THE THEORY AND PRACTICE of GOVERNANCE: the next steps[1]

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Introduction

In the 2000s, the New Public Governance (NPG) became prominent (see Osborne 2010; Rhodes 2017a) and this article takes stock of developments in studying governance. There are two much discussed waves of governance; network governance followed by metagovernance. There is now an emerging third wave – decentred governance. This article describes each wave and its weaknesses, arguing for a bottom-up approach to the study of governance that uses storytelling as its main method of data collection. It describes ways of collecting and analysing stories. It ends with a warning. The local knowledge encapsulated in stories about governance is 'shifty', and can be rejected by central policy makers because it does not fit with their expectations.

Network governance

The roots of recent governance theory lie in policy network analysis, in the analysis of the sharing of power between public and private actors, most commonly between business, trade unions and the government in economic policy making (Jordan 1981 and 1990). At first, the emphasis fell on corporatism, a topic worthy of a paper in its own right (see Schmitter and Lehmbruch 1979). There was also the longstanding and distinctive Scandinavian analysis of 'corporate pluralism' (Heisler 1979), which continued under such labels as 'the segmented state' (Olsen 1983: 118) and 'the negotiated economy' (Nielsen and Pedersen 1988). Latterly, the main concern was with governance by (and through) networks, on trends in the relationship between state and civil society government rather than policy making in specific arenas. Thus, governance is a broader term than government with public resources and services provided by any permutation of government and the private and voluntary sectors (and on the different conceptions of governance see, Kjær 2004; Pierre 2000).

There are several accounts of this trend for Britain, continental Europe and the USA, too many to warrant yet another extended summary (see Börzel 1998 and 2011; Klijn 2008; Klijn and Koppenjan 2015: chapter 2; and Rhodes 2006). Thus, for Britain, there has been a shift from government by a unitary state to governance by and through networks. In this period, the boundary between state and civil society changed. It can be understood as a shift from hierarchies, or the bureaucracies of the welfare state, through the marketisation reforms of the Conservative governments of Thatcher, to the networks and joined-up government of New Labour.[2]

There is also a large European literature on 'guidance', 'steering' and 'indirect coordination' which predates both the British interest in network governance, and the American interest in reinventing government. For example, Kaufmann's (1986) edited volume on guidance, steering and control is Germanic in size, scope and language. It focuses on how a multiplicity of interdependent actors can be coordinated in the long chains of actions typical of complex societies (see also Kooiman 1993; Scharpf 1997).

For the USA, Osborne and Gaebler (1992: 20 and 34) distinguish between policy decisions (steering) and service delivery (rowing), arguing bureaucracy is a bankrupt tool for rowing. In its place they propose entrepreneurial government, with its stress on working with the private sector and responsiveness to customers. This transformation of the public sector involves 'less government' or less rowing but 'more governance' or more steering. In his

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[2] See for example: Rhodes 1997a; and 2000; Stoker 2004; and for a review of the literature and citations see Marinetto 2003.

review of the American literature, Frederickson (1997: 84-5) concludes the word 'governance is probably the best and most generally accepted metaphor for describing the patterns of interaction of multiple-organisational systems or networks' (see also Frederickson 2005; Kettl 1993: 206-7, Salamon 2002). Peters (1996: chapter 1) argues the traditional hierarchical model of government is everywhere under challenge. He identifies four trends, or models of governance, challenging the hierarchic model - market, participative, flexible and deregulated governance. Fragmentation, networks, flexibility and responsiveness are characteristics of flexible governance.

In sum, talk of the governance transformation abounds even if the scope, pace, direction and reasons for that change are matters of dispute (and for a survey see Pierre 2000). There are no obvious signs of convergence. American scholars brought their characteristic modernist-empiricist skill set to bear on networks and governance. They combined 'large N' studies of networks (Meier and O'Toole 2005) with an instrumental or tool view that sought to make the study of networks relevant to public managers (Agranoff 2007). Their European counterparts preferred comparative case studies, although there was a shared focus on network management and the allied subject of collaboration (see Rhodes 2011b).

