keywords: boundary crossing; sectors; narrative; activists; identity; Manchester, UK; Auckland, New Zealand

Au-delà du « paradoxe de notre propre complicité »: la place de l’activisme et de l’identité dans des récits du ‘secteur du bénévolat’ de Manchester et Auckland

Cet article problématise les « secteurs » en tant que concept au cœur de l’organisation des lieux à l’intérieur de la politique sociale et de la théorie et de la pratique du ‘secteur tertiaire’. Il fait cela en s’inspirant de récits (auto)biographiques issus d’une étude transnationale d’activisme au Royaume Uni et en Nouvelle-Zélande qui a exploré les expériences d’activistes et leurs motivations concernant le mouvement entre les secteurs statutaires et bénévoles. Nous arguons que la perpétuation de la pensée sectorielle représente un paradoxe dont les intellectuels ont été amplement complices. C’est-à-dire que, en s’embarquant dans des exercices de définition de plus en plus sophistiqués, le concept de secteurs en général, et la carte tri-sectorielle (compris l’état, le marché et le secteur tertiaire) en particulier, reste incontesté. En identifiant les raisons derrière les changements inter-sectoriels, nous montrons comment les secteurs sont à la fois incorporés et ‘effacés’ par les activistes afin d’atteindre leurs buts, démontrant ainsi la nature floue des démarcations sectorielles. Les approches (auto) biographiques nous permettent de déballer l’importance du temps et du lieu dans la

*Corresponding author. Email: r.kearns@auckland.ac.nz

© 2014 Taylor & Francis
Más allá de ‘la paradoja de nuestra propia complicidad’: el lugar del activismo y de la identidad en las historias del ‘sector voluntario’ de Manchester y Auckland

Este artículo problematiza ‘los sectores’ como concepto básico de organización de espacios dentro de la política social y la teoría y práctica del ‘tercer sector’. Lo hace basándose en narrativas (auto) biográficas de un estudio internacional de activismo en el Reino Unido y Nueva Zelanda, el cual exploró las experiencias y los motivos de los activistas para desplazarse entre el sector reglamentado y el voluntario. Se sostiene que la perpetuación del pensamiento sectorial representa una paradoja con la que los estudiosos han sido cómplices en gran medida. Es decir, al embarcarse en ejercicios de definición cada vez más refinados, el concepto de sectores en general, y el mapa de la triple sectorial (que comprende el estado, el mercado y el tercer sector), en particular, sigue sin ser cuestionado. A través de la identificación de las causas detrás de los cambios intersectoriales se muestra cómo los sectores son tanto listados y ‘borrados’ por los activistas para conseguir sus objetivos, lo que demuestra la falta de claridad de los límites sectoriales. Las aproximaciones (auto) biográficas permiten deshacer la importancia del tiempo y lugar en la formación del activismo de las personas. Se llega a la conclusión de que si los investigadores pueden aprender de los activistas, y trazar una línea muy fina entre la utilidad y la futilidad de los sectores como una realidad conceptual y empírica, entonces sería posible escapar de la paradoja. Así, nuevos caminos a través de espacios del ‘tercer sector’ pueden ser explorados y soluciones políticas alternativas, libres del pensamiento ‘sectorial’ miope, pueden ser previstas.

Palabras claves: tercer sector; narrativa; activistas; identidad; Manchester, Reino Unido; Auckland, Nueva Zelanda

1. Introduction

There has been a resurgence of interest in narrative approaches in the social sciences since the 1980s (Chamberlayne, Bornmat, & Wengraf, 2000; Czarniawska, 2004; Finger, 1989; Frank, 1995). Social policy and third sector scholars have increasingly embraced this ‘biographical (re)turn’ to craft rich and nuanced accounts that emphasise the lived experience of members of voluntary organisations and are alert to the role of identity and emotion in shaping organisational space at a range of scales (Conradson, 2003; Milligan, 2005; Newman, 2013; Somers, 1994). In particular, critical approaches drawing on written and orally recounted (auto)biography that highlight the interplay between organisational and personal life have become increasingly popular and sophisticated (e.g. Godfrey & Richardson, 2004; Ladkin, 1999; Lewis, 2008b).

Lewis (2008a, pp. 561–562) has summarised four key strengths of life-work histories. First, they ‘can provide a high level of historical depth and ethnographic detail’ facilitating the re-historicisation of policy narratives. Second, structure and agency can be linked. Put another way, narrated (auto)biography provides insight into the ways in which the wider institutional and organisational landscape has influenced individual actors’ trajectories and how, in turn, their actions have (re)-shaped the contexts within which they are embedded.
Third, life-work histories can ‘humanise the research process’ by recovering the everyday individual actions that enliven institutions (Conradson, 2003). Fourth, they may have a ‘counter-cultural role’ as centring marginalised voices might ‘challenge received wisdom’ (Lewis, 2008a, p. 562). In addition, we highlight a fifth strength: (auto)biographical approaches enable researchers to ‘unpack the importance of time and place in the shaping of people’s activism’ and, crucially, allow individuals to narrate (and locate) their identity (Milligan, Kearns, & Kyle, 2011, p. 8).

