



Between and Beyond Social Entrepreneur and Activist: Transformative Personas for Social Change

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Abstract

In this paper, we highlight emergent trends that we have observed from direct participation in civil society organisations, and importantly the potential they have to enact transformative social change. Specifically, drawing on in-depth participation with two community organisations in Leeds in the North of England, we highlight the limits of traditional personas of the social entrepreneur and social activist and tendencies that sit between and beyond them that are more hybrid and messy, but ultimately more disruptive and productive. Through our fieldwork, we identified four aspects to this: 1.) purposeful value-rationality and attempts to explicitly foreground values in the everyday; 2.) relations as co-constructed and interdependent; 3.) the cyclical and transformative nature of practices; and, 4.) the role of storytelling in narrating and supporting alternative future visions. Ultimately, at the heart of the dysfunction of both social entrepreneur and social activist personas is an absence of conscious acknowledgements of how our work is motivated by what we love, and what we feel a loss for; what we have become disconnected from, and what we urgently need to reconnect with beyond

individualised notions of social change. We contend that acknowledging these and incorporating them into our social change work can nurture more transformative values, practices, identities and narratives.

Keywords

Social activism; social entrepreneur; civil society; social change

Introduction

We write this paper to draw attention to some emerging, and urgently needed, trends amongst civil society actors which we have directly experienced. It has become clear to us that there is a growing disjuncture between commonly-circulated narratives, practices, relations and values around social change and the complexity, scale and nature of the task of social transformation that lies before us (Homer-Dixon 2006; Girardet 2007; Kunstler 2006; Chesters and Welsh 2005). More specifically, we have been struck by the limitations of two specific personas with relevance in civil society and which are commonly identified in practitioner and scholarly debates: the social entrepreneur (Simms & Robinson 2008; Nicholls, 2013) and the social activist (Castree, 2000; Mertes, 2004; Mott, 2016; Routledge and Derickson, 2015).

We intentionally focus on the term *persona*, to mean, broadly, a public-facing version of the self that people adopt to present themselves and their public image in particular ways (Perlman, 1986; Leary and Hall, 2011). Derived from Latin, literally meaning mask, the idea of *persona* is a broadly and commonly adopted term referring to, for example, a character adopted by novelists, online gamers, musicians or marketeers. What is evident is that we are dealing with the self-presentation of particular social roles often in short term, flexible and strategic ways to achieve specific work, political or social objectives.

A *persona* is a deeply relational concept, based around a relation between the wearer of the social mask and those intended to receive the messages it conveys (Perlman, 1986). People's personalities shift over their life course as a result of the different *personas* they take on in different moments. A range of *personas*, therefore, can be adopted, ranging through more authentic to utilitarian. One particular danger that psychologists have pointed out, is that through their overuse, people can lose connection with their wider identity and end up relying on artificially constructed *personas* (Leary and Hall, 2011).

There are a range of parallel heuristic devices and sociological concepts that are connected but subtly different to that of *persona*. Identity, for example, refers to a much broader and complex process of self-hood and self-creation over a life course, where issues of class, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation amongst others intersect and combine in powerful and enduring ways (Jenkins, 2008).

Additionally, there are also close overlaps with ideas of narrative self which refers to the ways in which individuals create life narratives through autobiographical memory to understand what a self is (Fivush and Haden, 2003); and subject positioning where a person adopts a position along with the repertoires and storylines associated with that position such as, for example, husband or wife (Davies and Harré 1990). With all these heuristic devices we need to be alive to their dynamic nature; they are simultaneously internally self-generated constructs as well as being imposed and shaped through interactions and broader structures and norms in the surrounding social world. Many of these debates have been particularly relevant within critical and feminist geographies and the social sciences more broadly, especially in terms of the need to decenter subjectivities and explore identities at the intersections of multiple social categories (Butler, 1990, Valentine, 2007).

Returning to our core argument, we contend that the personas adopted by activists and entrepreneurs are not adequate or textured enough to respond to the unprecedented and interconnected global, social and environmental challenges we currently face. While there is much worth in the activities of both social entrepreneurs and social activists, our experience leads us to contend that they are based around sets of narratives, practices, relations and values that are overly narrow and prescriptive, and reaching their limits of effectiveness. From our direct engagements, the social entrepreneur persona is increasingly set within a neoliberal business model that largely pursues monetary value as a goal, albeit with a social conscience, and ultimately is uncomfortable with direct naming and addressing the contradictions within pro-growth economics and climate breakdown. The activist persona has often become socially detached, subject to surveillance, and prone to lack of self-care, burn-out, or unproductive rage, and/or has become increasingly professionalised and pulled into neoliberal financial and governance regimes (See Mayer, 2003; Chatterton and Heynen, 2010).

This paper does not reject these personas outright. Rather, we contend that they provide foundational material that needs radically reworking. We highlight novel threads that we have observed from our own participation in civil society organisations and the potential they have to enact transformative social change (Boyle and Simms 2009; Wright 2010; Murray 2012). Our own engagements have found that many civil society actors are uncomfortable with existing social personas and are aware that they simply do not fit the challenges and complexities they deal with on a daily basis. Instead, they are responding to these discomforts by experimenting with novel hybrid personas, social change practices, values and narratives. We argue that over-emphasis on established personas such as 'social entrepreneur' or 'social activist', obscures more interesting social change work emerging in the gaps. We specifically point to processes which combine activism and entrepreneurship, whereby activists seem to be becoming more entrepreneurial and entrepreneurs, more activist. Our intention is not to simply advocate for a

balanced combination, but focus on the processes reshaping civil society actors, and tendencies that can recast civic action to be genuinely transformative.