The literature on how to manage your network is now voluminous. The interested reader will have no difficulty finding practical advice; it is not rocket science (see for example: Ansell and Gash 2007; Goldsmith and Eggers 2004; Rhodes 2017a, and citations). For the politician and bureaucrat, they struggle with two features of network management. First, central agencies belong to, and seek to manage their 'multi-network portfolio' (Ysa and Esteve 2013) not individual networks. The most obvious problem for the central agency is to identify its portfolio. All too often, an agency will have no map of its own networks let alone the networks of other central agencies. So, there will be no mechanisms for coordinating the responses of a central agency to the portfolio. Second, local networks cease to be local networks when centrally manipulated or directed. In effect, when networks are managed centrally, horizontal relationships are transformed into vertical relationships. The dilemma is between hands-on versus hands-off styles of intervention. Central actors can adopt a decentralised negotiating style that trades a measure of control for agreement. This style of hands-off management involves setting the framework in which networks work but then keeping an arm's length relationship. Central actors find such self-denial even harder to keep than New Year's Resolutions.

Governance and the changing role of the state

There is an odd challenge to the network governance narrative that questions whether it is an accurate description (Colebatch 2009; Hughes 2010). Whether the number of networks has grown or whether such networks are new are, frankly, deeply uninteresting questions that miss the point. The central concern is the spread of new ideas about markets and networks and the consequent changes in the role of the state. Torfing et al. (2012: 31-2) deal brusquely and briskly with such sceptics. They argue there have been three 'irreversible changes': in the expectations of stakeholders about their involvement in collaborative policy making; in the shift of public bureaucracies to 'open organisations … engaged in joint problem solving and collaborative service delivery'; and in the belief that network governance is 'a legitimate alternative to hierarchy and markets'. The new ideas had consequences.

Most critics have focused, correctly, on the changing role of the state and challenged the idea that there has been a hollowing out or decline of the state. They see a transformation

rather than a weakening of the state.[3] One example must suffice; the critique by Pierre and Peters (2000, 78, 104-5 and 111', 1998; and 2009; Torfing, Peters et al. 2012). Their views are typical and, undeniably, they have been persistent. They argue the shift to network governance could 'increase public control over society' because governments 'rethink the mix of policy instruments'. They continue, 'coercive or regulatory instruments become less important and … "softer" instruments gain importance'; for example, for steering instead of rowing. In short, the state has not been hollowed-out but reasserted its privileged position to govern by regulating the mix of governing structures such as markets and networks and deploying indirect instruments of control. There has been no decline of the state. They argue the changes are not a zero-sum game and governance has increased state control over civil society (Pierre and Peters (2000: 78).

Rolling-back or rolling-out the state

In replying to critics, one should look for ways forward but some ground clearing is necessary before we can do so.

Scharpf (1994: 38 and 40) argued that, although hierarchical coordination 'remains a relatively rare phenomenon', self-coordination among units takes place in 'the shadow of hierarchy'. For example, hierarchical structures 'define the context within which negotiations take place'. There is nothing new here. This argument about the continuing importance of hierarchy was rehearsed in Rhodes (1986: 4-7). The continuing importance of bureaucracy was acknowledged for Australia in Davis and Rhodes (2000) and for British government in Rhodes (1994; and Rhodes 2017a: Chapter 8).

Second, some claim the 'from government to governance' argument is 'extreme' (Torfing et al. 2012: 3). Such assertions do not withstand scrutiny. Rhodes (1997b) argued that governments had to choose between three main governing structures of bureaucracy, markets and networks:

> British government is searching for a new 'operating code' ', and 'this search involves choosing not only between governing structures but also the mix of structures and strategies for managing them' (Rhodes 1997b: 48).

> No governing structure works for all services in all conditions. The issue, therefore, is not the superiority of markets and hierarchy over networks, but managing networks in the conditions under which they work best (Rhodes 1997b: 48-9).

Indeed, the title of the 1997 article, 'it's the mix that matters', might suggest that the state's key task as steering through some mix of markets, hierarchies and networks. Torfing et al. (2012), Pierre and Peters (2000 and 2009) find it impossible to get beyond the eye-catching phrase 'from government to governance' to grasp the essentials of the argument. For example, Torfing et al. (2012: 14) define interactive forms of governance as:

> the complex process through which a plurality of social and political actors with diverging interests interact in order to formulate, promote, and

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[3] See, for example: Bell and Hindmoor 2009; Jessop 2000; Kjær 2004; Marsh 2008 and 2011; Marsh, Richards and Smith 2003; Pierre and Peters 2000 and 2009; and Torfing et al. 2012.

achieve common objectives by means of mobilizing, exchanging, and deploying a range of ideas, rules, and resources.