In this paper, we build on Lewis’s work to argue that (auto)biographical research can usefully be employed to challenge the straightforward and sedimented conceptualisation of sectors that has underpinned much recent theorisation in social policy research and third sector studies. As in Newman’s (2013) examination of women’s transference of activist commitments into their working lives, we suggest that the adoption of (auto)biographical approaches helps to reveal how individual and organisational life is closely entwined. This approach affords opportunities to envision alternative theorisations of the third sector that, in turn, support alternative social policy solutions that are not shackled to myopic sectoral thinking.

To illustrate our claim, we draw on a comparative study of activism in the UK and New Zealand (NZ) that involved activists narrating their ‘career trajectory’ through the various movements, campaigns, organisations and sectors with which they had been involved. The resulting autobiographical narratives describe how and why individuals moved between, and forged connections among, voluntary, statutory and private sector organisations over space and through time, the barriers and enablers of this process, and how these organisational and sectoral shifts facilitated or hindered their activism. The particular focus of this paper is on boundary crossing between the voluntary and statutory sectors. Consequently, we acknowledge that although intra-sectoral shifts (e.g. between sub-sectors within the third sector) are common, they are not the core focus of this paper. Rather, by charting the detailed cross-sectoral movements of activists, the ways in which sectors are enlisted and ‘erased’ by activists to achieve social change can be discerned, thus revealing the definitional and empirical fuzziness of sectoral boundaries. We suggest that, rather than within traditional political spaces, the ‘third sector’ is actively assembled by actors within its bounds and border areas.

The paper proceeds in five parts. First, we examine ways in which the ‘third sector’ has been understood and the definitional exercises that have led to what we term ‘the paradox of our own complicity’. Drawing on recent research that seeks to deconstruct sectoral maps, we then argue that autobiographical approaches allow us to move beyond this paradox. Following a methodological note, we draw on activists’ narratives to draw out examples of inter-sectoral movement within these accounts, paying particular attention to five important – and inter-related – motivations behind these shifts (strategic, environmental, pragmatic, emotional and vocational). We then use our case material to tease out the importance of what we call ‘anchored identity’, a hitherto under-theorised dimension of boundary crossing behaviour. Finally, we suggest that accounts of inter-sectoral transit allow us to explore new pathways through ‘third sector’ research that, ultimately, help to decouple social policy and practice from restrictive sectoral thinking.

2. Towards ‘the paradox of our own complicity’

The language of sectors emerged through Etzioni’s (1973) work, in which he described the third sector as comprising people whose commitments and actions are fundamentally value-driven. Over the four decades since, scholars have frequently been caught in
something of a ‘terminological tangle’ (Salamon & Anheier, 1992). There have been numerous attempts to categorise a sector increasingly characterised by its diversity and hybridity into a single unifying entity that not only distils the essence of the form, function and ideology of these organisations but also ‘travels’ over time and space enabling cross-national comparative research and historical investigation (Morris, 2000; Salamon & Anheier, 1997). As a result, researchers and practitioners find themselves having to navigate through an almost bewildering array of terms each of which not only emphasises and attempts to categorise a particular set of organisational features (Salamon, 1992) but also reflects its proponents’ political, philosophical and organisational standpoint. The sector is, for instance, variably referred to using terms as diverse as third sector, voluntary sector, non-profit sector, social enterprise and non-governmental organisations. Further, each term presupposes a particular worldview. This navigational task is made even more challenging because these terms are often uncritically conflated and used interchangeably (Morris, 2000; Salamon & Anheier, 1992). In this paper, we follow Corry’s (2010) concern in pointing out that the very term ‘third sector suggests … entities (that), however diverse, together make up a coherent whole’ (p. 11). More crucially, we problematise the utility of the prefix ‘third’, with its rank-order implications, and instead use ‘voluntary sector’ to better align with the terminology used by our study participants.

The definition advocated by The John Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project (CNP) has arguably gained most currency.¹ The lynchpin of the CNP was the development of what its directors termed the structural-operational definition of the non-profit sector (Salamon & Anheier, 1992). This definition provided ‘a common language and concept of the non-profit sector’ (Salamon & Anheier, 1997, p. 4), which has enabled the characterisation and cross-national comparison of the voluntary sector in 40 countries by categorising and including organisations that make a ‘reasonable showing’ on five criteria: formal; private; non-profit-distributing; self-governing; and voluntary (Salamon & Anheier, 1992, pp. 135–136). Although use of Salamon and Anheier’s structural-operational definition has now become widespread, this approach has its critics. For example, Voluntas published two commentaries (Ragin, 1998; Steinberg & Young, 1998) arguing that the structural-operational definition required refinement before further theory-building. Moreover, Morris (2000) suggested that ‘the structural-operational definition is unable to cope with the institutional diversity of earlier periods’ due to its ‘contextual specificity’ (p. 41).

This critique notwithstanding, it is containment that lies at the heart of such definitional exercises. Through the careful selection and methodical application of a set of criteria, the common aim – regardless of approach – is to create a typology of organisations that can be legitimately corralled into a concept of ‘voluntary’ sector. Hence, definitional exercises are concerned with mapping the limits and extent of an institutional landscape comprising three sectors: private, state and a voluntary (arguably residual) sector. We suggest that this approach has led to a paradox with which scholars have been complicit: the process of packaging up a sector by its various attributes leads, and indeed permits, us only to see and, crucially, theorise within these definitional containers. We argue, however, that attending to the co-constitution of careers and sectors in activists’ narratives in different places at different times in their activist careers allows us to move beyond ‘the paradox of our own complicity’.

