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Creaking, Slipping and the Goldilocks zone: Cultivating relevance in established and scaled worker cooperatives

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CREAKING, SLIPPING, AND THE GOLDILOCKS ZONE:

CULTIVATING RELEVANCE IN ESTABLISHED AND

SCALED WORKER COOPERATIVES

by

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to understand how collectivist-democratic organizing is sustained over time and scale in worker cooperatives based in the UK. This research builds on and contributes to key developments in the contemporary literature by focusing on the (up to now) relatively unexplored phenomenon of prefigurative democratic organizing at the boundary between smaller-scale collectivist-democratic organizations and larger scale representative-bureaucratic organizations. A constructivist grounded theory approach was adopted to generate novel conceptual and empirical understandings based on a comparative case study of four worker cooperatives in the UK, all of which had survived for more than twenty years and had grown beyond fifty full members. Data were captured from five extended interviews with 'cooperative movement actors' and forty interviews with worker-members and were supported by fieldnotes from site visits and participant observation where permitted. Data analysis involved batch-coding, memo-writing, and the development of categories, concepts, and theoretical contributions. Empirical findings are presented in the first instance across three types of 'space' (interpersonal, headspace, and physical space) and subsequently in greater depth across four levels of organizing (individual, cultural, structural, and decision-making).

Through this analysis a conceptual framework is woven from three threads; the conception of organizations as landscapes and communities of practice, the philosophical underpinnings of relational process ontology, and the positioning of organizing as an 'integrative process'. The central argument of this thesis is that members are engaged in an ongoing search for the 'Goldilocks zone': a point of perfect 'relevance' of practice and structure. Members experience 'relevance' through the 'creaking' and 'slipping' between points of variable quality in cooperative prefiguration. The main contribution of this thesis is to further develop appreciation of nuance and imperfection in exploring, understanding, and practising democratic organizing. Going beyond arguing what is 'bad' or 'good' cooperation, it suggests that organizing cannot move closer to the 'Goldilocks zone' without moving between and through more-or-less 'cooperative' practice. Cultivating 'relevance' is a never-ending dance of engaging, aligning, and (re)imagining in the pursuit of an ever-evolving goal.

Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. All other sources are acknowledged by bibliographic references. This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree unless, as agreed by the University, for approved dual awards.

Yr wyf drwy hyn yn datgan mai canlyniad fy ymchwil fy hun yw'r thesis hwn, ac eithrio lle nodir yn wahanol. Caiff ffynonellau eraill eu cydnabod gan droednodiadau yn rhoi cyfeiriadau eglur. Nid yw sylwedd y 3waith hwn wedi cael ei dderbyn o'r blaen ar gyfer unrhyw radd, ac nid yw'n cael ei gyflwyno ar yr un pryd mewn ymgeisiaeth am unrhyw radd oni bai ei fod, fel y cytunwyd gan y Brifysgol, am gymwysterau deuol cymeradwy.

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List of abbreviations

CAQDAS	Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis System
CGT	Constructivist grounded theory
CMA	Cooperative movement actor
CMS	Critical Management Studies
Co-op	Cooperative
CoP	Community of practice
EOC	Employee-owned company
HR	Human resources
ICA	International Cooperative Alliance
IOC	Investor-owned company
LoP	Landscape of practice
MC	Management Committee
MJD	Member job description
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NVC	Non-violent communication
SMO	Social movement organization
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States of America
WC	Worker cooperative
WCM	Worker cooperative member
WCW	Worker Coop(erative) Weekend
YCN	Young Cooperators Network (UK)
YECN	Young European Cooperators Network

1.0 Introduction

This thesis is an inquiry into the issue of sustaining direct forms of democracy in human organizing over time and at scale. Specifically, I explore the tensions and strains experienced by members of UK worker cooperatives (WCs) that have survived for more than twenty years and have grown beyond fifty members yet have not expanded beyond two-hundred members.

Contemporary research into formal, economically oriented, democratic organizing has focused primarily on larger examples of democratic organizing, such as the Mondragon Corporation (Basque Country, Spain) and the John Lewis Partnership (UK), which tend towards being highly bureaucratic and representative-democratic (Rothschild-Whitt, 1979; Rothschild, 2016). Meanwhile, interest in instances of more direct democratic organizing has focused on prefigurative social movement organizations (SMOs), collectives, and smaller formal organizations; including WCs. Thus, this thesis attends to a notable practical and conceptual gap in the contemporary body of knowledge regarding prefigurative democratic organizing. I argue that the organizations I focus on exist in a liminal position, between more ossified examples of large-scale representative-democratic organizing and potentially more radical examples of smaller-scale, informal, or less economically oriented collectivist-democratic organizations.

While the infrequency and limited size of formal collectivist-democratic organizations in the UK is undeniable, my research turns to the few examples that have survived and even thrived. These organizations are interesting and valuable for two key reasons. Firstly, they sit at the frontier of our experience and understanding of the possibilities and limitations of human organizing. As such, they not only hold value for organization studies, my primary academic audience, they are also sites of value in terms of sustaining similar projects and improving our understanding of democracy more generally. Secondly, they have social and economic value in their potential to broaden capital ownership and returns, which is suggested to facilitate a more stable, balanced, and fairer economy (Blasi & Kruse, 2012; Lawrence, Pendleton, & Mahmoud, 2018). The need for such research has been advocated by authors including Cheney et al. (2014), who stated that "…further research is needed on the resources, structures, and practices that contribute to the resilience of worker cooperatives." (p. 595)

My main aim was to understand how such organizing is sustained, to identify associated issues, and to illuminate these in a manner that would be beneficial not only to worker cooperation but also to democratic organizing more broadly.

The over-arching research question guiding this investigation is:

- How do members of worker cooperatives that have aged, scaled, and are still growing experience the tensions involved with sustaining organizational democracy?

This main question is supported by three sub-questions.

- Where do tensions emerge in sustaining and expanding worker cooperatives?
- How do members make sense of and attempt to address these tensions?
- What are the implications for growing and sustaining organizational democracy?

My research contributes to a growing body of literature (Cornforth, 1995; Diefenbach, 2019; Langmead, 2016) that challenges long-standing assumptions regarding the pervasiveness of bureaucracy (Weber, 1968) and the inevitability of degeneration towards oligarchy (Michels, 1915). Furthermore, my research contributes to growing interest in the potential for relational, paradox-embracing, conceptual understanding and practice to facilitate the sustaining of the quality of democratic organizing (Griffin, King, & Reedy, 2020; Hernandez, 2006; Kioupkiolis, 2010; Kokkinidis, 2015; Langmead, 2016; Ng & Ng, 2009; Stryjan, 1994; Varman & Chakrabarti, 2004).