Our approach in this paper draws on experiential knowledge as public/scholar-activists, informed by radical geography traditions including anarchist, neo-Marxist, feminist and queer approaches, who have developed solidarities with specific social change groups (Holloway 2002; Gibson-Graham 2006; The Autonomous Geographies Collective 2010; Derickson & Routledge 2015; Routledge & Derickson 2015). As both participants and researchers, our positionality within these groups has moved across an insider-outsider spectrum (Herr and Anderson 2015) encompassing multiple roles of stakeholder, participant, and critical friend. There is a normative aspect to this paper, which is situated in a hopeful and critical approach to already-existing practical approaches for concrete social change (Darby 2016; Fincher and Iveson 2012; Chatterton 2006; Solnit 2004). As researchers our engagements formed part of a co-inquiry approach into the nature of change within our respective organisations (Darby 2017; Campbell and Vanderhoven 2016). Indeed, this paper is part of a broader, purposeful intervention - to re-energise social enterprise and activism and rebuild collective capacity to deal with ecological and social breakdown.¹

The analysis underpinning this paper is based on our separate in-depth involvements in two civil society organisations in England.² The first organisation, which one of the authors of this paper helped to co-found, is Leeds Community Homes (LCH), a community co-operative and land trust dedicated to supporting low impact affordable community-led housing. The second organisation, which the other author of this paper played a pivotal role in developing and expanding, partly through her PhD work, is Oblong Community Resource Centre, also based in Leeds. Oblong, a registered charity, was begun in 1996 by a group of unemployed

¹ Clearly, our argument could be seen as extension of the neoliberal mindset (Jenkins 2005; Kaldor 2003; Slater 2012); that activists need to partly accept the reality of the corporate world, and that social entrepreneurs need to be more edgy, which can offer new opportunities for capital accumulation. In many ways this is likely. Every thought and act seems to be somehow co-opted. But this does not mean there are no progressive openings. We contend that fixed personas such as activist and entrepreneur constrain potential, and our intention is to explore new openings. The entrepreneur and activist alike are known quantities, easy for established powers to stereotype, manage and corral. We want to transcend the naïve hope of enterprise culture and the expansive anger of social activism. Moving between and beyond these, and combining them, could create space for radical future civic action that is more fleet of foot and less co-optable – and, importantly, empower ourselves and others.

² While our involvement in these organisations continues, this paper is based on detailed engagements with our respective groups between 2013-2017 and draws on experiential moments, meetings, interviews, public events and workshops to specific artefacts such as publicity, notes and workshop materials. Data was coded by hand using a simple analysis frame relating to identities, practices, values and narratives.

people wanting to pool resources to make change in their local area and now runs Woodhouse Community Centre in inner-city Leeds. Both organisations represent attempts to establish novel institutions that play creatively with boundaries such as civil society/business and entrepreneur/activist (Corry 2010; Panelli and Larner 2010; Trudeau 2008).

The material that follows is structured in three parts. First, we outline the main contours of the social entrepreneur and social activist persona. We then interrogate our case studies through four tendencies that we identified during our experiences: 1.) purposeful value-rationality and attempts to explicitly foreground values in the everyday; 2.) relations as co-constructed and interdependent; 3.) the cyclical and transformative nature of practices; and, 4.) the role of storytelling in narrating and supporting alternative future visions. We conclude by pointing to some broader issues that emerge from these tendencies. In particular, at the heart of the dysfunction of both of these personas is an absence of conscious acknowledgements of how our work is motivated by what we love and what we feel a loss for, what we have become disconnected from, and what we urgently need to reconnect with.

Civil society personas: the social entrepreneur and the social activist

The evolutions of the social entrepreneur and the social activist are set within a complex, multi-faceted terrain characterised by constant change and dynamic interactions. Moreover, civil society actors do not exist in a vacuum but alongside other actors in the market, state and academy, all of whom are negotiating rapidly changing contexts.³ In particular, broader changes in knowledge production, institutional boundaries and organisational forms are taking place, as established arrangements fail to demonstrate an ability to tackle persistent problems. Those interested in new forms of collaborative place leadership are recognising the need to work across boundaries (cf Lindberg et al. 2012; Lindberg et al. 2014) – in ways which avoid traditional silos and harnesses middle-out rather than simply, top-down or bottom-up processes (Wessells and Dawes 2007; Nieuwsma 2011; Lederach 1997). Nevertheless, complex material and discursive processes of neoliberalisation remain a dominant feature shaping civil society. In particular, for complex reasons around co-optation, internal competition, marginalisation, and struggles over finite resources, civil society actors struggle to

³ Public authorities are increasingly hand tied by financial austerity and the prospect of simply doing less with less. Second, the private sector plays only a partial role due to competing priorities around shareholder and profit interest, and at the same time is offering new management solutions conducive to greater commercialisation and privatisation. Third, while the academy is engaged with resolving issues within local civil society, it has competing and parallel interests around internationalisation, national economic growth and more traditional forms of social reproduction and a mode of knowledge production that seeks generalizable and transferable outcomes.

fulfil their potential (Wright 2010; Beveridge and Koch, 2016; Wright 2010; Roy, 2009). We expand on these below.

The social entrepreneur: social change through capitalism?