3. Beyond ‘the paradox of our own complicity’

Brandsen, van de Donk, and Putters (2005) have directly challenged the notion of sectors as an organising concept. They contend that of the range of definitions on offer, the ‘third
sector’ is ‘possibly the vaguest term’ and suffers acutely from empirical and conceptual ‘boundary problems’ as it is ‘based on ideal, simple notions of the state, market and community’ (p. 750). They make a subtle, yet potent, semantic shift from a definition of ‘the third sector occupying a distinctive social space outside both the market and the state’ (Salamon & Anheier, 1992) or as a ‘middle sector that operates best between the public and private sectors’ (Uphoff, 1996, p. 24 cited in Najam, 1996, p. 214) to the emergence of ‘the third sector as a hybrid domain amidst the three ideal or ‘pure’ domains of society’ (Brandsen et al., 2005, p. 751: added emphasis). Brandsen et al. (2005) suggest that:

There is no reason to believe that the different domains will empirically move closer together; quite the reverse. If this is the case, then perhaps the fuzziness is not fuzzy at all; it is not the fog that obscures our vision, but the very thing we have been trying to discern (pp. 758–759).

This situation, they argue, leads towards an altogether different approach to third sector research that is less concerned with charting the contours of an ever more accurate tri-sectoral map and navigating safely within these bounds but rather constitutes a far more exploratory journey of discovery: ‘Rather than attempting to carve a specific niche, with clear boundaries, it may be more effective to search out the border areas and make them as problematic as possible’ (Brandsen et al., 2005, p. 762). In practice, this move necessitates a departure from research that focuses on ‘the “safe” core cases […] the “hardcore” actors […] that appear closest to the ideal types’ to an empirical investigation of ‘the fuzziest cases, those that can be found on the fringes of the domain’ (pp. 761–762).

We are not seeking to redraw the tri-sectoral map in this paper. Rather we connect with this research which emphasises and embraces the challenges of defining sectoral boundaries. More specifically, we respond to Brandsen et al.’s (2005) call to focus on the ‘fuzziest cases’ by exploring the experiences of these ‘actors on the fringes’ who, we illustrate, are individuals who transit between the statutory and voluntary sectors.

### 3.1 Boundary crossing

Lewis (2008a, 2008b) has made the most sustained effort to understand ‘boundary crossing’ between the voluntary and statutory sectors through constructing nine archetypes comprising three forms of boundary crossing activity (i.e. ‘reactive’, ‘proactive’ and ‘opportunistic’) at three analytical levels (i.e. individual, organisation and sector) (2008c, p. 31). At the individual level, he identifies how activists narrate either a ‘role-based’ or ‘sector-based’ identity (2008a, p. 570). For the former, the motivation to switch sectors stems from a desire to follow the job or issue, whereas for the latter, it is a sense of belonging to a sector which triggers such moves (2008a, pp. 570–572).

There is much in common between Lewis’s research and our own. However, there are also points of divergence, not least the subtly – yet importantly – different foci of the studies. Although a key aspect of our work was to understand how activists moved between sectors during their career, we did not deliberately set out to identify only those individuals who had experienced these inter-sectoral shifts. Instead, we were equally interested in changing intra-sectoral involvements in different organisations, movements and campaigns during the course of an activist’s career: activism was our attentional frame rather than boundary crossing per se.

### 4. Methods

Our discussion draws on a 2-year research project entitled Placing Voluntary Activism conducted in the cities of Manchester, the UK and Auckland, NZ – two cities of
comparable size, population, cultural diversity and political environment. Data were collected 2005–2007 and the study involved a survey \((n = 267)\) and in-depth interviews with voluntary and statutory sector actors \((n = 80)\) to explore issues around governance, partnership working and activism (see Table 1).

In seeking to understand how shifting policy landscapes influenced the experiences and actions of activists across the life course, we also gathered a series of (auto) biographical narratives \((n = 46)\) across both cities involving 47 individuals (Table 2). These narratives were designed to unpack respondents’ career trajectories over time, tracing the story of their involvements from its trigger point to the time of the narrative. Individuals either self-defined as activists or were defined as such by others. The term ‘activist’ was thus broadly defined and not bound by, for example, specific roles or responsibilities, or a specific level of seniority within organisations. Instead, informed by a questionnaire used in an earlier phase of the study, activism was defined as a spectrum of engagement that stretched from manoeuvring change from high-level strategic managerial positions to highly politicised direct action. Indeed, elsewhere we have reported that study participants typically recounted activist biographies that started in protest movements and shifted towards effecting change through partnership (Milligan et al., 2011). A central recognition was that individuals identified a transformational element to their work: that their raison d’être was to influence individuals and organisations or mobilise communities (however defined) towards social and political change. Importantly, not all activists initially identified as such; recounting their biography provided them with an opportunity to explore both their understanding of the term and alternatives such as ‘volunteer’ (UK AB 11) or ‘do-gooder’ (NZ AB 22) with which some preferred to identify.