In Section 1.1, I explain the approach I adopted, which is explored in greater detail in Chapters 2, 3, and 4. In Section 1.2, I state the main findings and contributions of this project, these are developed and discussed across my conceptual chapter (Chapter 4) and empirical chapters (Chapters 5-8), and brought together through discussion in Chapter 9. Finally, in Section 1.3, I provide an overview of this thesis, briefly detailing the content of each chapter.

1.1 Approach

Toward responding to my research questions I develop a conceptualisation of 'cooperative prefiguration' as an aspirational position composed of the 'cooperative definition', values, and principles (ICA, 2019). In its construction I draw on the concept of 'prefiguration' (Maeckelbergh, 2012; Reedy, King, & Coupland, 2016) as a present-

time manifestation of future-oriented aspirations and intentions, along with the concepts of 'participatory democracy' (Pateman, 1970) and 'collectivist-democratic' organizing (Rothschild-Whitt, 1979; Rothschild, 2016). I frame the challenges faced by collectivist-democratic WCs within the meta-narrative of the 'degeneration thesis' which purports the inevitable demise of direct democracy in light of the challenges, tensions, and strains it faces (Cornforth, Thomas, Lewis, & Spear, 1988). While the 'primary contradiction' facing cooperation is understood to be the lack of coherence with the external environment (Varman & Chakrabarti, 2004), my thesis focuses primarily on members' experiences of the internal issues highlighted in the extant literature.

I explore how, in seeking to understand the means by which members can mitigate and counter these challenges, authors have sought to identify 'conditions' that help to sustain democratic organizing. Building from these conditions, I attend to the literature that presents a broad argument for the potential regeneration or reproduction of democratic organizing (Batstone, 1983; Cornforth, 1995). I highlight how, within this body of literature, there has been a notable shift in the past thirty years towards process-driven reconceptualisations and resolutions. Of particular note is the reframing of oligarchy as an ongoing 'threat' as opposed to existential inevitability (Diefenbach, 2019). Democratic organizing has come to be understood as an "evolving reality" (Varman & Chakrabarti, 2004, p. 187) that can be attended to through processes such as the "reproduction of membership" (Stryjan, 1994, p. 65) and "individual-collective alignment" (Langmead, 2016, p. 81). Furthermore, authors have advocated for embracing the imperfections, contradictions, and paradoxes of democratic organizing (Griffin et al., 2020; Kioupkiolis, 2010) and sought to reframe democratic organizations as "spaces of possibility" (Cornwell, 2012, p. 731; Kokkinidis, 2015). These understandings have largely been developed in the context of smaller, less formal, less economically oriented, and/or more hierarchical (or hybrid) organizing. I assert there remains a need to explore how these ideas interface with the experiences of members where time and scale are contributing to pressure on established collectivist-democratic economic organizing in WCs.

I adopt a constructivist grounded theory (CGT) approach, as established most prominently by Charmaz (2005, 2006). It provides a "coherent practical package(s) of theory and method" (Nicolini, 2012, p. 217) that integrates with a philosophical position

between subjectivism and intersubjectivism (Cunliffe, 2011) in line with the conceptual framework discussed in Chapter 4. The implications of this position for my research practice included an abductive research logic, subjecting data to rigorous interpretive analysis, and the overall aim of developing empirically grounded theory (Charmaz, 2009, p. 127). Also of importance was my role as researcher and co-creator in the project and the way my approach evolved over time, gradually letting go of a priori notions of 'applying' sensemaking literature (Tracy, 2020). The outcomes of this reflective and reflexive practice are most evident in the first-person voice in which my thesis is written (Bryant, 2017, p. 360).

CGT was suited to this project because of my interest in qualitatively understanding the subjective experiences of members and their intersubjective responses to experienced tensions. It encourages and facilitates staying close to the data and building thick descriptions over iterative cycles of constant comparison and analysis. Adopting an 'emergent strategy' to developing case study research, my data collection involved two phases. Phase 1 involved undertaking five extended expert interviews that enabled me to gain insight into the UK WC movement and the challenges faced by cooperatives. Phase 2 involved interviews with forty worker-member participants across four UK WCs matching the selection criteria of being collectivist-democratic, having existed as a WC for more than twenty years, and having at least fifty full worker-members. This was supported by participant observation where access permitted.

Due to access limitations, I could not 'return to the field' as would normally be encouraged in CGT research. Therefore, I adopted an approach to analysis that entailed the intensive batch-coding of several interviews and subsequently writing an analytic memo focused on an emergent theme or idea. Over the course of my analysis I produced twenty extensive analytic memos, which iteratively moved my analysis toward conceptual development and theoretical saturation. This grounded process enabled me to remain close to the extensive empirical data collected whilst developing a nuanced conceptual understanding of participants' experiences. As my analytic memos developed, I gradually began to develop links between my findings, emergent concepts, and conceptual literature.

My grounded theory analysis led me to construct a conceptual framework that extends the processual, paradox-embracing approach to democratic organizing by using a 'toolkit approach' (Nicolini, 2012, p. 214). My framework integrates practice theory,

specifically the literature around landscapes of practice (LoPs), with relational process ontology (RPO) and Follettian integrative process. RPO (Stout & Love, 2015b) provides the philosophical foundations for framing the findings and conceptualisations emerging from my analysis. It focuses on the relationships and interconnectedness that facilitate the integration of difference through inclusivity and authentic participation in self-governance. 'Integrative process' draws on three 'cross-cutting principles': 'integrative process, sustains and guides all structures and practices through 'circular response'; 'the situation', constituted by all the factors that are 'relating'; 'the law of the situation' embodies situational responsiveness (Stout & Love, 2015a).

The concepts of landscapes and communities of practice provide a frame for conceptualising how Follett's ideas are enacted, negotiated, and contested in organizational practice. Key notions I draw from the literature include the premise that LoPs consist of complex systems of communities of practice (CoPs) and the boundaries between them. Individuals are understood as existing within/across multiple communities and landscapes. Their relative identification or dis-identification can be described using three interdependent and interwoven modes of identification: engagement, imagination, and alignment (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, pp. 13–21). The boundaries that define and delineate different CoPs and landscapes are understood as unavoidable and problematic. 'Boundary objects', either 'instrumental' (structures) or 'visionary' (concepts), give definition and legitimacy to CoPs and landscapes. 'Brokers' are individuals who intentionally work across boundaries, connecting practices, introducing new practices, and facilitating cross-boundary experiences. In combination, this literature provides the frame around which my findings are developed and into which my grounded theory constructs breathe life.