First, we are interested in the social entrepreneur which has become a significant and identifiable social persona over the last few decades. The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor's (GEM) 2009 Report on Social Entrepreneurship (Terjesen et al. 2012) found that over three percent of people worldwide are involved in social ventures. Murray (2012, p.144) sees social enterprise as “a kind of productive democracy...part of a long-term shift...towards...creating new versions of the economy from below”. At its most basic level, social enterprise is a business model that provides goods or services with an explicit aim to benefit wider society and create innovations geared towards tackling social problems. The addition of a ‘social bottom line’ (Elkington 1997) is a significant normative shift in the narrative of the goals of business with direct material effects. But as a social persona, the social entrepreneur is still vague and highly variable and there is no specific legal definition for a ‘social enterprise’ (Defourny and Nyssens 2006; Corry 2010; Peredo, and McLean, 2006; Bacq and Janssen 2011). Personas exist along a spectrum from dedicated social change agents to socially-conscious profit-seekers. Different types of social enterprise arise from economic necessity, unmet social needs, or a “propaganda of practice” intent on showing that another way is possible (Murray 2012, pp.144–145).

The rise of the social entrepreneur sits within the broader growth of the social economy, which occupies aspects of market, state, household and ‘third sector’ spheres of the economy (Murray 2012). In the EU alone there are two million social economy enterprises representing ten percent of all businesses and six percent of employees (European Commission 2017). The social economy has significant variation including the voluntary and third sectors, co-operatives, mutuals, community businesses, unincorporated organisations and not for profit organisations. Definitions of the social economy stress the key role of participation, democratic control and community need over profit (Moulaert and Ailenei 2005; Noya and Clarence 2007).

A number of factors have led to the growth of this broad terrain. Employment structures have drastically changed towards (often precarious) flexible working and self-employment. Demographic shifts reinforce an emerging cohort of so-called ‘millennials’, characterised as more socially conscious, technologically competent, and globally connected (Johnson 2016). Clearly, there are significant limitations and geographical and social variations within this much-debated demographic. But, importantly, it points towards a globally-significant age cohort with a different structural and social relationship to the economy (Ng et al. 2010; Levenson 2010).

Bridge et al. (2009) highlight three overall tendencies within the social enterprise economy: a more Anglo-American business approach where social

enterprises largely pump-prime activities and assist with community regeneration and incorporation into the wider economy; a socio-economic policy approach where social enterprise patches up inadequacies of the welfare state; and a more continental European political model where the social economy can leverage institutional change and greater citizen empowerment (see also Gibson-Graham et al. 2013; Gibson-Graham 2014). We argue that the novel personas we have identified, and explore below, combine all these tendencies in complex ways.

Overall however, broad trends towards professionalising and commodifying civil society continue, in the longer-term context of global neoliberalisation and more recent austerity policies which encourage government and commercial actors to offset costs and responsibilities onto civil society. Mayer (2003) raises key issues about grassroots groups' involvement in local politics. Her work highlights the norming of the social entrepreneur within civil society as part of the broader neoliberalisation of relations between state, market and civil society in ways that help unburden the local state and spread market forces to areas previously beyond the reach of capital (Mayer 2003; 2007; 2009). In some cases, social enterprise plays a role in neoliberal roll-out shoring up the state and its welfare functions as it retreats (Rosol 2012). Moreover, there are problematic tendencies associated with the heroism of the individual and charismatic entrepreneur which marginalises the social context within which they operate.

Clearly, there are both limitations and advantages of the social enterprise approach (Smith and Stevens 2010; Steyaert and Katz 2004). The social values of a given social enterprise can be incredibly vague, and the broader relationship between these and the wider economy is often unaddressed. In particular, social enterprises can be ripe for co-optation into the neoliberal economy, or subsumed into corporate social responsibility approaches. The narrative stories told through social enterprise may often reinforce a 'business-as-usual', capitalocentric view of the economy, implying that some simple 'tweaks' to global capitalism are all that is needed. Social entrepreneurship does not, in itself, overtly question the primacy of money. However, this may be a practical choice for social entrepreneurs who prioritise 'getting things done' over structural changes to the economy. We explore below these kinds of tensions within the social enterprise persona – how it is insufficient for transformative action which tackles root causes as well as symptoms.

Indeed, Simms and Robinson (2008) point out that social entrepreneurs experience tensions between their identities as activists and entrepreneurs, forcing them to manage this tension by focusing more on one identity over the other. In particular, what they found was that those with more dominant activist identities were more likely to establish a not-for-profit organization, while those with a more entrepreneur identity more likely to establish for-profit ventures. One of the challenges is to reframe social enterprise within the variety of activity within the social economy, thus revealing what a transformative social economy might mean.

The social activist: professional freedom-fighter?

The second persona we draw upon is the social activist. There is no singular definition of a social activist, or indeed the forms of organising and tactics that underpin it. It is highly place- and context-specific and encompasses personas across political party activism; extra-parliamentary radical activism, often associated with strong self-identity projects, causes or extra-local concerns around peace, ecology, and/or spirituality; or more place-based community activism working on local projects and organising. It also draws together those involved in prefigurative activities, civil disobedience, and more mundane advocacy and legal work which weave together, for example, peasant or indigenous activism from within subsistence communities, tech-smart activists in global urban centres, and highly mobile and transnational activists working in global civil society (Martin et al. 2007; Biekart and Fowler 2013; Chatterton and Pickerill 2010; Horton and Kraftl 2009). In the light of ecological and social crises, displays of social activism continue to multiply across a range of areas including anti-austerity protests, Occupy, Extinction Rebellion, the Black Lives Matter movement, student-led protests against higher tuition, sweat shop labour, migrant rights, or anti-fossil fuel and -fracking activities, amongst many others. Rather than dwelling on any of these specifically, we want to focus on the threads which are reshaping the activist persona.