Because we were primarily interested in people’s activist career trajectories, we adopted an (auto)biographical approach. This meant that we focused on those aged 30 years and upwards as they were able to narrate, and reflect critically upon, lengthier accounts of their careers (Table 2). Respondents occupied a variety of sectoral positions with representation largely from the voluntary and community \((n = 25; 54\%)\) and statutory \((n = 10; 22\%)\) sectors. This range of respondents reflected a recruitment strategy that asked voluntary and statutory sector representatives interviewed in earlier phases of the study to identify activists as well as subsequent ‘snowballing’ from other activists we had interviewed (Table 2). Moreover, some activists ‘straddled’ sectoral boundaries; this

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase 1</th>
<th>Phase 2</th>
<th>Phase 3</th>
<th>Phase 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mapping and questionnaire survey of all mental health and community safety organisations in Manchester and Auckland ((n = 267))</td>
<td>Interviews with 24 key individuals from local, regional and national voluntary organisations in each country</td>
<td>Interviews with 16 key individuals from local, regional and national government in each country</td>
<td>23 Activist (auto) biographical narratives in each country</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local ((n = 8; 4) per sub-sector)</td>
<td>Local ((n = 6; 3) per sub-sector)</td>
<td>Regional ((n = 8; 4) per sub-sector)</td>
<td>Regional ((n = 6; 3) per sub-sector)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National ((n = 8; 4) per sub-sector)</td>
<td>National ((n = 4; 2) per sub-sector)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total interviews</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
tendency was more apparent in NZ where several people had carefully carved out a role as a ‘consultant’, enabling them to agitate for change simultaneously from within or without both sectors (see also Lewis 2008c, p. 572). Others were located in organisations or institutions largely located off the tri-sectoral map (e.g. clergy \([n = 1]\), academics \([n = 7]\)) (Table 2). Here, our aim is neither to compare the existence or extent of sectoral thinking
between the UK and NZ, nor to carefully delineate differences in the drawing of the tri-sectoral map by various actors in each country. Rather, we combine learning from the narratives to identify the process of inter-sectoral transit that poses a challenge to this tri-sectoral map and sectoral thinking more broadly. That said, where appropriate, we alert the reader to important geographic characteristics and differences between study sites in order to aid interpretation and analysis.

The (auto)biographical approach is characterised by the abundance and richness of qualitative data it generates which, in turn, poses challenges for subsequent analysis and (re)presentation. There is an ever-present danger that certain analyses and presentation formats could remove subtleties from original narrative by slicing it into ‘useable chunks’ of data. To guard against this eventuality, following an initial phase of content analysis using qualitative software, each narrative was subjected to a second round of analysis at a team ‘data workshop’. Further, to alleviate the almost inevitable de-contextualisation, which results when illustrative quotations are used in academic articles, quotations have been coded by country, research phase and narrative number to enable tracking of respondents across publications from the Placing Voluntary Activism study. Thus, for example, UK AB 1 refers to the first Activist Biography narrated in the UK.

5. Narrating inter-sectoral shifts

The following discussion draws primarily on the strength of autobiographical approaches to access intimately personal, emotional and, indeed, spiritual reasons behind inter-sectoral shifts. Here, we are interested in people’s narratives of what Lewis (2008c) terms ‘entry-ism’ and ‘escape’ (p. 23). Connecting his work with scholarship around the emotional sustainability of activism (Brown & Pickerill, 2009) complements and extends Lewis’s approach, thus enabling exploration of Brandsen et al.’s (2005) ‘border areas’. In so doing, we seek to challenge and complicate the neat tri-sectoral map that presupposes sectors to be both an empirical and conceptual reality, thus effecting an escape from the ‘paradox of our own complicity’. Hence, this empirical investigation builds upon Lewis’s foundation. We extend his analysis of the motivations underpinning inter-sectoral movement between the voluntary and statutory sectors among activists by delving deeper into the heart – figuratively and literally – of the (moving) self. We do so by teasing out five interconnected triggers behind activists’ boundary-crossing behaviour: strategic, environmental, pragmatic, emotional and vocational.

5.1 Strategic

I think the lines are getting more and more blurred between the voluntary sector and the statutory sector. And I think that’s right because what’s important is what you can do and who actually does it is kind of secondary. (UK AB 3)

Activists often agreed with Brandsen et al.’s (2005) argument that sector boundaries are growing increasingly ‘fuzzy’. Yet, despite the foregoing participant’s assertion, others suggested that the organisational standpoint from which social change is attempted can – and does – impact positively or negatively upon success. Sectoral boundaries, however blurred, arguably harbour unique sets of knowledge, skills and expertise invested in the organisations and, in turn, the individuals from which they are constituted. Consequently, for many activists, a move into local or national government or a statutory agency represented a strategic manoeuvre to learn the ‘rules of the game’ (UK AB 1) in order to further their activism:
What I learned from the statutory sector which was very useful was systems and how systems work. I also learned [...] that if you’re out in the community your access, for example, to members, to councillors, is very different from when you’re an officer in the council. And I also learned how to use language and how to use language in a much more sophisticated way. So it was not about doing “this needs to happen because of”, but it’s about finding the buzzwords and learning how to manipulate those buzzwords in order to get what you want. (UK AB 1)

Such shifts were frequently made by those who felt at ‘home’ within voluntary sector organisations. Time and again ‘entry-ism’ for these individuals was narrated as a preparation for a future exit and frequently framed as a proactive incursion: ‘a means to an end’ (NZ AB 20). Put simply, the knowledge, skills, languages and management techniques (e.g. ‘around doing action plans and looking at outcomes and outputs’ [UK AB 1]) were learned in order to be ‘carried out’ and used to influence the development of the organisation they had left or another whose ethos aligned with their beliefs and values.