1.2 Main findings

In responding to my overarching research question, I constructed four heuristics for understanding and exploring members' experiences of sustaining collectivist-democratic organizing in established and scaled WCs: the 'Goldilocks zone', 'relevance', 'creaking', and 'slipping'. My central argument is that members of established and scaled WCs are engaged in an ongoing search for the 'Goldilocks zone'. This is an impossible point of situationally bound perfect integration between more-or-less 'cooperative' structurelessness and structuredness, embracing the paradoxical and

contradictory nature of democratic organizing. It is conceived as a point of perfect 'relevance' where members feel connected and meaningful to the organization and all its constituent parts; that is, the 'total situation' and thus the 'whole-a-making'. 'Relevance' is an emergent property that brings together Follett's cross-cutting principles of integrative process, the situation, and the law of the situation with the three modes of identification from practice theory: engagement, alignment, and imagination. 'Relevance' is conceived as a multi-directional process between the individual members and the organization and between members. The 'Goldilocks zone' illustrates the need for the organization to feel 'relevant' to the individual, for the individual to be 'relevant' to the organization, and for members to feel 'relevant' to each other.

This ongoing relational process may be more-or-less conscious and/or intentional. While its existence may escape members, their experiences of the tensions it produces are very real. These tensions are manifest in members' experiences of the 'creaking' and 'slipping' of practice between points of variable quality in collectivist-democratic cooperative prefiguration. Although philosophically and empirically grounded, in essence 'relevance', the 'Goldilocks zone', 'creaking', and 'slipping' are simple concepts and in this simplicity lies their heuristic strength and utility.

I initially explore this 'creaking' and 'slipping' of cooperative practice across the three kinds of 'space' that enable and contain organizing. Firstly, the 'interpersonal space' that connects members to each other and to 'the organization'. Secondly, the 'headspace' of members in terms of the behaviours, practices, knowledge, and connections they are asked to hold in their mind. Thirdly, in the 'physical space' occupied by the members. The main body of my empirical analysis developed around four 'pillars' that correspond to levels of organizational analysis. These are: the individual level, the cultural level, the structural level, and the decision-making level.

At the individual level of analysis, which I describe as 'the cooperative journey', I found that members' experiences and responses focused on: the contradictions between organizational need and individual autonomy associated with the push and pull of specialisation; the value of practising full or partial multi-skilling; and the centrality of ongoing, preferably collective, 'unlearning and learning' to sustaining healthy cooperation.

At the cultural level of analysis I found that members' experiences and responses focused on: the art of cooperation entailing 'keeping it together' while 'letting go' of the shared worldview; enabling the practising of ongoing 'reviewing and renewing' as well as allowing new ideas to be integrated through the practice of 'turning outwards'.

At the structural level I found that members' experiences and responses focused on: the ongoing and active practice of 'consenting to authority'; the practising of 'conscious inequality'; and the iterative 'tightening and loosening' of structures.

At the decision-making level of analysis I found that members' experiences and responses focused on: sustaining 'nuance' in communicating and decision-making; the need for processes to be and feel 'relevant'; the need to address attachments, maintain openness, and continuously develop the skills and mentalities of members with respect to engaging in 'productive conversations' (constructive conflict).

The central implication of my research for democratic organizing is the appreciation of nuance and imperfection in exploring, understanding, and practising democratic organizing over time and scale. It is not about simply saying structure is bad, structurelessness is good or vice versa. Organizations cannot move closer to the 'Goldilocks zone' without moving between and through more-or-less 'cooperative' practice. Democratic organizing inevitably involves making mistakes. Sustaining cooperation, or democracy more generally, therefore entails having the personal and collective strength to be aware of the ongoing 'creaking' and also attentive to 'slipping'. Cultivating 'relevance' is a never-ending dance of engaging, aligning, and (re)imagining in the pursuit of an ever-evolving goal.

1.3 Plan of the thesis

My literature review in Chapter 2 first introduces the concept of prefiguration and delineates the collectivist-democratic WCs that are the subject of this research. I then address the literature that problematises their existence, with particular attention to 'the degeneration thesis' (Cornforth et al., 1988) and Michels' (1915) 'iron law of oligarchy'. I subsequently turn to the conditions suggested to alleviate or prevent the degeneration of organizational democracy and the emergence of oligarchy. From these conditions I move to explore the still-developing processual understandings and narratives of sustaining cooperation and democracy to identify what my thesis builds on and how it

contributes to progressing this stream in the literature (Diefenbach, 2019; Langmead, 2016; Stryjan, 1994; Varman & Chakrabarti, 2004).

Chapter 3 provides an overview of my methodological approach. I explain how my motivation and intentions developed over time, the journey that led me to explore cooperation in established and scaled WCs, and the research questions I set out to answer. Drawing on the work of Cunliffe (2011), I then reflect on my liminal positioning between intersubjectivism and subjectivism, how this interfaces with my CGT approach (Charmaz, 2005, 2006, 2014), and what the implication of my position are for my research practice. I turn to the work Wagenaar (2011) and Cerwonka and Malkki (2007) to outline why I describe my research strategy as 'deliberately emergent' and explain my two-phase approach involving 'expert interviews' followed by case-based 'practitioner interviews' supported in parts by participant observation. I subsequently provide explanation of and reflection on my analytical process; from transcription to intensive coding to the creation of twenty analytic memos that carried me from initial analysis through to theoretical saturation and write-up. In the final two sections I respectively reflect upon on my ethical considerations and their influence on the project as well as the issue of research quality; which I evaluate using Tracy's (2010, 2020) eight-point framework.

Chapter 4 serves as the bridge between the concepts that emerged from my analysis and the conceptual frame I developed to philosophically and analytically anchor and develop these. In Section 4.1, I introduce the three strands of literature I draw upon for my conceptual framing: relational process ontology (Stout & Love, 2015b), Follettian integrative process (Stout & Love, 2015a), and landscapes of practice (Wenger-Trayner, Fenton-O'Creevy, Hutchinson, Kubiak, & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). In Section 4.2, I introduce the four emergent concepts developed from my analysis: 'creaking', 'slipping, 'relevance', and the 'Goldilocks zone'. In Section 4.3, I illustrate how my four emergent concepts speak to the 'creaking' and 'slipping' that manifests in the interpersonal space, 'headspace' of members, and the physical spaces in which cooperation takes place.