First, it seems that activism defined through the ‘great man of history’ – the militant figure who is dedicated to revolutionary change through visible struggle against an objective oppressor – is diminishing in relevance. For this kind of militant social change agent, there is always oppression to fight, a former lost state of grace to be regained and a utopian end point to be realised (Thoborn, 2008; Rose, 2002). While this thread of romance and idealism remains a strong current (Sparke 2008), less-hierarchical, more networked movements in recent decades, such as the Zapatistas and Occupy / Podemos, point to a loss of faith in such an individualised, masculinist persona. This version of the activist persona creates social distance between the ordinary citizen and the social change specialist. Reliance on binaries, such as activist/non-activist, reproduces unhelpful dynamics between those seen as ‘the powerful’ and ‘the oppressed’.

Anarchist, post-structural, feminist and queer approaches have rejected reified figures of social action, and instead embrace the ‘invisible (wo)man’ of resistance (see Gibson-Graham, 2014; Day, 2005). What this work points to is social action in all its unromantic, transnational, messy impurities. Here, the ability to act in society is not the preserve of the militant or the avant-garde. Indeed, as Baille-Smith and Jenkins (2011) point out, in reality many activists actually have an intermediate status, in-between overtly political and civil society characterizations. To fully understand the everyday nuances of the social activist persona, attention needs to be drawn to the ways in which identity, culture, power and emotional differences shape effectiveness (Pickerill 2009; Mott 2016; Flesher Fominaya 2016; Routledge 2003; 2012; Clough 2012).

Second, the task of the social activist becomes more complex if we no longer assume a pre-established system to push against (Rose 2002). Finding ways to take action without reference to a singular or stable centre is an important avenue for progressive political formations. Examples include local solidarity networks and alternative economies, such as the Catalan Integral Co-operative, which respond to collective needs and build community wealth (Gibson-Graham et al. 2013; Dafermos, 2017). Social action then is a process of becoming, creating agency in the everyday. It is at its strongest when it is collective where solidarities are forged between different groups (Gibson-Graham 2006; Grosz 1999).

Third, the last few decades have seen the growth of more transnational forms of activism, especially through global networks and convergence spaces (Routledge 2003). Novel forms of internationalism emerged over the 1990s as a result of responses to the global reach of neoliberal economics. These more diffuse networks, such as the World Social Forum and People's Global Action, grew in the space left by trade unions and political parties. Transnational alter-globalisation movements relying on democratic networks of self-organising activist groups show strong potential for effective resistance and transformation within emergent, complex environments (Chesters and Welsh 2005). They are also enhanced through open social media platforms (Castells 2012).

Fourth, many strands of social activism have become institutionalised and professionalised. Within global civil society much of this has come from neoliberal discourses surrounding development policy, especially through the United Nations and World Bank (Baille Smith and Jenkins 2011; Berry and Gabay 2009). This has led to a cadre of professionalised transnational activists within a more narrowly defined cosmopolitan global civil society, at the expense of further marginalisation of localised grassroots activists largely shut out from resources and institutional power (Clayton et al. 2015). More generally, free time and spaces for activism have been reduced, and certain sectors, especially the church, trade unions and the voluntary sector, all now play smaller roles in terms of radical activism (Kaldor 2003). The language of social enterprise has found effective footholds, especially through the proliferation of grants, charitable foundations and smart tech solutions, leading to commercialised start-ups, products and employment opportunities for former activists.⁴ Further, the potential of social activism has also been reshaped through increasing levels of policing and surveillance (Uitermark and Nicholls 2014; White and Wood 2016).

⁴ At the same time, within the UK at least, the 'charity gagging law' represents state silencing of third-sector entities by prohibiting political statements by charities with the threat of sanctions (Bulman 2017).

The activist-entrepreneur - novel personas for transformative social change?

In this section, we return to the four themes we identified in our engagements in civil society and explore how they illuminate tendencies towards novel personas around the social activist-entrepreneur.

Value rationality: an explicit process of foregrounding values

Our first line of analysis refers to values. Values are the broader basis of how we see the world, of whether we adopt more reactive or proactive strategies, and indeed whether we are optimistic or pessimistic. Here, we are interested in value differences that shape people's engagement in civil society especially between intrinsic and extrinsic values - the former based on the ability to support, nurture and self-affirm and latter to seek external approval and build status (Holmes et al. 2011). We are interested in how civil society actors understand and deploy their own values and apply them to everyday practice. We contend that the limits of the social entrepreneur and social activist personas relate in part to their deployment in ways which are disconnected from their implicit value structures, whether this is done unconsciously or not.

For example, although the social entrepreneur persona pursues social aims, what remains unquestioned is how these aims can be pursued within the existing capitalist value system, thus implicitly endorsing values of growth and profit as a suitable basis for social organisation. In this way, social entrepreneurship fails to fundamentally challenge the corrosive logic of capital which exploits people and finite environmental resources, despite aiming to challenge these particular practices. This mismatch of stated and implicit values undermines social enterprise's integrity and authority. In a similar way, the traditional social activist persona pursues an implicit goal towards organised social justice. As environmental and economic systems display symptoms of cyclical and complex crisis, goal-oriented social activism fails to effectively counteract the flawed logic of linear and static endpoints. This mismatch of stated and implicit values also saps social enterprise of its believability and ability to motivate. Moreover, some of the anger and urgency embedded in goal-focussed social activism undermines the importance of nurturing and self-care as parts of broader social change values (Cox 2009).