The definition accords no special place to command and control despite their stress on the core role of the state. Rather, they stress that complexity, common objectives and decentring are the three key features of this definition. Governments … 'often play a crucial role as facilitator and manager … but *there is no privileged centre* in public policy making, but a number of competing actors and arenas' (Torfing et al. 2012:15, emphasis added; see also Peters and Pierre 2009: 92). Moreover, Ansell and Torfing (2016: 552) concede, the argument about self-organisation is a common theme, not an extreme position. Rhodes (1997a: 199) Sates clearly that the state did not occupy a privileged sovereign position; the relationship was asymmetric; centralisation co-existed with interdependence; and the state could imperfectly steer. There is little or no difference between these two accounts (cf. Peters 1994).

A recurrent theme in Rhodes' work is the changing role of the state. The core question is whether the state has been rolled-back to create the minimalist state or whether it is rolling-out to extend its influence by outsourcing and incorporating others in public governance. Of course, it is both, and the original version of hollowing-out did not allow for *both* these trends. The analysis of metagovernance redresses the balance by focusing on the rolling-out of the state.

Metagovernance

Metagovernance refers to the role of the state in securing coordination in governance and its use of negotiation, diplomacy, and more informal modes of steering. As with network governance, metagovernance comes in several varieties (Sørensen and Torfing 2007: 170-80). They share a concern, however, with the varied ways in which the state now steers organisations, governments and networks rather than directly providing services through state bureaucracies, or rowing. These other organisations undertake much of the work of governing; they implement policies, they provide public services, and at times they even regulate themselves. The state governs the organisations that govern civil society; *'the governance of government and governance' (*Jessop 2000: 23). Moreover, the other organisations characteristically have a degree of autonomy from the state. They are often voluntary or private sector groups or they are governmental agencies or tiers of government separate from the core executive. So, the state cannot govern them solely by the instruments that work in bureaucracies.

Torfing et al. (2012, 156-9; and chapter 7) suggest the traditional role of the public service is 'supplemented' (not replaced) with that of the 'meta-governor managing and facilitating interactive governance'. Their task is to 'balance autonomy of networks with hands-on intervention'. They have various specific ways of carrying out this balancing act. They become 'meta-governors' managing the mix of bureaucracy, markets and networks (see also: Koliba et al. 2011, xxxii and chapter 8; and Rhodes 1997b and Rhodes 2017a: chapter 11).

Tools of the metagovernor

The problem with the neologisms of the social sciences is that they can seem a world away from the experience of practitioners. While there is a wealth of literature on how to manage a network, there is little work on how to be a metagovernor. There are several ways in

which the state can steer the other actors involved in governance (see for example Jessop 2000: 23-4, and 2003; Torfing et al. 2012: chapter 7).

First, the state can set the rules of the game for other actors and then leave them to do what they will within those rules; they work 'in the shadow of hierarchy'. So, it can redesign markets, reregulate policy sectors, or introduce constitutional change.

It can supplement such hands-on measures with, second, hands-off steering through storytelling. It can organise dialogues, foster meanings, beliefs, and identities among the relevant actors, and influence what actors think and do (see below pp. xx-xx).

Third, the state can steer by the ways in which it distributes resources such as money and authority. It can play a boundary spanning role; alter the balance between actors in a network; act as a court of appeal when conflict arises; rebalance the mix of governing structures; and step in when network governance fails. Of course, the state need not adopt a single uniform approach to metagovernance.

Finally, public servants can play a political role. Of course they cannot play a party political role but they can campaign for a policy and form alliances with (say) local politicians.

The state is not limited to any one of these tools. It can use different tools, and combination of tools, in different settings at different times. So, the neutral, competent servants of the political executive must now master the skills for managing the complex, non-routine issues, policies and relationships in networks. They must become meta-governing, boundary-spanning, collaborative leaders. The task is to manage the mix of bureaucracy, markets and networks (Rhodes 1997b; and 2017a: chapter 11). The public service needs these new skills, although it is a step too far to talk of these new skills needing 'a full blown cultural transformation' (Goldsmith and Eggers 2004, 178; cf. Rhodes 2016a).