I wanted to get an understanding of what the issues were from the statutory sector and that that knowledge would in turn support the development of my organisation. (UK AB 16)

I actually made a conscious decision to go into the central government policy environment to learn how that worked. [...] I wanted to influence the policy environment but didn’t know enough about how it worked. So that was what I call doing my time on the inside [laughs]. (NZ AB 20)

For others, a sectoral switch was less about a single relatively brief incursion, but part of a longer term strategy of ‘criss-crossing’ between sectors that we liken elsewhere to a ‘cross-sectoral dance’ (Milligan et al., 2011). This repeated transit between statutory and voluntary organisations throughout a career was part of a continual learning process: movements to particular organisations at particular times were motivated by a desire to accumulate new knowledge, skills and tools that accrue to, and find application within, different sectors over time as organisations respond to changing political and policy landscapes:

I went into a more public sector environment, had the ability to understand structures and operate within those sort of systems. [...] But if you are connected to your own communities, you know that you’re only there for a short period of time. And for me I kept going in and out of between working in a community sector organisation, or in a public sector organisation, and then in the ’90s when I branched out on my own, in my own consulting practice, so it was, so it’s very much taking on board a more entrepreneurial approach. (NZ AB 09)

In this way the idea and (albeit porous) reality of ‘sectors’ was purposively enlisted by activists to pursue their aims. As another individual said:

Though I love the voluntary and community sector that’s not what guides me, it’s communities themselves, people themselves. And the closest to that is the voluntary and community sector. But whatever provided the best opportunity to achieve change is where I’d go I suspect. (UK AB 2)

5.2 Environmental

A crucial aspect of the activists’ craft is an ability to sense shifts in the institutional landscape, to read its undulations and respond by seising opportune moments to switch between organisations or sectors. As one activist said:

I think it is a very important thing to actually keep reading the environment and making changes and trying to think ahead; where are you going to have to go in the future if you’re going to actually make an impact? (NZ AB 07)

However, categorising these movements across sectoral boundaries separately highlights how careers and sectors are shaped and reshaped through action-reaction/read-response
cycles. Such responses to, often negative, environmental triggers were evident in both countries. For one UK activist, the decision to move into the statutory sector was because she ‘felt that the robustness of the voluntary sector being able to have a critical voice around services was actually being dampened’ (UK AB 1) She explained that:

It was becoming increasingly impossible to actually get involved and to campaign around the issues that you were picking up as a service delivery organisation […] [name] was a very controlling city council (they’ll probably kill me for saying this) but, it was very simple, if you decide to lobby councillors etc. and make an issue of this you will actually end up losing your funding. It was as crude as that.

Similarly, NZ’s ‘neo-liberal experiment’ was characterised _inter alia_ by aggressive roll-back of the welfare state and the simultaneous rise of a competitive ‘contracting culture’ among voluntary and community sector organisations (Owen & Kearns, 2006). This situation is suggestive of what Bondi (2005, p. 499) describes as the capacity of neoliberalism ‘to co-exist with apparently contradictory political ideas’. Activists suggested that this situation not only resulted in an erosion of what were considered to be core sectoral values but also precipitated inter-sectoral transit:

Prior to all this change in the ‘80s, there were values and organisations in NZ public-private community around longevity and value, people being valued, and loyalty … and when all this sort of task-focused stuff came up, people were just saying, well, you don’t like it, I’m out of here, go somewhere else. (NZ AB 02)

5.3 _Pragmatic_

…the work I’m doing is not only my politics, my belief, it’s also my bread and butter; it’s what pays for my mortgage, what pays for my music. (UK AB 19)

If strategic and environmental shifts can be characterised as active choices or tactical decisions, pragmatic transit is a far more reactive process as individuals respond to personal events, experiences and needs, such as an income. Stimuli for these responses were both positive and negative. For example, one UK-based activist narrated her ‘escape’ from a voluntary organisation to local government in reaction to experiences of institutional racism:

It wasn’t really a conscious choice to, or decision to come to the local authority. I came here because I was experiencing racism as an employee. […] And after nine years I’d got tired of it and I thought I’ve got to go, I just can’t work with this no more. So that prompted me to start looking for other jobs really, it wasn’t because I wanted to be here [statutory sector] or that I, you know, it wasn’t that I didn’t enjoy the work. (UK AB 4)

It would be wrong to straightforwardly separate triggers for such shifts into push and pull factors. Far more frequently motivations were interwoven. As the above activist continued:

By that time I’d also had a child […] so I also needed the flexibility of a job that allowed me special leave for example if your child’s sick or flexible hours in terms of coming in and leaving […] I suppose by this time my level of activism had really decreased because I’d got a new child and my family needs took over the community’s needs if you like. (UK AB 4)

Frequently, the relative security and benefits offered by statutory organisations were set against a sense of instability and ‘survival’ mentality that characterises voluntary sector organisations reliant upon short-term funding (UK AB 14). Hence, the statutory sector held an allure for activists at key stages of the lifecourse when responsibilities extended to caring for children. Child-bearing and -rearing often resulted in an individual reappraising, curtailing or delaying their activist involvements:
I’m sure people used to think “oh yeah the kids are 18 now hopefully they’ll go to university and then they’ll get a grant and that will be the end of it, my financial responsibilities”, but it’s not like that is it. And I think that we need to consider the tension between the need for some kind of financial income and activism, and how can you be kind of with no money or on unemployment benefit or whatever, job-seekers allowance, and be an activist? (UK AB 12)