In contrast we have found the process of purposeful value-rationality – attempts to explicitly foreground values in the everyday (Flyvbjerg 2009) – useful to understanding tendencies which transcend these personas' limitations. Value-rationality relates to a process of *phronesis*, a type of discernment relevant to practical action and requiring a willingness to engage with the 'why' and 'how' of a given process of taking action. Whereas instrumental rationality focusses on what can be achieved, prioritising goals, destinations, or end-points, value-rationality points to the importance of processes, praxis and negotiation about what is desirable and how it should be acted upon (Flyvbjerg 2001; 2009). In particular,

“emotions, interactions and relationships...underlie values-based decision-making and action – [which are] essential to contesting neoliberalized governance and finance processes which emphasise economic rationality over value-rationality” (Darby 2016). Flyvberg (2001) argues that value-rational questioning is key to value-rationality with ‘where are we going?’ replaced by, for example, ‘how can we take action in a way that is consistent with our values?’

How did value-rationality play out in our practical engagements? Within Leeds Community Homes, each of the founding members brought their own individual value sets from their own host organisation and background ranging across housing as a fundamental human right, housing as a way to respond to climate change, housing as a means to tackle homelessness and poverty, and housing as a way to empower individuals and communities. Ultimately, these values played a key part in maintaining a sense of self-worth and were derived from personal exposure, as the following quotes from LCH members convey:

For me, ultimately I’m worried about the world. I’ve found the most effective way to use my time and skills is in this kind of thing of, trying to work with other people to identify a problem, and then work out a way to solve it.

I’m the sort of person who wants to make a difference in the world. I want to change the world for the better. I believe in social justice really strongly and I’m passionate about equality in the sense of fairness. I see a lot of unfairness and inequality and injustice.

One of the key challenges underpinning the creation of LCH was to create an organisation that could reflect this range of explicitly stated values through its activities. Long discussions between founding members focused on what kind of organisation would enable this. Key features emerged and included a commitment to work mutually and in partnership, which ultimately led to the creation of a co-operative society which could hold assets in perpetuity for the benefit of the community, and a desire to promote a different kind of money system through financial practices where money was retained locally for the benefit of communities. Rather than retreat from values in an attempt to gain a favourable market position, there was a desire to actively foreground them to differentiate LCH from other entities within the increasingly crowded third sector. A particularly value-laden strapline was chosen purposefully to stress a value set around the collective nature of the task where ordinary citizens are the driving force of change: ‘Let’s build a better Leeds: join the people powered homes revolution’.

Similarly, Oblong formed around a set of values held by its founding members. These have been periodically reviewed and reformulated over the twenty years it has been running. Oblong currently defines its core values through the ideas of empowerment, collectivism, sustainability, being community led, equality, respect and care. These are used actively across the life of the

organisation - in its publicity and induction processes, staff meetings, quarterly planning meetings, and annual strategic review and planning sessions. As one member commented:

And we constantly need to be making connections between the way we behave, the way we think, and what we say our values are. I think if we stop doing that, we will forget what those values are – we will say the words, but we won't really understand what we're saying... So I think our values should be evident in the way we hold our meetings, the way we present our website... the way we talk to each other, the whole...who we are, essentially.

Another member put it this way:

...you breathe in values, you breathe out actions. Your actions should be informed by your values, you're making your values manifest in the world. That's, I think, that's how organisational values should work.... I think it should be a closed circle really, like an iterative process.

At Oblong, the iterative nature of values is crucial to the process of building a collective sense of purpose:

...reinforcing them every week has made a real difference. And, listening to how other people interpret those values – reminding ourselves what they are and why we're there – is important in building trust, because you realise people do really care, and it's not about just getting their job done or whatever.

In these two organisations, then, value-rationality plays out through a commitment to draw upon the values of members to constantly check and challenge their practices, purposes, and direction of travel. It is this deep foregrounding of values within everyday practice that can push the boundaries of established personas and open up approaches to transformative social change beyond what is expected or tolerated.

Social relations: balancing independence and interdependence

Our second line of enquiry relates to the social relations that activists and entrepreneurs navigate within their wider social contexts. What we have noticed is that these personas contain tendencies to mobilise singular and often ego-led understandings of the self, encouraging individuals to rise above and detach themselves from their rich contexts. Much of this emerges from organisational styles and funding regimes that require people to adopt leadership positions that come with accountability and management responsibilities, as well as tendencies within the media, publishing and awards industry that require leaders and spokespeople who can represent wider social groups. Ultimately, this creates a wider sense of inclusion/exclusion (Holloway 2002; Kohl and McCutcheon 2015)

and fragments the wider relations that connect social groupings. It separates (active) leaders from (passive) beneficiaries, which damages processes of co-creation and collective action (Pain 2015). This separation can lead to people being associated with being either part of the problem or part of the solution. It overlooks that at different points in our lives we make mistakes and positive contributions.

But such separatedness is far from the norm. What we are keen to uncover are the many productive mobilisations of social activist and social entrepreneur ‘personas’ that recognise the interdependence, interconnectedness and intersectionality needed to iteratively respond to complex social and environmental problems. In this sense, unique and powerful actions are more often deeply co-constructed through interdependent relations. The issue is how to surface these relations in more socially visible ways. While the underpinning logic of identity formation classifies complex individuals into static categories (Holloway 2002), this overlooks the complex and messy reality of how we both create a sense of ourselves, and how this is also imposed on us by our wider social context. A more contingent, fluid and temporary approach to social relations means social actors can be ‘both/and’ rather than ‘either/or’ and confounds divisive binaries, heroic individualism and blame culture. Of particular interest here is how people knit together both creation and resistance in their identities, foreground vulnerabilities and weaknesses, and adopt a more interconnected sense of self from the dense flow of networks that can harness collective power-with, rather than individualised power-to or power-over (Shiva 1988; Gaventa and Cornwall 2001). There are also important unintended consequences here. Social actors can become swept up by particular contexts and become tacitly complicit in reinforcing repressive social relations, even when the opposite was intended. For example, attempts at less hierarchical social relations can allow invisible hierarchies to emerge which reinforce privilege around race, class, physical ability and sexuality, for example.