Decentred governance

For all their different emphases, the first and second waves of governance have three shared weaknesses; essential properties, instrumental knowledge, and reification (and for a more detailed account see Bevir and Rhode 2010 and Rhodes 2017a). A decentred approach seeks to overcome these problems.

First, proponents of metagovernance takes for granted the characteristics or essential properties of network governance. They agree networks are characterised by trust and diplomacy. They accept that states are becoming increasingly fragmented into networks based on several different stakeholders. They accept the dividing line between the state and civil society is becoming more blurred because the relevant stakeholders are private or voluntary sector organisations. So, Jessop (2000: 24) concedes 'the state is no longer the sovereign authority … [it is] less hierarchical, less centralised, less *dirigiste*'. There is a shared modernist-empiricist description of the characteristics of network governance (see also Sørensen and Torfing 2007; Torfing et al. 2012).

Second, in the analysis of metagovernance, the state governs the other actors involved in governance. It concedes them the power to self-regulate but keeps the capacity to exert macro-control over that self-regulation. In other words, metagovernance heralds the return of

the state by reinventing its governing role; it is 'bringing the state back in (yet again)' (Jessop 2007: 54). This return to the state opens opportunities for policy advice on the practice of metagovernance. The two waves share a common concern with providing advice on network governance; on instrumental knowledge. Both assume the role of the state is to manage, directly and indirectly, the networks of service delivery. For example, Part III of Sørensen and Torfing (2007, chapters 10-12) on 'metagovernance' is devoted to such topics as: governing the performance of networks; institutional design and network management; and the possibilities for public authorities to shape network outputs. They are not alone. The literature on network management assumes that government departments, local authorities, markets and networks are fixed structures with essential properties that governments can manipulate by using the right tools. It seeks to improve the ability of the state to manage the mix of hierarchies, markets and networks and of state managers to steer these structures.

Third, both network governance and metagovernance rely on a reified notion of structure. The proponents of first-wave governance are self-confessed modernist-empiricists with a reified notion of structure rooted in an explicit social science theory of functional differentiation. The proponents of metagovernance also continue to claim the state is a material object, a structure, or a social form. They draw on critical realist epistemology and such notions as 'emergence' and 'mechanisms' ostensibly to guard against the charge of reification (see for example Jessop 2003; and Rhodes 2017b: chapter 12). Decentred governance avoids all three problems.

A decentred account of governance argues that it does not have essentialist features like trust or reciprocity, only family resemblances that are constructed, contested, and contingent. Instead of looking for recurring patterns or creating typologies, it focuses on the everyday practices of agents whose beliefs and actions are informed by traditions. In a phrase, it shifts away from a top-down focus on the intentions of central elites to a bottom-up analysis of the beliefs and practices of citizens, street-level bureaucrats and the like. It explains shifting patterns of governance by focusing on the actors' own interpretations of events, not external causes such as a global financial crisis. It explores the diverse ways in which such situated agents change the boundaries of state and civil society by constantly remaking practices as their beliefs change in response to dilemmas. It highlights a more diverse view of state authority and its exercise by recovering the contingent and contestable narratives or stories that people tell about.

This approach casts a searchlight on governance and finds new and edifying ways to talk about it. Marinetto (2003: 605) argues that network governance needs to give way to alternative ways of understanding government. Decentred governance is one such way. So, the state is not a material object and governance is not an emergent structure. The state is not a pre-existing causal structure that can be understood as having an autonomous existence and causal effects over and apart from people's beliefs and actions. Rather, the idea of the state is an abstract proxy for the vast array of meaningful actions that coalesce into contingent, shifting, and contested practices, which we classify using such labels. They are shorthand, even on occasion analytically useful, but they are bewitching metaphors that we reify as 'real'.

All patterns of rule arise as the contingent products of diverse actions and political struggles informed by the varied beliefs of situated agents. So, the notion of a monolithic state in control of itself and civil society was always a myth. The myth obscured the reality of

diverse state practices that escaped the control of the centre because they arose from the contingent beliefs and actions of diverse actors at the boundary of state and civil society. The state is never monolithic and it always negotiates with others. Policy always arises from interactions within networks of organisations and individuals. Patterns of rule always traverse the public, private, and voluntary sectors. The boundaries between state and civil society are always blurred. Trans-national and international links and flows always disrupt national borders. In short, state authority is constantly being remade, negotiated, and contested in widely different ways in widely varying everyday practices (and for a more detailed account see Bevir and Rhodes 2003, 2006 and 2010).