5.4 Emotional

Among the participants, personal experiences such as witnessing the death of an alcoholic due to a landlord’s systematic exploitation of rent laws in Auckland or the gang shooting of a friend attending a party in Manchester triggered feelings of anger that subsequently fuelled life-long activism. Emotions also played a powerful role in the boundary-crossing behaviour of activists, especially when individuals narrated escape from activist engagements:

At the end of the ‘80s many of us in the feminist movement were sort of burnt-out actually, it’d been two decades solid […] a lot of us … had children or got involved in their own spiritual selves, or got into mainstream jobs big-time. … I was still working full-time – but I spent [some time] as part of a spiritual movement and was spending a lot of time [overseas] in an organisation that taught meditation but also taught ethics and values. And I sort of needed that by that time because even though we had very lofty ideals … pretty rough ruthless politics went on […] So to have that time out where you got some nurturing – […] it was, I think, the right thing for me to do at that stage. (NZ AB 15)

Scholars have started to understand the importance of emotional reflexivity to an individual’s endurance as an activist (Brown & Pikerill, 2009). One aspect of this emotional reflexivity is activists’ experiences of, and responses to, burn-out – defined as ‘a state of mental and physical exhaustion brought on by over-work or trauma’ often as a ‘consequence of the failure to engage in emotional reflexivity’ (p. 28). In our narratives, burn-out frequently triggered a withdrawal from activism and a period of ‘reflection’ and ‘re-evaluation of what an individual’s commitment might entail’ (p. 28). This re-appraisal process could – and often did – precipitate strategic re-engagement or retreat from activism, the adoption of ‘watch-and-wait’ tactics to astutely assess environmental shifts, and inter-sectoral transit. For example, the next position the activist quoted above held was in the statutory sector. Such experiences are common within the voluntary and community sector. As one activist put it: ‘Good people get burnt-out and leave, good people go to the statutory sector’ (UK AB 19). Others emphasise a wider point central to our unfolding argument: following burn-out activism frequently changes form, focus and at times the organisational and sectoral location from which it is performed, but more often than not it does not end; something deeply personal, intimate even, propels activists and their activism forwards:

… we stopped our activism because we got burnt-out. I had a full-time job, kids and that was the end of my contribution to society for a bit. Nonetheless, I’ve still continued with working on issues that I feel passionate about. I … I feel I cannot walk away. (UK AB 21)

5.5 Vocational

The unwillingness – indeed inability – to ‘walk away’ from activism expressed by the foregoing respondent is echoed throughout the elicited narratives. For many participants, decisions about whether to remain in or leave campaigns, organisations or sectors at particular junctures were underpinned far less by an active choice than an inevitability that activism (however changed) would continue. Being an activist was intimately bound to an individual’s identity and sense of self-purpose:
I regard it as somewhat of a calling too in terms of what I’m really supposed to be doing in life […] and that’s connected with family but also with others that I’m related to and others who I work with […] And you kind of, there’s an expectation created that you will do certain things, and that’s your job, not in an employment sense but it’s part of what you got to do. (NZ ABI 2)

This sense of vocation plays a crucial role throughout an activist’s career and unpacking this role emphasises the importance of an autobiographical approach. By looking back, the points at which alternative futures were possible and bypassed because of an activist’s sense of vocation become apparent. Hence, for one individual whose activism was triggered by the death of an alcoholic in his arms:

    Many times I could have gone off and done other things […] but it has been definitely a sense of what I feel I need to be doing. So I mean it’s a question of “yes I think the world can be changed,” I think communities can be made better, I think that justice can be done (such) that we can be more understanding and loving to each other and I feel a responsibility to be part of helping create that. So yeah there is that sense of call too, and that comes out of my own faith connection […] And I think that’s the thing that sustained me during periods when that’s been quite difficult. (NZ ABI 07)

Family and faith background is frequently identified as the source of this sense of vocation and the values that have underpinned a life of activism. For example, one individual recalled the influence of ‘conversations around the dinner table’ that were shaped by her father’s Presbyterian faith with ‘a very very strong service ethic and very very strong critical thinking ethic’ and her mother who was ‘very strongly involved in community work’ (NZ ABI 20). For others their ‘Catholic background’ (UK ABI 1) or Muslim faith was formative (UK ABI 12, UK ABI 15):

    I don’t think it was a conscious decision to become an activist as such […] I think because of my faith what I’ve seen from my young days has been a very friendly and charitable faith and I’ve seen my father, for example, during key periods in our faith give a lot, help a lot, be very active in the community and that’s how we’ve grown up. So I just thought …, the values that you are brought up with, which are affected by your heritage and your culture and your faith and the people around you who are real role models. (UK ABI 15)

Regardless of source, thinking through the role of vocation in inter-sectoral shifts leads to a re-consideration of Lewis’s typology of role- and sector-based identity. Although we have no wish to supplant either of these archetypes, we nevertheless suggest that these can be complemented by a third ‘anchored’ identity. This identity is arguably more personal than either a role- and sector-based identity insofar as each has an external depersonalised reference point: an issue or job in the case of the former, an idea of a sector in the latter. Anchored identity is instead characterised by an internal referent; that is, an activist’s relationship to their (past) self:

    I think again it’s easier when you’ve got either one or a small number of triggers that got you into this in the first place. It’s easier to keep sight of that because you’ve got a very clear reference point to look back on. What would that person have done? What would that person think? […] But again for me personally I only really relate what I’m doing to the now and to the past, there’s always that anchor point of where I started from. (UK ABI 2)

For some, this core anchor point exerts a constant righting and realigning force on their activism pulling them back to their sense of purpose whether framed as vocation, calling, or conscience. It is a navigational aid akin to a compass that constantly corrects itself en route guiding activists towards their goal and reinforcing the values instilled by familial, faith and cultural influences:

    I’m not sure I could work in the statutory sector at a senior management level. I really think where I am now I would find it very very difficult. […] And my fear would be that I would
probably end up sort of compromising, colluding with stuff that I then find it difficult to align with my conscience. (UK AB 1)

Accounts of the motivations underpinning inter-sectoral transit that are sensitive to this sense of anchored identity must therefore acknowledge that although at times activists do invest meaning in sectors, they are equally likely to prudently dispense with these constructions in the pursuit of their aims. Sectors not only become porous and blurred through inter-sectoral transit but their boundaries also become fragile and precarious as a result of ‘actors on the fringes’ advantageously enlisting and, placing them ‘under erasure’ (Derrida, 1976). Hence, if there is a common thread connecting these activists’ experiences, it is that they each walk a tightrope between the utility and futility of sectors as both a conceptual and empirical reality.

6. Discussion

In a well-made observation, Corry (2010) notes that whereas there is state theory and the field of public administration, as well as the discipline of economics studying markets, the so-called third sector remains under-theorised. Our paper has been a contribution to a richer theorisation of what our participants referred to as the ‘voluntary’ sector. We began with a simple premise: that the endurance of sectors as the core organising concept within social policy and research represents a paradox – one with which scholars have been complicit. By this, we mean that by embarking on ever more refined cartographical exercises that seek to contain and accurately define sectoral limits, sectors in general, and the tri-sectoral map in particular, remain largely uncontested. The perpetuation of this thinking in social policy as in geography limits theoretical and empirical exploration as it permits us only to see and theorise within these definitional spaces. We also suggest that it subtly constricts our thinking around challenging social issues and policy solutions.

Our paper has built on Brandsen et al.’s (2005) argument that accentuates the fuzziness of sectoral boundaries and points to the need for new research approaches focusing on the ‘actors on the fringes’ (pp. 761–762). Taking up this call, we suggest that activists who move between sectors at particular junctures in their career trajectory are examples of those who should be brought closer to the centre of our scholarship (Brandsen et al., 2005). Considering these actors’ biographies allows us, like Newman (2013, p. 218), to see the ‘...contingent and temporary forms of intervention through which activist projects can be pursued’. Through an empirical investigation drawing on Auckland and Manchester data, we have identified five motivations behind inter-sectoral transit:

1. Strategic: Activists make active incursions into the statutory sector to learn knowledge, skills, languages and techniques that are subsequently applied to further the ends of voluntary and community organisations with values that match their own.

2. Environmental: Activists seize opportune moments in response to shifts in the political and policy landscape to switch sectors and maximise impact towards the pursuit of their personal or organisational aims.

3. Pragmatic: Activists react to personal needs, events or experiences ranging from the positive (e.g. the birth of a child) to the negative (e.g. institutional racism) – and sometimes both simultaneously.

4. Emotional: Activists’ experiences of burn-out can precipitate inter-sectoral shifts by triggering a period of emotional reflexivity involving re-appraisal of their activist involvements.
(5) Vocational: Activists’ ‘anchored identity’ (i.e. remembrance of, and relation to, one’s (past) self) shapes future engagements and exerts an aligning force guiding them towards the ‘right’ place to pursue their activism.

We acknowledge that teasing out motivations behind inter-sectoral shifts into separate strands is largely a descriptive device; indeed, the reality is infinitely more messy and entangled. Narrated ‘trajectories’, it must be remembered, are post hoc constructions: trigger points recognised after the fact may, for example, have been experienced as responses to contingent events or personal trials, perhaps replete with emotional turmoil. Similarly, voluntary sector stories are spoken from a specific historical and geographical standpoint: not only are recollections a product of the time and place of their telling, but also the possibilities and opportunities available at specific times and places shape the motivations subsequently recalled and rationalised. Thus, through putting the messiness back in, it could be speculated that environmental and pragmatic shifts might be interwoven as activists react to the current era of fiscal austerity. Increasing pressure on voluntary and community and public sector budgets and, at least recently, a political shift towards the privatisation of the public sector and corporatisation of voluntary sector, may prompt activists to weather the fiscal storm – and secure an income – elsewhere. Such moves may potentially impose a temporary hiatus on their ‘on the job’ activism, or, alternatively, make possible different, creative and new forms of activism.