We turn now to how these issues played out in terms of our engagements. One of the desires behind LCH was for individual social actors to come together to strengthen and go beyond what they were already doing on their own. In particular, founding members saw themselves as a broader movement, rather than a mere organisation. For this reason, a member based co-operative was chosen as it provided opportunities to create a broader community of people who could advocate for and implement change. As one LCH member commented:

For me, it’s that the scale of the problem’s so big, you’ve kind of got to do more. And I kind of think we’re trying to find a way that we can do more together than we could ever do on our own.

At the most basic level this co-operative organisational structure provides a shift towards a collective entrepreneur model which connects people in a movement that is focused on shared challenges and values-led solutions:

...also trying to kind of bring in a whole group of people in the city who think, ‘We’ve got a problem here. I want to do something about

it. I don't know what to do.' We're providing them with an opportunity to actually get involved with something that will actually do something.

Founding members were acutely aware of the need not associate too closely with individual social enterprise:

Within the social enterprise world, there's the heroic individual narrative and some of them will bring people along with them. But it's often about a person and they make things happen. I think that there are other social enterprises that, that are more like movements, they're very good at bringing people with them... quite enterprising but doing it in a participatory, movement way.

The wider intention was not just to connect but actively change how people saw themselves and relations with others as the organisation was built. This can challenge the sense of ego-self often displayed by the social entrepreneur and was neatly summed up by one member who stressed outcomes not individuals:

It's about not being precious. I think there is strength in numbers. What we've always been good at, I think, is bringing people together. And not everybody who you bring together comes in the spirit, and they remain precious about the things that they're doing. It does matter, because otherwise, it's egos and personalities. And it's not the thing that you do; it's the difference that you're making that matters.

You hear it in language, you'll hear people in organisations talking about the 'we' or 'I' thing. The person who talks about the 'I', I've achieved this in the organisation. Actually, we either achieve stuff together or we don't achieve it...sometimes if you're focused too much on yourself, then you get in the way.

In this sense, LCH represents a desire to explore a movement approach and create broader change that can scale up and connect individuals in a broader movement identity:

Lots of social enterprises are small and they do great stuff and they're sustainable in their little area, they do great stuff. But I think if you want to create big, serious proper change you need a movement don't you? I'm excited to be part of something that is trying to build a movement. And a movement is different to a business.

How that movement is built is instructive. For Oblong, it means supporting other organisations to develop their own strong values-based identities and practices rather than scaling-out and imposing a model. Similarly, one of Oblong's defining features is its non-hierarchical management and organisational structure. Staff peer-manage each other, there is no chief executive, and volunteers work in

collectives, focussed on specific projects, with staff taking part in these collectives with equal decision-making power to volunteers. Oblong's founding members chose this organisational structure as a defining feature because one of their aims was to 'combat the wider inequalities in society' through and within the organisation itself. They chose a structure which made a statement against the competitive and hierarchical values of traditional organisations. Oblong has consistently placed an emphasis on participants being able to contribute meaningfully to change and action that makes a difference, both within the organisation itself and more widely in their communities. Overall, these activities attempt to transcend individual working practices and instead create a broader workplace identity. As one member commented: 'There's quite an Oblong way of doing things.' Volunteers say Oblong's strong identity contributes to their feelings that the organisation is a 'safe place' where 'everyone is treated equally'. Staff have also interpreted Oblong's identity as radical, even non-capitalist, and as an 'underdog' with a strong local reputation as a group which puts people first.

These purposeful social relations also have difficulties. For example, city council officials expressed scepticism about Oblong's collective working practices and whether it could manage a major building asset transfer, and one of their major social investment lenders had reservations about the non-traditional organisational structure. Over time, Oblong's identity has been tested and stretched by a creeping business-led entrepreneurialism. Compromises had to be reached to secure long-term viability. In particular, taking over a community centre created a new role as landlord and responsibilities around rent collection, loan repayments and space management, and this meant occasional tough decisions about choice of tenants and rental levels. To continue as a social enterprise, Oblong has had to be transparent about how the organisation was run, why and how it took over running the community centre, and why it charged rent. Members admit that non-hierarchy is an 'aspiration, not an achievement', and continually attempt to explain why it uses this structure. It has begun to use its identity as a 'unique selling point,' for example recruiting trustees with publicity which says, "Are you tired of business as usual? ...At Oblong we do things differently."

We can see in these examples two organisations that attempt to foster social relations and organisational identities that are less ego-driven and persona-dependent, and more co-constructed through interdependent relations. They take a more movement-oriented, collective approach as one further keystone to transformative social action. Clearly, this is an ongoing journey, and as both organisations experiment with what is possible through more hybrid and non-traditional collective personas.

Transformative and cyclical practices

Our third line of analysis relates to the actual practices and the daily flow of doing amongst civil society actors. We are interested in the actual tasks that people assemble together and how they undertake them in terms of style and manner. We

are particularly keen to unpack the tension between more linear and circular practices, and the extent to which actors frame them within transformative patterns and iterative cycles of doing.