Both network governance and metagovernance have an instrumental approach to networks; they are top-down approaches supporting central steering. A decentred view challenges this approach with its bottom-up approach. Local networks are no longer local when run from the centre. The relationship is better described as an exercise in official consultation; at least this phrase does not imply any local discretion or local ownership. But the effect is that central management of local networks threatens their autonomy, distinctiveness and effectiveness. This threat arises because any pattern of governance is a product of diverse practices that are themselves composed of multiple individuals acting on all sorts of conflicting beliefs, which they have reached against the background of many traditions and in response to varied dilemmas. So, a decentred approach sees network governance arising from the bottom-up and suggests that central intervention will undermine the bottom-up construction of governance, provoking resistance and generating unintended consequences.

So far, so abstract; on which parallel Planet Earth is this conception of the state useful? There are two answers to this jibe. First, when Fish's (2008: 154) was asked about the usefulness of the humanities, replied 'none whatsoever' because the 'humanities are their own good' and do not need an instrumental justification. This decentred view of the state is its own justification because it directs our attention to new topics; to local knowledge and bottom-up accounts of the state. It forsakes an elite top-down view to support giving voice to the silent. Edification is more than enough But, and second, we live in an era where 'impact' and 'relevance' are king. So, to avoid being dubbed 'irrelevant', the next section harnesses the analysis of storytelling to the analysis and practice of governance.

Storytelling

A decentred approach undercuts the idea of network steering as a set of tools by which we can manage governance. If governance is constructed differently, contingently, and continuously, we cannot have a tool kit for managing it. This line of reasoning challenges the idea of expertise as a basis for policy making (see also Rhodes 2017b: chapter 10). Decentred narratives offer a different approach to policy advice. Instead of revealing policy consequences through insights into a social logic or law-like regularities, they enable policy makers to see things differently. They display new connections in governance and new aspects of governance. In other words, a decentred approach treats policy advice as stories that enable listeners to see governance afresh (Bevir 2011). A storytelling approach encourages us to give up management techniques and strategies for a practice of learning by telling stories and listening to them. While statistics, models and claims to expertise all have a place in such stories, we should not become too preoccupied with them. On the contrary, we should recognise that they too are narratives about how people have acted or will react given

their beliefs and desires. No matter what rigour or expertise we bring to bear, all we can do is tell a story and offer plausible conjecture what the future might bring.

The starting point is the idea that any organisation 'always hinges on the creation of shared meaning and shared understandings'. Metaphors exercise a 'formative impact' on the construction of meaning (Morgan 1993: 11 and 276-80; see also Weick 1995: chapter 8). Stories spell out the shared meaning and shared understandings. Of course, stories come in many versions and often have no clear beginning and no ending. They are provisional and unfolding. In telling the stories, we freeze them so they can appear set in stone, but they unfold constantly.

In a British government department, there is at least one departmental philosophy and it is the storehouse of many stories. It is a form of folk psychology. It provides the everyday theory and shared languages for storytelling. It is the collective memory of the department; Institutional memory lives in the stories people tell one another; 'stories are to the storytelling system what precedent cases are to the judicial system'. Such narratives were like 'precedent cases … to the judicial system'. They were used to 'formulate recognizable, cogent, defensible and seemingly rational collective accounts that will serve as precedents for individual assumption, decision and action' (Boje 1991: 106).

Civil servants and ministers learn and filter current events through the stories they hear and tell one another. It is an integral part of the everyday practice of civil servants. Stories explain past practice and events and justify recommendations for the future. It is an organised, selective, retelling of the past to make sense of the present. Public servants know they tell the minister stories. Stories come in many forms. Some stories are short. They are told in a single sentence. When you belong to the same organisation, the listener can unpack these stories. They do not need to be recounted in full. The shortest example is 'you know' as in you know the story already. For example, one short story told recruits 'there 'is a bit of mystique around ministers and they make you feel inferior'. It invokes the idea of hierarchy, the subordinate role of civil servants, and the ceremonial side of being the Queen's minister. Its meaning is clear: 'you are a subordinate'. Gossip is another form of storytelling; personalised with a variable regard for accuracy. Submissions and briefs are stories by another name and recognised to be so by the civil servants who tell them. When the Minister resigned, the civil servants asked: 'What is our story?' They wanted to find out what had happened. They talked of 'getting the story straight'; 'getting it together'; 'we've got the story'; 'when you have the narrative' and 'we've reached agreement on some of the main story-lines.' Officials were also explicitly invited to tell a story. Storytelling is recognised by managers as providing guides for managerial action.