Chapter 5, 'The cooperative journey', explores three threads in the individual level of analysis. Section 5.1 attends to the tensions present in the concept of 'membership' and the recruitment and development of members. In Section 5.2, I turn to how work is organized in WCs, focusing on the tension between iterations of multi-skilling and specialisation and the strains that emerge from these practices. Section 5.3 moves to

explore the importance of the practices of 'unlearning and learning' through which individuals are developed and develop themselves. What emerges from this analysis is that within the continuous struggle to sustain the integration of individuals through a 'sense of relevance', there is a tension between the idea of the autonomous individual engaging in a collective project and the idea of the cooperative as a collective entity.

Chapter 6, 'Keeping it together', explores three threads at the cultural level of analysis. In Section 6.1, I attend to the purposive nature of WCs and how shared purpose and worldview are developed, questioned, and potentially sustained. Section 6.2 turns to the role of a 'sense of uniqueness' in the survival of WCs and their ability to sustain democracy; this is contrasted with the potentially detrimental influence of a 'sense of exceptionalism'. In Section 6.3, I examine how time and scale affect the experiences of members with regards to the shared worldview and experience. What emerges from this analysis is that 'keeping it together' entails ongoing 'reviewing and renewing' of the needs and aspirations of members that compose the overarching 'purpose' of the cooperative as well as 'turning outwards' to engage with the wider landscape of cooperative practice. Furthermore, it requires balancing the beneficial 'sense of uniqueness' with the tendency of 'slipping' towards a detrimental 'sense of exceptionalism'.

Chapter 7, 'Consenting to authority', addresses three threads at the structural level of analysis. In Section 7.1, I explore the tensions between the autonomy of individuals and the authority placed in people and structures in established and scaled WCs. Section 7.2 turns to the relationship of members to authority and their experiences of assuming positions of authority. Section 7.3 probes the strains experienced with respect to giving authority to groups and structure such as rules or policies and procedures. What emerges from this analysis is that 'consenting to authority' involves a consciousness on the part of members as to their tacit and/or explicit agreement regarding the autonomy and agency of individual members as well as the authority entrusted to individuals, groups, and the rules of the organization.

Chapter 8, 'Cutting the knot', follows three threads at the decision-making level of analysis. Section 8.1 attends to where and how decisions are made. In Section 8.2, I explore how information moves through the organization and how members experience the tensions created by this movement. Section 8.3 addresses the challenges of having and sustaining productive conversations; highlighting the problematic presence of

vested interests and the tendency of members towards conflict avoidance, passive aggression, and political chicanery. What emerges from this analysis is an understanding that decision-making poses two key challenges. Firstly, in determining the 'relevance' of decision making in such as a way as to engender efficiency whilst also ensuring transparency and accountability. Secondly, in sustaining the 'nuance' of communication and decision-making so as to render interactions substantive, productive, and 'relevant'.

Chapter 9 brings my thesis to its conclusion by integrating my conceptual framework, heuristics, findings, and the extant literature into a single coherent narrative. I first draw on my three initial chapters to recapitulate my main aims, questions, and approach. Responding to my first two sub-questions, I then discuss my conceptual chapter and four empirical chapters to explain their respective findings in relation to key insights identified in the literature review. Next, I review the methodological, empirical, conceptual, and practical contributions of my thesis. Responding to my third sub-question, I then highlight the implications of my research for democratic organizing before considering where and how this research might have wider implications. Furthermore, along with considering how I will render my work meaningful to practice, I introduce a heuristic tool featuring four sets of questions emergent from this research that may serve as a springboard for practice and possible future research. Finally, I reflect on the limitations of my research and identify avenues for further research into WCs and democratic organizing.

2.0 Literature review

In this chapter I explore the body of extant literature that conceptualises worker cooperation, illuminates the precarious existence of collectivist-democratic organizing, and explores the conditions, practices, and processes by which it might be maintained and sustained. Section 2.1, 'Worker cooperation', sets out the concept of 'cooperative prefiguration' and delineates the 'collectivist-democratic' WCs I have studied. In Section 2.2, 'Degeneration, oligarchy, and legitimacy', I set out the challenges faced in sustaining prefigurative worker cooperation and the degeneration thesis that provides a narrative to these challenges. Section 2.3, 'Sustaining cooperation', first addresses the literature regarding the conditions for resisting degeneration in democratic organizing. This leads into the contemporary processual literature on sustaining prefigurative democratic organizing, its focus on inherent contradictions and paradoxes, and how conceiving democratic organizations as 'spaces of possibility' can further organizations' ability to resist degeneration and nurture cooperation. I then turn to what I regard as the most proximal research to my own before concluding the chapter with a summary that concisely brings all this literature together and sets forth the chapters to follow.

In this literature review I establish an understanding of the object of my research, collectivist-democratic WCs, and the subject of my research, members' experiences of tension and strain. Through this process I lay the foundations for my contributions. On the one hand, to our understanding of the tensions and strains experienced in the process of democratic organizing. On the other hand, to the processual, relational, paradox-embracing conceptualisations of collectivist-democratic organizing that may hold answers to how the prefiguration of today may become the reality of tomorrow.

2.1 Worker cooperation

Worker cooperatives (WCs) are a form of wholly employee-owned company (EOC) that subscribe to the cooperative movement's internationally recognised framework of values and principles (ICA, 2019). Their membership consists only of 'worker-members'. Unlike investor-owned companies (IOCs), partially employee-owned companies (EOCs), or indeed other forms of cooperative such as consumer or community associations, WCs are not exposed to shareholder-esque behaviour on the part of members not directly engaged as 'workers'. Worker-members typically control

WCs using some iteration of 'one-member one-vote' mechanism at the highest level (extreme) of decision-making. For example, where all the membership come together to discuss and vote on major items. Although employee ownership and control are becoming increasingly 'mainstream' through the popularisation of employee stock ownership plans (ESOPs), 'horizontal' structures, and partial- or pseudo-participative practices, WCs remain inherently prefigurative organizations in that they are manifestations of human aspiration and potentiality. In this section I unpack this description of WCs and outline the prefigurative position I ascribe to the collectivist-democratic WCs studied, providing the context and conceptual foundations for my own exploration of these intriguing organizations.