Our contention is that traditional social enterprise and activist personas do not fulfil their potential because they underestimate the importance of exactly how they might embody transformative values and visions within micro-level organisational practices, and of approaching such practices through iterative cycles. We are specifically interested in how civil society actors can actively align their practices around their values and identities. This concern is particularly acute given the mismatch between aspirations and outcomes we have observed which leads to disorientation and reduced effectiveness. Pragmatic approaches which rely on the logic of growth, the pursuit of fixed goals, and the mobilisation of individualistic politics inevitably create social practices which contradict, or fail to live up to, the stated social goals of social entrepreneurs and activists. This could be seen in terms of campaigns to tackle homelessness, poverty, climate breakdown or micro-plastics which seek to raise money or set up micro initiatives but fail to understand and contextualise these within broader causal mechanisms.

Corporate models of organisational development and leadership are generating unsustainable levels of contradictions for many social entrepreneurs and activists alike who are seeking transformative change which breaks from the dominant growth paradigm. Many civil society actors are looking for alternative models of leadership and organisational development based on peer to peer networks, flatter hierarchies, more collaborative leadership styles as well as complexity and commons thinking (Herbst 1981; Ianello 1992; Chesters and Welsh 2005; Gibson-Graham 2008). At the same time, there are clear dangers to value-rational practice, especially given that many flatter forms are emerging directly from the business world, e.g. Google and other Silicon Valley corporations, to maintain and increase capital growth (Robertson, 2015).

In terms of our engagements, early discussions at LCH focused on the need for transformative business practices in order that the ambitious agenda for change could be realised. Traditional business and financial models from the housing and third sectors were rejected in favour of collaborative group working that could handle fast experimentation and testing, and citizen finance that could build localised capital markets. The original intent of LCH was indeed to challenge and provide alternatives to pro-growth business orthodoxy. One of the founding directors said:

I kind of want to do something that makes more of a difference. So we actually don't just get patronised by the business people who say 'well, yes, but we're the ones who do growth'. We want to say well no, in the economy we're going to have over the next 10 years, we have to grow differently and our approach, for example to housing, will create social value, will create economic value, at a scale...

Practices were shaped through, and grounded in, problems rather than generating market opportunities. She went on to state:

On my Twitter now it says ‘trying to solve social problems’. The thing I care about most is thinking right ok there’s a problem, how do we solve it.

Interestingly, another director responded to this by recognising the interstitial nature of practices.

...that’s the frustrating thing isn’t it. Trying to run something counter cultural within a system which demands growth and profit. But I guess we’re trying to find the ways in between aren’t we. We’re trying to find the cracks in the paving slabs, we’re kind of dancing with the devil in order to achieve what we want to do.

Ultimately, one director also stressed the desire to reconceive individual roles as facilitators of peer-to-peer networks and a wider movement, rather than an actor within a defined hierarchy undertaking prescribed tasks:

So maybe it needs, ultimately a big enabler somewhere at the top, because we don’t want to be doing it for people, we want to be helping people do it, I think. So maybe there needs to be an influencer, a fundraiser, a spokesperson, somewhere, that can support everybody else, all these smaller organisations or just groups of people, to do it themselves.

Oblong’s original intention was to pursue an agenda of challenging the inequalities in society by doing things differently. This places an important focus on the actual tasks, behaviours, and conscious practices that sustain Oblong’s identity and values within an evolving external context. Practices have been developed which aim to make Oblong’s core values into concrete behaviours and strategic plans. This is most evident in the routine practices embedded in Oblong’s review and planning sessions and in the micro-politics of daily activities including beginning weekly meetings by sharing examples of Oblong’s values being put into practice, using Time to Think® tools, using a review of Oblong’s values as a starting point for annual reviews, involving volunteers in running the organisation, and inducting volunteers through a discussion of values. In the wider community, Oblong exercises influence through networks and through strategic planning which responds to stakeholder’s views and priorities, maintaining an iterative and cyclical approach.

Practices at Oblong and LCH then are intimately linked to values-based identities. We suggest these practices can be transformative when pragmatism and goals-driven action is complemented with values-driven iterative cycles, which in turn can nurture, support, and promote active listening and self-care. While some degree of operational pragmatism is useful, it can also make practices vulnerable to external changes. In contrast, values-informed practices allow an organisation to

use its values to respond to changing circumstances; maintaining some power to effect change, rather than changing practices to fit changing circumstances.

Storytelling social change: 'the Great Turning'

Finally, our experience leads us to consider the broader narratives and stories that people and groups recount to describe their journey and wider story of change. Narratives of change underpin our ability to understand, articulate and intervene in the world to enact transformation. Stories are particularly effective, lucid and empowering devices for conveying how people have taken specific action to create change. In the context of a growing sense of the failure of business as usual approaches to human development, many civil society actors are focused on creating alternative, disruptive, but ultimately hopeful and empowering storylines and narratives that radically depart from the status quo (Starhawk 2002; Eisenstein 2013; Macy and Brown 2014; Coote 2017). Being able to tell radically different narratives about what is wrong with the world and how it could turn out positively is essential to building broad and transformative social change practices in the present.