Likewise, strategic moves may be the result of the vocational ‘pull’ that encourages the activist to make forays into another sector for the betterment of a cause close to his/her heart. Nevertheless, separation of these motivations recalls Lewis’s typology such that the strategic, environmental and pragmatic reasons identified resonate with his proactive, opportunistic and reactive shifts, respectively. We emphasise, however, that we do not seek to displace Lewis’s schema [although we do note that it characterises the ‘forms’ of these shifts rather than the underpinning motivations (Lewis, 2008c, p. 31)]. Instead, we suggest that our paper adds weight to Lewis’ work through identifying its relevance in different sub-sectors of activity (mental health and community safety) and geographical contexts (the UK and NZ).

We also extend Lewis’s work by highlighting the additional emotional and vocational reasons behind boundary-crossing behaviour. In drawing on the strength of autobiographical approaches to allow individuals to narrate their identity, we propose a concept we call ‘anchored identity’ that in many ways both overrides and tempers the other four reasons for inter-sectoral transit identified (Figure 1). For example, a sense of vocation or calling can override pragmatic concerns such as an income. Similarly, strategic or environmental movements that were viewed as unpleasant are endured by activists because a core sense of calling encourages, indeed demands, them to do so. Further, the fluid schematic of motivations underpinning inter-sectoral transit sketched in Figure 1 and comprising a vocational core encircled by the four other inter-related reasons could be used to understand other forms of boundary-crossing behaviour not discussed here. These forms include intra-sectoral shifts between sub-sectors of the voluntary sector or movement across private/public and private/voluntary sector boundaries. We note, in passing, that the private sector is playing an increasingly important role in the delivery of health and social welfare in the fields of mental health and community safety, but we found little reference to this aspect of boundary crossing in our activists’ biographies. Given the shifting landscape of welfare delivery in both countries, exploring this potential porosity between private and voluntary sectors through the approach used here potentially provides a useful area for future study. Similarly, our framework could be used to ‘map’ the
motivations of so-called ‘professional activists’ who travel through the voluntary sector over their career accruing and applying knowledge and skills in different sub-sectors of voluntary activity. On the one hand, it could be suggested that such individuals switch between sub-sectors to indulge in ‘activism for activism’s sake’, perhaps due to their pleasure in activist engagement. A more balanced reading offered by this approach, however, would remain alert to the sometimes competing, sometimes complementary but always multiple motivations that trigger such shifts. This ‘mapping’ might suggest that transit is less a product of the pursuit of activism as an end in itself, than the reflection of a calling manifest in a desire to utilise experience and expertise to develop and support voluntary organisations in other sub-sectors.

Through discussion of these motivations, we have shown that sectors are not understood by activists as fixed features of the landscape – a line simply stepped across – but as porous, contested and assembled border zones that actors constantly shape and blur as they enlist and erase them throughout their activist ‘careers’. Hence, the voluntary and community sector is enlisted as a relatively autonomous organisational space from which to lobby and launch campaigns when it is useful to do so, just as the knowledge, skills and language that accrues to statutory sector organisations are appropriated to further activist ends. Sectors are also erased by activists who downplay their importance in achieving their goals and often refuse to invest meaning in these (scholarly/policy) constructions. Indeed, our activists’ preference for the term ‘voluntary’ rather than ‘third’ sector arguably testifies to this, and our own adoption of the term highlights this tension still further.

In concluding, then, we maintain that a crucial lesson can be learned from activists’ careful and purposeful negotiation of sectoral boundaries: activists tread a fine line between the utility and futility of sectors as an empirical and conceptual reality. They hold in tension a desire to discard and to deploy sectors to pursue their aims. We contend that scholarly adoption of this strategy has the potential to lead us out of the paradox of our own complicity. By similarly holding sectors in tension, social policy researchers need neither to subscribe wholeheartedly to, nor eschew, sectors as conceptual constructs and an empirical reality. Instead, we live with them, albeit critically. Our critical accounts should not only emphasise the fuzziness of the border zones but also challenge the cartography through which sectoral maps are drawn. Put another way, sectors should not be ‘taken as read’ – but, rather, be regarded as discursive constructions that academic and other social policy researchers should continually deconstruct and problematise through our scholarship. Achieving this perspective will require further research on how sectors are ascribed meaning and assembled as discursive categories, and how they are understood.

Figure 1. A representation of reasons underlying cross-sectoral transit.
and experienced by activists (especially among those new to, or who now eschew, activism), policy-makers and others, particularly at a cross-national level. It may also require a rapprochement between research that has engaged with these issues in different fields of enquiry – such as social policy, third sector and development studies – that have each tended to advance separately with the adverse effect of diffusing and, arguably, weakening scholarship as a result. Embracing this critical approach, we suggest, holds the potential to join-up and strengthen work in this area. Only through this research and dialogue will we begin to truly deconstruct sectoral maps, escape the paradox of our own complicity that has hitherto constricted our efforts and, ultimately, envision alternative policy solutions that are not bound by limits imposed by myopic ‘sectoral thinking’.

Acknowledgements
We would like to acknowledge the invaluable contribution of Nick Fyfe, Wendy Larner and Liz Bondi to the wider project upon which this paper draws. David Lewis kindly provided helpful comments on an earlier draft. Any errors or omissions remain our own.

Funding
The research on which this paper draws was funded by ESRC [grant number RES-000-23-1104].

Note
1. Readers may respond that we have ourselves uncritically conflated the terms third and non-profit sector immediately after drawing attention to this unhelpful practice. Here, we do so purposefully to highlight Salamon and Anheier’s (1992) own conflation of these terms in their seminal paper outlining their structural-operational definition (p. 126).

References