2.1.1 Cooperative prefiguration

> Prefiguration is a practice through which movement actors create a conflation of their ends with their means. It is an enactment of the ultimate values of an ideal society within the very means of struggle for that society. (Maeckelbergh, 2009, p. 67)

Prefiguration is closely aligned with anarchism, or anarchist literature, and is widely viewed as one of the defining characteristics of anarchist and syndicalist praxis (Leach, 2013b). However, it can be practised by any sort of movement from across the political spectrum (Maeckelbergh, 2009, p. 86). Prefiguration involves removing the temporal separation between the struggle of the present and the future conceived, envisioned, and desired by the actors involved (Kokkinidis, 2012; Reedy et al., 2016). In this process, the future reality is brought into the present through process and action. As opposed to being a theory of social change that entails goal setting and planning, prefiguration theorises through action; it is "something people do" (Maeckelbergh, 2009, p. 68).

The ends that are being prefigured determine the quality or character of the prefiguration. For example, Franks (2003, p. 26) suggested that the 'ends' of self-conscious non-hierarchical organizing are indicative of anarchic prefiguration. Maeckelbergh (2009, pp. 86–87) took care to point out that actors themselves may not understand their practices in the same way as researchers or other observers. Accordingly, the interpretation of any form of prefiguration is 'second order'. Even in spaces where means and ends are at the extremes of prefiguration, actors may not be

self-aware of a label or quality being applicable to their practice, be this 'anarchism' or 'cooperation'. Nor should one expect to find a consistency of interpretations as to what exactly actors consider, in this instance, 'cooperation', not to mention their perceptions as to what constitutes qualitatively 'good' or 'bad' prefigurative practice (Griffin et al., 2020; Kioupkiolis, 2010; Parker, Cheney, Fournier, & Land, 2014).

Although cooperatives and the idea of cooperation are not by any means novel, they remain prefigurative in that they are a present-time manifestation of an ideal future-time in which the default modes of relating, producing, and consuming are markedly different from those of the present. In the UK, the earliest recorded instance of an organization we might still consider 'a cooperative' is the Fenwick Weavers' Society, established on March 14th 1761 in Fenwick, Scotland (ICA, 2018). Its initial purpose was to sell food, specifically oatmeal, at discount prices to the membership to alleviate socio-economic pressures on the community. However, the co-operative organizational model as it is more broadly recognised today emerged several decades later in Northern England. The Rochdale Pioneers were a community of cotton mill workers who, facing a combination of low wages and high prices for basic necessities, established the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society in order to pool their collective resources and obtain basic necessities at lower prices (ICA, 2018). Intrinsic to the Pioneers' organization was the idea that consumers should be treated equitably, benefitting from their custom through a membership model by which they would share in the profits of, and have a democratic say in, the organization. This was arguably the birth of the consumer co-operative model (equitable tuck-shops in factories may be considered their predecessor).

By the late 19th Century cooperatives of various types had proliferated around the world and in 1895 the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) was created in order to serve as a unifying apex organization for the global cooperative movement. In 1995 the ICA revised and adopted a new 'Statement of Co-operative Identity', which included the following definition of a cooperative as "...an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social, and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly owned and democratically-controlled enterprise." (ICA, 2015)

This definition provides the underpinnings for a delineated conceptualisation of 'cooperation' as a practice and/or praxis, namely: the centrality of autonomy, the notion

of unity, voluntary participation, their purposiveness (economic, social, and/or cultural), being driven by necessity and/or aspirations, joint ownership, and democratic control. The notion of 'association' is also held to be important with respect to their formation around the shared needs and aspirations of groups of individuals willing to collaborate for the collective, egalitarian benefit of themselves, their community, and society at large (Watkins, 1986). Chaddad and Cook (2004) highlighted that cooperatives are normally distinguishable from other types of organization in that it is normal for ownership rights to be restricted to members and for limitations to be placed on rights to residual returns (non-transferable, non-appreciable, and non-redeemable) with any distributed benefits being shared, often equally, amongst the membership.

Webb and Cheney (2014, p. 67) identified a number of features that set cooperatives apart from other forms of organization: the purpose (or intention) of the business, a profound ethic of economic fairness and justice, and internationally accepted frameworks of both values and principles. Indeed, the ICA's definition of a cooperative is accompanied by a set of six values and seven principles which are subscribed to by all cooperatives around the world. The six values are: self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity. The seven principles are exhibited in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1 Seven Co-operative Principles (adapted from ICA, 2015)

PRINCIPLE	DESCRIPTION
1. Voluntary and Open Membership	Co-operatives are voluntary organizations, open to all persons able to use their services and willing to accept the responsibilities of membership, without gender, social, racial, political or religious discrimination.
2. Democratic Member Control	Co-operatives are democratic organizations controlled by their members, who actively participate in setting their policies and making decisions. Men and women serving as elected representatives are accountable to the membership. In primary co-operatives members have equal voting rights (one member, one vote) and co-operatives at other levels are also organized in a democratic manner.
3. Member Economic Participation	Members contribute equitably to, and democratically control, the capital of their co-operative. At least part of that capital is usually the common property of the co-operative. Members usually receive limited compensation, if any, on capital subscribed as a condition of membership. Members allocate surpluses for any or all of the following purposes: developing their co-operative, possibly by setting up reserves, at least part of which would be indivisible; benefiting members in proportion to their transactions with the co-operative; and supporting other activities approved by the membership.
4. Autonomy and Independence	Co-operatives are autonomous, self-help organizations controlled by their members. If they enter into agreements with other organizations, including governments, or raise capital from external sources, they do so on terms that ensure democratic control by their members and maintain their co-operative autonomy.
5. Education, Training and Information	Co-operatives provide education and training for their members, elected representatives, managers, and employees so they can contribute effectively to the development of their co-operatives. They inform the general public - particularly young people and opinion leaders - about the nature and benefits of co-operation.
6. Co-operation among Co-operatives	Co-operatives serve their members most effectively and strengthen the co-operative movement by working together through local, national, regional and international structures.
7. Concern for Community	Co-operatives work for the sustainable development of their communities through policies approved by their members.

It is contended by some that it is the combined application of these values and principles that truly define and distinguish cooperatives from other forms of organization (Jussila, 2013; Münkner, 1981; Novkovic, 2008; Watkins, 1986). In practice, the shape and substance of these values and principles varies greatly, particularly across the different forms of cooperative and inter-cooperative organizations identified by Webb and Cheney (2014) (see Table 2.2).