Storytelling is linked to performance. In Rhodes (2011) storytelling had three characteristics: a language game, a performing game and a management game. The language game identified and constructed the story-line, answering the questions of what and happened and why. The performing game told the story to a wider audience, inside and outside the department. Officials tested the facts and rehearsed the story-line in official meetings to see how their colleagues responded. They had to adapt the story to suit the minister, and both ministers and officials had to judge how the story would play publicly. They then performed that agreed story on a public stage to the media, parliament and the public. Finally, there was the management game, which both implemented any policy changes and perhaps even more important let them get on with 'business as usual' as quickly as possible. The resulting story

had to be reliable, defensible, accurate and consistent with the department's traditions. As Fawcett (2016: 52) argues the analysis of storytelling requires us to understand not only the construction and performance of stories but also their reception; 'why do some stories capture the imagination when others fail?' If storytelling is an important metagoverning tool, we need to examine the successes and failures of different types of stories and ways of telling them. We need also systematic ways of collecting and analysing stories.

Collecting stories

Recovering stories can be treated as a technique like a survey; a means for getting data for policymakers. For central elites, the question is how can we collect such data? In a phrase, the answer is 'policy narratives'. So, storytelling is a tool for collecting data about local knowledge to be used by central elites; an addition to the modernist social science toolbox. It is about providing information for policymakers so they can make rational decisions (Van Willigen (2002: 150 and chapter 10).[4]

There are at least four approaches to collecting stories to provide advice to policymakers: observation, questionnaires, focus groups, and Most Significant Change (MSC).

Observational fieldwork is the best way of collecting stories but involves deep hanging out (see Rhodes 2017b: chapter 3). The problem is that such fieldwork is time consuming. So, deep hanging out is supplemented with hit-and-run ethnography – short repeat visits. In every organisation there are some excellent places for hanging out – the water cooler, the coffee machine, and the canteen. In British government departments, the microwave in the office kitchen was a great place as people from across the department hung out for coffee or lunch. There are many ways of 'being there'.

An alternative way of collecting stories is to use a questionnaire (see: Gabriel 2000: chapter 6). The questions are reassuringly obvious; for example: 'if a new member of staff asks you "how do things work around here", what do you tell them?' Alternatively, you can ask about people rather than events; 'who are the main characters in this department? Why do you think they are characters?' In part, in the beginning, you are persuading people to relax so there is no need to focus only on work and colleagues. Instead, you can ask whether there is any story about work that you told family or friends. Once underway, there are a multitude of possible follow-up questions. You can ask if there are conflicting versions of a story, and what the story means to different people. Interviewees can write-up their story. For example, in Rhodes (2017a: chapter 6) counsellors wrote a first version of their stories about social care. Then they answered questions about their story to add more detail and colour and to explain why the events happened. The story was rewritten and these iterations continued until the interviewee was too bored to continue revising or everyone agreed. Other people can then comment on whether this 'faction' is accurate.

Focus group, sometimes referred to as a storytelling circle (Snowden 2000a; and 2000b) are an effective method for collecting stories Focus groups involve getting a group of people together to discuss their beliefs and practices. The groups are interactive and group

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[4] Storytelling or narratives as a tool of management is an established part of the business toolkit and there is a burgeoning literature. See, for example: Czarniawska 2004; Gabriel 2000; and Denning 2007. There is even a *Dummies* book (Dietz and Silverman 2014).

members are encouraged by a facilitator to talk to one another. The researcher does not interview the group members but facilitates their discussion (Rhodes 2017b: chapter 4; and Rhodes and Tiernan 2014). It is important that the focus group should be coherent, comprised of people from the same organisation and with shared experiences in that organisation. There has to be a shared history from which they can draw stories. The questions discussed in the previous section can be used to start people talking but the group members must talk to one another and not facilitator. Unstructured discussion can open new avenues. Ambiguity and its silences can provoke discussion. There are no conclusions, no findings. The meaning of the stories will not be clear until the researcher analyses and writes up the transcript. The focus group is shaking the bag of organisational stories to identify its dramas (see Agar and MacDonald 1995; and Rhodes 2017b: chapter 4).