However, our final contention is that while we strive to create coherent narratives that reflect a particular perspective, in the face of rapid social and ecological change there is a growing crisis in the ability to create workable narratives of the self, and how they fit into their broader social context (Holler and Kleppe, 2013). In terms of the personas in this paper, the typical values, practices, identities and narratives deployed through social entrepreneurship and/or social activism become increasingly less viable and plausible in the face of rapid social and ecological breakdown. We perceive the basic problem to be that change stories are not deep or wide enough to encompass the complex nature of current problems. As it becomes clearer that repeated biospheric, financial and social crises will disrupt the growth of capitalism, and that social movements see repeated setbacks and defeats, narratives of long-term commercial growth as well as politically progressive utopias lose their ability to inspire faith and action. Moreover, both underestimate the need for nurturing, and for interpersonal and democratic skills to navigate future likely breakdown (Cox 2009; Macy and Johnstone 2012). In such a context, social activists and social entrepreneurs are understandably struggling to convey compelling narratives to effectively story-tell change processes that can support transformation.

We are interested in what narratives and storylines civil society actors recount and whether these align with their practices, values and identities. What we are arguing for is a praxis based approach to social action where social actors begin to create new stories through reflexive negotiation which in turn underpin transformative values, practices and identities. We have experienced glimpses of activity between and beyond the social entrepreneur and activist which are attempting to narrate future change in new ways. These inevitably draw on established narratives around the need to resist injustice and organise, as well as to

develop organisational models that can provide jobs and meet basic needs. But they also convey novel aspects in their attempts to understand what exactly they are up against.

In terms of our practical engagements, we saw this novelty emerging from pushing boundaries and taking risks. As one LCH member commented, for him it was about:

...asking those crazy questions, because then everyone has to think about them, and you end up hopefully with a better conversation. I think they're disruptive and I think they're creative. I think no let's stir it up, see what comes out of that.

More specifically, at a visioning day LCH members defined its vision in the following way:

LCH will do good business, by delivering affordable sustainable new homes, leading by example, and accessing and providing access to good finance. This will result in better places to live, and LCH will learn from its experience and share its learning to influence the world, attract partners and continue to do good business.

LCH is involved in attempting to create a different storyline for the delivery of housing by combining not just housing delivery but a community-led approach that foregrounds place-stewardship, economic equality, tackling climate change, reskilling and community regeneration. This approach was generating a considerable pipeline of projects and attracted national grant funding to develop a city enabler service for community-led housing.

Secondly, Oblong's narrative of change centres around its core values, with special emphasis on collectivism, empowerment, and being led by the communities it is part of. This provides a narrative which can remain relevant as external circumstances and participants change. Oblong's wider change story concerns helping people and communities flourish by empowering them to take action that can identify and solve problems. Oblong sees itself as a change-making organisation, both through its internal and external actions. Through its day to day practices, Oblong creates a space within which participants can experience a non-competitive, empowering way of relating to each other, taking action and solving problems. This in itself creates change, by changing individuals' lives and experiences of working with others. Oblong sees a volunteer's journey of self-development as intrinsic to wider social change in that volunteer's individual life, community, and broader society. For this reason, emphasis is placed on supporting volunteers and valuing individuals' contributions to the collective.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have pointed to four novel tendencies that begin to map out transformative civic actors for social change between and beyond entrepreneur

and activist. Here we point to some broader issues that emerge from these tendencies. First, value-rationality is a way of thinking and decision-making which can make space for feelings such as loss and love, grief and joy, disconnection and reconnection. Collectively, we fear and deny not just biological human death, but the wider death or ending of aspects of our society, species or even the wider biosphere. To connect with these feelings, we have to acknowledge the role of death and loss in our lives and the vulnerability and pain associated with acknowledging these. For us, the absence of articulating these feelings is at the heart of the dysfunction of social entrepreneurial and activist personas. Acknowledging these emotions and incorporating them into our social change can nurture more transformative values, practices, identities and narratives.

Second, there is an awareness of the need for practices which nurture reconnection, strengthen our actions, and our collective power to act. One powerful question, for example, becomes: how do we fall in love with our communities we are engaging in, and base our practices around the deep connection that stems from the love of people and place? Practices which help us do this can bring up painful feelings of disconnection and a sense of loss of the world we are struggling to regain control over (Macy and Johnstone 2012). But importantly it will also encourage us to develop a more compassionate, loving and nurturing approach to others in our work.

In this sense, much can be learned from campaigns of indigenous peoples, from the Zapatistas of Mexico to Standing Rock in Canada, or indeed participants at UK anti-fracking sites. Narratives of love for sacred places and the natural environment, and expressions of grief at their destruction, are significant parts of the impetus to organise. They recognise that a prosperous future relies on harnessing the inter-dependencies between humans and those with the natural world (McIntosh 2004). Recognising our interdependent future on a finite planet, is a profound existential challenge to all of us.

Third, our desire to embrace interconnected relations is a profound move. This is not just about rejecting labels such as activist or entrepreneur. It is also about challenging the broader taken for granted binaries and categorises that shape our world which, for example, divides human from the non-human world, areas of poverty from those of prosperity, the domestic and the work sphere, or inner city from central areas. Only when we confront the structural mechanisms that divides us, can we work towards looser and more transformative social change personas (Gibson-Graham and Roelvink 2010; Eisenstein 2013; Gibson-Graham 2014; Kohl and McCutcheon 2015).

Finally, there is much that geographers can do in fostering and nurturing these novel personas between and beyond social entrepreneur and activist. Geographers in their scholar-activist work are already extremely active in supporting a range of civil society groups. They can continue this work and weave together larger narratives of change with workable practices. We encourage critical

geographers everywhere to further ‘dig where they stand’, and critically interrogate the values, relations, practices and narratives that we all use in our daily working lives. In this way, we can all make further interventions in shaping transformative social change personas.

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