Table 2.2 Six forms of cooperative organization (adapted from T. Webb & Cheney, 2014, p. 69)

TYPE	DESCRIPTION
Worker/Employee	Those who work in the business which could be in any industry such as food, agriculture, retail sales of goods or services, social services, etc. This model would include collectives although most worker co-operatives would not function as collectives.
Consumer	Consumers of various commodities such as food, insurance, funerals, financial services including credit unions, housing, utilities such as electricity or gas, farm and garden supplies, travel services etc. (This model includes mutuals.)
Small Business	Producers of common products such as dairy farmer, fishers, motel owners, hardware or other retail stores, electricians, plumbers, family grocers providing themselves with shared services such as procurement, marketing, business expertise, government relations, etc.
Solidarity	These involve members who have an interdependent relationship (dairy workers and farmers, parents and day-care workers, social workers and clients, etc.) and form a co-operative with different classes of membership to work toward shared goals.
Community	People from a community seeking to accomplish an ad hoc project or broader community improvement join together to achieve shared goals; for example, building a community hall or developing a plan for community renewal.
Second/Third Tier	Members are cooperatives rather than individuals and there is often a variation of the one-member-one-vote practice to reflect the varying individual membership level in member co-operatives. The ICA is a clear example of a third-tier co-operative whose members are for the most part second-tier cooperatives.

In the past, WCs were more frequently found in food production (agriculture, fishing, localised food distribution), professional services, and small-scale fabrication, manufacturing, and construction industries (Cheney et al., 2014; Dow, 2003). More recently WCs have emerged across a range of service sectors including legal, financial, healthcare, creative, and technology (e.g. programming and web development). UK-based WCs are not restricted in terms of the legal form they adopt (e.g. limited companies, community benefit societies, or partnerships); this is due to the absence of any special co-operative legislation or regulations (Co-operatives UK, 2012). While this offers flexibility, it also creates a further layer of ambiguity as to what exactly a WC is and how they are regulated.

WCs arguably represent the pinnacle of cooperative prefiguration in that they involve the highest degree of member participation with the least opportunity for exploitation by secondary (managers) or tertiary (shareholders) parties. WCs offer members greater opportunity for self-determination and equitable remuneration, although not necessarily equality of pay. While some WCs operate a completely flat pay structure, others have collectively agreed scales of pay, though often with a ratio in place limiting the difference between the lowest and highest pay bracket. As a result of these characteristics, there is a tendency for higher levels of member participation in WCs than in other forms of cooperative (Cheney et al., 2014). WCs, whether more or less 'collectively' organized, face several challenges to sustaining their cooperative prefiguration. These are attended in Section 2.2.

2.1.2 Collectivist-democratic organizing

Fully participative democratic organizing can be understood as requiring a degree of control, as opposed to just influence, over decision-making on the part of workers (Cathcart, 2013a; Cheney, 1995; Dow, 1993). Offering a twist on Arnstein's (1969) 'ladder of citizen participation', Marchington et al.'s (1992, pp. 7–8) conceptual "escalator of participation" visualised five degrees along a continuum through which the extent of worker participation may be described: information, communication, consultation, codetermination, and control (see Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1: The escalator of participation (source: Marchington et al., 1992, p. 7)
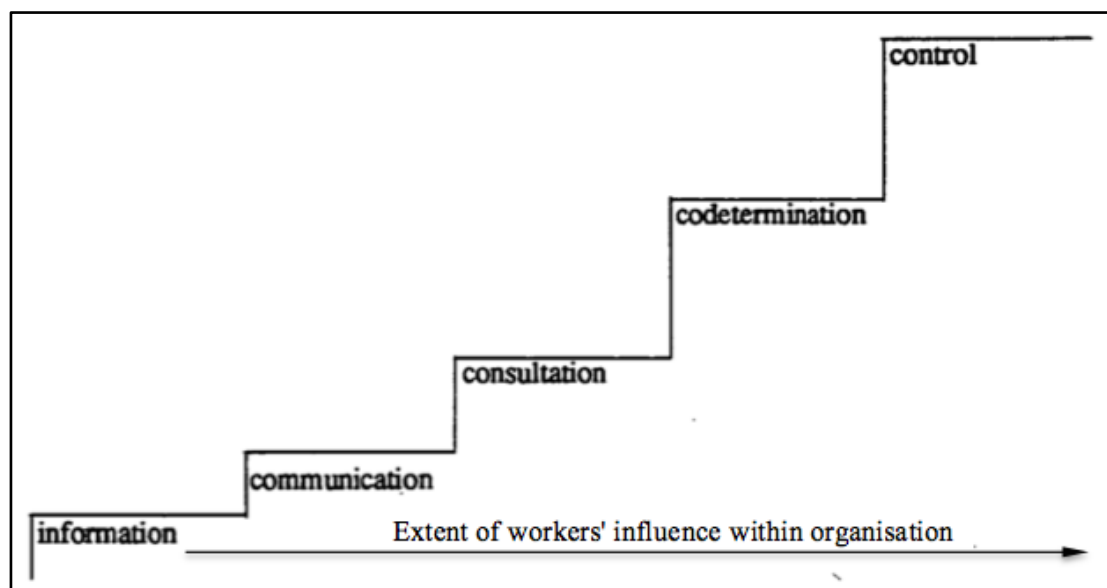
The authors contended that each of the degrees is necessarily dependent on the previous, i.e. control requires information and communication in order to be effective. Bernstein (1976) offered a more nuanced, or dimensional, set of three measures for understanding and evaluating participation. Firstly, the range of issues over which workers have some form of control; secondly, the degree of control held by the workers; thirdly, the organizational level at which the workers exercise their control. These measures enable us to appreciate how in cases where workers are given control over work procedures, they may still have no control over wage setting, strategy, or the division of profits: the final say remaining in the hands of management.

The contribution of Pateman (1970) in terms of synthesising and clarifying our understanding of democratic participation cannot be understated. At the heart of Pateman's (1970) conceptualisation of 'participatory democracy' were the assertions that individuals and institutions cannot be considered in isolation from each other and that representation alone is insufficient for sustaining democracy. For Pateman, the primary function of direct democratic participation, and therefore practice, is its educative effect. However, participation's subsidiary effects are nonetheless important, these being: 'integrating', sometimes referred to as 'solidarity building', and 'validating' the democratic polity through the collective collaborative process. Stability is achieved via the self-sustaining nature of participation as opposed to its minimisation and control by a social elite. Thus, 'participatory democracy' may be understood as;

> …where maximum input (participation) is required and where output includes not just policies (decisions) but also the development of the social and political capacities of each individual, so that there is 'feedback' from output to input. (Pateman, 1970, p. 43)

In light of perceived inadequacies in definitions attributed to 'participation' in organizations, Pateman built on work by French, Israel, and Aas (1960) to illuminate situations of 'partial participation' where workers are in an unequal position as permanent subordinates and the final prerogative rests with management. Furthermore, she highlighted that in cases where techniques to persuade employees or workers to accept decisions that have already been made, or the parameters of which have already been determined, the term 'pseudo participation' would be more appropriate (Pateman 1970, p.68-69). What emerges from Pateman's analysis is that many definitions of, and discussions about 'participation' are in fact describing or exploring situations of 'partial

participation' or 'pseudo participation' as opposed to 'full participation'. Pateman (1970) defined full participation as "a process where each individual member of a decision-making body has equal power to determine the outcome of decisions", asserting that, "where industrial democracy exists there are no longer 'sides' in the existing sense" (p. 71).