MSC or Most significant Change collects stories of significant change 'from those most directly involved, such as beneficiaries, clients and field staff'. Unapologetically, it is a management tool (the following is paraphrased from Dart and Davies 2003: 138-9). As before, the question is simple: for example, 'During the last month, in your opinion, what was the most significant change that took place in the program'. The respondents decided not only what was significant but also why it was significant. The stories were about a dairy extension programme designed to improve farm productivity and the specific issues included dairy cow nutrition and grazing management. The stories were analysed and filtered as they moved through the hierarchy: 'Each level in the hierarchy … reviews a series of stories sent to them by the level below and selects the single most significant account of change within each of the domains'. In effect, they selected a 'winning story', gave their reasons for the choice, and passed it up the hierarchy. In this way, the many stories were whittled down. At the end of the year, top management produced a summary of the winning stories and the reasons for their selection. This document then went to the:

> program funders and they are asked to assess the stories, selecting those that most fully represent the sort of outcomes they wish to fund. They are also asked to document the reasons for their choice. This information is fed back to program managers.

Such applied ethnography is now the stuff of management consultants and their kith and kin (Dietz and Silverman 2014). There are also specialised government units. The explicit aim may not be to collect stories, although they do, but it is always to provide advice for policymakers. However, many parties are involved in, or affected by, public policy making. They can resist and subvert the intentions of central elites. So, a second reason for collecting stories about governance is to specify the voices of the silent others.

Inscribing: recover, recount, and review

Recovering local stories about governance is also about inscribing complex specificity in its context. The toolkit is the same whether one is collecting stories to advise policymakers or to give voice. The differences lie in whom we ask, for whom we collect the data, and how we use those data. The role is not limited to advising policymakers. The researcher has many roles. The research does not privilege any one voice but represents the several voices in public policy making. So, instead of advice to policymakers, the aim is to recover, recount and review. We recover the stories told to us by politicians, public servants and citizens. We systematise these accounts, telling our version of their stories, and recounting them. Our version is reviewed jointly by storywriter and storyteller to identify errors, divergences, and

lessons. The aim is a fusion of horizons that covers both agreement and where we agree to disagree. Both are reported. We derive practical lessons from lived experience (see Rhodes and Tiernan 2014).

Any aphorism courts the danger of over-simplification. 'Recover, recount and review' is no exception because it attributes fixity to local stories and the local knowledge in them when such knowledge is often elusive and ambiguous. Thus, Vohnsen (2015: 158) argues that 'local knowledge and practice is a tricky phenomenon' because it is 'dispersed and, not possessed equally by all':

> 'what one person holds to be of importance in one specific situation is not necessarily what the same person might attribute importance to in a different situation – in other words what people know to be of local relevance in one situation might be different from what they know to be of local relevance in the next situation Vohnsen.

Moreover, the street level bureaucrats do not have clear, fixed identities; they 'swap identities all the time: one minute they are advocating the project like true politicians, while the next moment they are criticising it like detached academic scholars'. They are not local experts confronting a central plan. They know the plan cannot be implemented so 'implementation happens hand-in-hand with street-level planning'. There is 'a second, highly unstable planning phase' locally that continuously plans and redrafts the policy Vohnsen (2015: 157-8). To use Vohnsen's colloquial phrase, local knowledge is 'shifty' or, more formally, it is contested, contingent, and generative. It is not amenable to central collection or direction. Collecting stories to advise policy makers raises the question of whose local knowledge in what context. To recover local knowledge through stories is to inscribe these complex specificities in their ever varying contexts, but at the cost of being dismissed as irrelevant by central elites (see Rhodes 2016b).