The work of Rothschild moves us further toward an understanding of the kind of democratic ownership and control aspired to by the organizations explored in this study. In her seminal article 'The Collectivist Organization: An Alternative to Rational-Bureaucratic Models' (1979) Rothschild elucidated the differences between 'collectivist-democratic organization', which is necessarily not merely democratic but also participatory, and the 'bureaucratic organization', which may or may not be democratic. She delineated the collectivist-democratic organization from the bureaucratic organization along eight dimensions: authority, rules, social control, social relations, recruitment and advancement, incentive structure, social stratification, and differentiation (see Table 2.3). Although these characteristics are inherently interconnected and synergistic, organizations may feature a combination of collectivist and bureaucratic characteristics. As ever, such frameworks deal with extremes and it is advisable to view these as cross-sectional points on a continuum.

Table 2.3 Bureaucratic and collectivist-democratic organizations (adapted from Rothschild-Whitt, 1979, p. 519)

DIMENSION	BUREAUCRATIC ORGANIZATION	COLLECTIVIST-DEMOCRATIC ORGANIZATION
1. Authority	Authority resides in individuals by virtue of incumbency in office and/or expertise: hierarchical organization of offices. Compliance is to universal fixed rules as these are implemented by office incumbents	Authority resides in the collective as a whole: delegated, if at all, only temporarily and subject to recall. Compliance is to the consensus of the collective which is always fluid and open to negotiation
2. Rules	Formalisation of the fixed and universalistic rules: calculability and appeal of decisions on the basis of correspondence to the formal, written law	Minimal stipulated rules: primacy of ad hoc, individualised decisions: some calculability possible on the basis of knowing the substantive ethics involved in the situation
3. Social control	Organizational behaviour is subject to social control, primarily through direct supervision or standardised rules and sanctions, tertiarily through the selection of homogeneous personnel especially at top levels	Social controls are primarily based on personalistic or moralistic appeals and the selection of homogeneous personnel
4. Social relations	Ideal of impersonality. Relations are to be role-based, segmental, and instrumental	Ideal of community. Relations are to be holistic, personal, of value in themselves
5. Recruitment and advancement	a. Employment based on specialised training and formal certification b. Employment constitutes a career; advancement based on seniority or achievement	a. Employment based on friends, social-political values, personality attributes, and informally assessed knowledge and skills b. Concept of career advancement not meaningful; no hierarchy of positions
6. Incentive structure	Remunerative incentives are primary	Normative and solidarity incentives are primary; material incentives are secondary
7. Social stratification	Isomorphic distribution of prestige, privilege, and power; i.e. differential rewards by office; hierarchy justifies inequality	Egalitarian; reward differentials, if any, are strictly limited by the collectivity
8. Differentiation	a. Maximal division of labour; dichotomy between intellectual work and manual work and between administrative tasks and performance tasks b. Maximal specialisation of jobs and functions; segmental roles. Technical expertise is exclusively held; ideal of the specialist-expert	a. Minimal division of labour; administration is combined with performance tasks; division between intellectual and manual work is reduced b. Generalisation of jobs and functions; holistic roles. Demystification of expertise; ideal of the amateur factotum

Building on this delineation of the 'collectivist-democratic organization', Rothschild (2016) outlined the differences between democratic organizations operating with a 'formal-representative' democratic system, as might be found in larger co-operatives or EOCs and those practising 'collectivist-democratic' democracy. Rothschild calls these modes of organizing 'Democracy 1.0' and 'Democracy 2.0' respectively. Again, these sets of characteristics were typical as opposed to absolute. Rothschild's second framework provides us with a set of 'anticipated characteristics' to be found in participatory and 'collectivist-democratic' WCs. For example, we might expect to find that:

- Major decisions will be made by general assemblies of all worker-members; that decision-making will tend towards consensus seeking (or similar non-hierarchical methods)

- There are likely to be few formalised 'senior positions' and that where these do exist, they will be temporary and 'functional'

- Decisions and operations will be based upon the shared values and principles of the worker-members, as opposed to a stringent set of bureaucratic rules; that decisions are commonly provisional, temporary, and revisable

- Shared values and principles are often referenced and widely known by the membership; that there is a continuous search for common ground and shared meaning within the organization; and that participation is open to all members without restriction.

2.1.3 Summary

In this section I have introduced the type of cooperative and iteration of cooperative prefiguration this study focuses on. 'Prefiguration' involves the removal of the temporal separation between the struggle of the present and the future conceived, envisioned, and desired by the actors involved. It is the present manifestation of an aspirational reality. Whilst a formalised idea of 'cooperation' is now several hundred years old, it remains prefigurative as the reality aspired towards is unrealised and incomplete. Within the broad church of cooperation, featuring organizations ranging from mutual banks and industrial-scale farming cooperatives to loosely formed collectives of artists and technologists, the 'shared' set of values and principles are interpreted and enacted to varying extremes.

My interest lies in the WC model of organization and in the more 'radical' interpretations of cooperative prefiguration. These cooperatives are directly owned and controlled by their worker-members alone and are thus absent of conventional shareholder-esque behaviour. More specifically, they aspire towards a mode of highly participatory collectivist-democratic organizing. Drawing on literature to identify a range of typical or expected features, such WCs would be characterised by: authority resting with the collective, limited formal rules and structures, deliberative and consensus-seeking decision-making processes, minimal social and economic stratification, limited division and specialisation of labour, and an egalitarian culture that emphasises solidaristic practices.

2.2 Degeneration, oligarchy, and legitimacy

The prefigurative cooperation outlined through the work of Pateman and Rothschild challenges the conventional and hegemonic mode of bureaucratic, oligarchic organization that persists as the apparent ontological truth of economic organizing, and indeed organizing more generally. The WCs in which I am interested, as with other instances of unconventional organizing, are contentious because the prevailing understanding has long been that they will inevitably fail. That is to say, they will either collapse on themselves or gradually become more and more like conventional organizations. Indeed, as noted in the previous section, WCs are fraught with a host of challenges that make them potentially difficult to sustain. In this section, I explore this prevailing narrative and the specific challenges identified in the literature as well as offer a closer examination of the inherent tension between legitimacy and oligarchy.