Analysing stories

Wright Mills (1959: 134-5) argued that theory and methods are 'marginal notes on work-in-progress' and we should never limit 'in the name of "natural science", the problems upon which we shall work'. Method was about producing 'durable answers' and theory was about 'paying close attention to the words one is using'. The primary purpose of both was the 'release rather than the restriction of the sociological imagination'. Nonetheless, we still need to be systematic in our analysis of our stories, and thematic analysis is well suited to the analysis of stories. [5]

The stages of thematic analysis are straightforward. Step 1 is to become familiar with your data, whether interviews or fieldwork notes, by checking the transcript for accuracy then reading and re-reading the transcripts making notes as you go along. In effect, it is a preliminary mapping of your data. It is preparation for Step 2, which is preparing the code book across all your data. It is usually an iterative process as you move forwards and backwards between individual interviews and fieldwork notes and the complete data set. You have to beware of the attention grabbing anecdote and make sure your analysis is comprehensive. Step 3 is to collate the codes into general themes and collate the data under those themes. It is important to be reflexive and criticise your possible themes. So, Step 4 is to review the themes. It helps if two people (or more) work on the same data and compare notes. You ask whether the themes work both for specific transcripts and across the complete

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[5] The following two paragraphs paraphrase Braun and Clarke 2006.

data set. Are the themes internally coherent, consistent, and distinctive? Do the quotes illustrate the themes? Step 5 is drawing the themes together in a coherent narrative. This drawing together may involve further refinement, even redefinition, of the themes and, of course, it involves relating the data to your puzzle and theoretical approach. If you were avoiding the vivid anecdote at earlier stages of the analysis, such anecdotes can now be used to make your article or book more readable. You need to write a persuasive story in which there is a good fit between what you say you going to do and what you have done, and in which your quotes and anecdotes illustrate your analysis.

There are several advantages to thematic analysis. It is flexible and easily learned. The findings are comprehensible to a general reader. It is a method that lends itself to co-production because participants in the research can become collaborators in its analysis. It is well suited to generating thick descriptions and summarising large amounts of semi-structured interview data. Often it leads to 'surprises' or unanticipated findings. Moreover, and important for the argument of this article, it can produce data useful for policymakers.

Conclusions

This article discusses three waves of governance; network governance, metagovernance and decentred governance. For each wave, it discusses the implications for practitioners; the tools they can use to steer governance. However, there are significant weaknesses with both network governance and metagovernance. Decentred governance is an edifying third wave. Decentred governance focuses on the diverse ways in which such situated agents change the boundaries of state and civil society by constantly remaking practices as their beliefs change in response to dilemmas. It highlights a more diverse view of state authority and its exercise. It suggests that tools based on collecting and analysing stories is the best way to steer contingent and contested narratives of governance. It describes how to collect and analyse stories. However, instrumental knowledge is not the only valued goal in the analysis of governance.

This account of decentred governance and storytelling as advice to policy makers is associated with the advocacy of responsive government and with adapting national decisions to local conditions. Such local knowledge is seen as 'good' and an essential complement to other forms of knowledge. It is seen as another way for elite decision makers to 'improve' policy making. Storytelling as inscription is more ambitious because it seeks to give voice to the silent. Both forms of advice confront politicians and bureaucrats who are scarcely sympathetic to such aims as giving voice. They see the stories as 'coming forward with awkward observations' and 'as wishing to preserve "traditional" ways' (Sillitoe 2006: 10). Politicians and bureaucrats criticise stories because the stories fail to conform to their expectations about the causes of problems and their solutions. Stories are dismissed as 'irrelevant or disruptive' (Sillitoe 2006: 14). To compound these problems much local knowledge is 'shifty', not fixed.

Proponents of decentred governance can provide advice to policy makers by collecting stories and the systematic thematic analysis of those stories. But, buyers beware. It may be today's conventional wisdom that local knowledge should be relevant to policy makers who define relevance. However, it is not a given. It may be disruptive but it is legitimate to focus on other people's definition of relevance and on people who hold views contrary to the government of the day. We can choose to be servants of power and help the

state win consent, but it is not required. We can choose to contribute to debates that will enhance the capacity of citizens to consider and voice differing perspectives in policy debates. It is an alternative normative choice (see Bevir 2013). Social scientists, like cobblers, should stick to their lasts and focus on diagnosing ills and criticising policies and the policy process. They should leave problem solving and policy making to those elected, *and accountable*, for those tasks. Decentred governance and its stories encapsulating local knowledge offer no easy panacea for decision makers, but it is an effective analytical tool for unpacking state practices from the bottom-up.

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