2.2.1 The degeneration thesis

The totality of the issues associated with sustaining worker cooperation is captured in what has come to be known as the 'degeneration thesis' (Cornforth, 1995; Cornforth et al., 1988; Diefenbach, 2019; Langmead, 2016; Meister, 1984; Sauser, 2009; Varman & Chakrabarti, 2004). For example, Meister (1974) proposed a four-stage process of degeneration which begins with conflict between direct democracy and what is assumed to be a 'badly developed economic function'. This leads to the application of conventional organizational principles (e.g. formalisation); or falling back from collectivist-democracy (Democracy 2.0) to formal-representative democracy (Democracy 1.0). This, it is suggested, eventually gives rise to the emergence of

representative democracy, and finally culminates in full management control of the organization. In what stands as one of the more comprehensive studies of UK WCs to date, in terms of the number of cooperatives studied, their variety, and the extensiveness of analysis, Cornforth et al. (1988) broke down the arguments supporting the degeneration thesis into three groupings.

The first grouping is labelled 'constitutional degeneration'. This describes scenarios where ownership is taken over by external shareholders or becomes concentrated in the hands of a small group of workers. Constitutional degeneration was noticed as being prevalent in more economically successful cooperatives. Dilution of control and ownership through open membership and share trading were cited as key reasons for this (Fanning & McCarthy, 1986; Holyoake, 1906; Vanek, 1970). However, cooperatives have since established mechanisms for more carefully curating membership intake and restricting the transferability of shares. The lack of a clear set of cooperative legal structures remains problematic for cooperatives in the UK. Although this provides for greater flexibility, it also creates opportunities for constitutional failings. Likewise, despite cooperatives having formalised membership control, the organizations may become so constrained by circumstances that this control may not be able to be effectively exercised. Furthermore, control may still become concentrated in a small or select group of members. These issues are essentially the explanations for degeneration offered by the two further groupings described below.

The second grouping concerns the degenerative influence of external forces under capitalism (Cornforth et al., 1988, p. 115); we can extend this to include neoliberalism and the dominant oligarchic paradigm. The prevailing external forces served as the source of cynicism toward cooperatives on the part of Marx, Marxists, as well as socialists including the Webbs (S. Webb & Webb, 1914). For Marxists, the degenerative pressures stem primarily, if not entirely, from capitalist relations of production. The understanding that the homogeneous and hegemonic capitalist external environment plays a key role in undermining both the creation and sustaining of prefigurative organizing has been broadly taken on-board. The idea is captured in DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) concept of 'institutional isomorphism', which suggests that organizations are shaped by their institutional environment through one or a combination of three modes: normalisation, coercion, and mimicry (mimetic). Thompson (2015) highlights how the prevailing institutional environment suppresses

cooperatives' ability to overcome the trade-off between cooperation and coordination, because it is geared, or designed, toward the prevailing mode of organization, i.e. capitalism, bureaucracy, and oligarchy.

According to Thompson (2015, p. 9), the structural/relational facet of institutional isomorphism concerns the bias of legal and financial institutions in favour of the dominant paradigm, and more importantly the barriers this creates with regards to the formation and success of co-operatives. These include the normalisation of 'management' roles, pay-scales influenced by extent of involvement in coordination activities, and the reduced autonomy of workers (Chaves & Sajardo-Moreno, 2004; Davis, 2001; Spear, 2004). Furthermore, the risks associated with bundling wealth into employment serve to further discourage workers from striking out as cooperators (Benner, 1984; Miyazaki, 1984).

The cultural/cognitive facet of institutional isomorphism is characterised by "pervasive behaviour-shaping institutions" (Rothschild & Whitt, 1986, p. 67) including media and education institutions. These propagate the instrumental, transactional, and individualistic approach to economic participation (Blumberg, 1973; Kanter, 1977; Pateman, 1970) while discouraging, even preventing, individuals from considering forming, managing, and/or working in cooperatives (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Everett & Minkler, 1993; Kanter, 1972). Furthermore, problems can emerge when the day-to-day experiences of bureaucracy begin to undermine participation through systemic ambivalence, inexperience, apathy with regards to democratic processes and governance (Batstone, 1983; Ben-ner, 1984; Cornforth, 1995; Cornforth et al., 1988; Hernandez, 2006; Storey, Basterretxea, & Salaman, 2014; Stryjan, 1994; Varman & Chakrabarti, 2004). Likewise, the special treatment of managers (Meister, 1984), expanding bureaucracy to the point of fundamentally changing the organization (Rothschild & Whitt, 1986, p. 113), and increased coordination/control trade-off issues emerging from general organizational expansion (Jones & Kalmi, 2012) also may play roles in contributing to this externally-influenced degeneration. Varman and Chakrabarti (2004, p. 187) concluded that the non-collectivist-democratic social and economic context is the primary contradiction of, or rather challenge for, organizational democracy. In supporting this assertion, they pointed to Kleinman's (1996) observation of the patterns of domination and subordination in a society permeated by inequalities

and Bernstein's (1982) emphasis on the need for engendering democratic consciousness to mitigate against compliant and passive behaviours.

The third grouping emphasises the degenerative effects of the internal characteristics and pressures of WCs (Cornforth et al., 1988, p. 117). Although they too recognised the issues associated with external forces, the Webbs (1902) also pointed to internal issues facing cooperatives and worker cooperation, namely: a lack of discipline due to democratic organizing, limited understanding of 'the market' (i.e. the capitalist paradigm), and a resistance to adapting to technological change. Others also acknowledge the inherent internal challenges facing cooperatives as being a key factor in both limiting their proliferation and precipitating degeneration. For example, Rothschild-Whitt (1979) identified several membership-related constraints which affect and potentially limit the effectiveness and efficiency of collectivist-democratic organizations relative to their influence within bureaucratic organizations, including: time cost, degree of homogeneity, emotional intensity, nondemocratic individuals, and individual differences (see Table 2.4).

Table 2.4 Constraints facing collectivist-democracies (adapted from: Rothschild-Whitt, 1979)

CONSTRAINT	DESCRIPTION
Time	Democracy takes time. There is a limit to how streamlined collectivist-democratic meetings may be. With practice, planning, and self-discipline, groups can learn to accomplish more in the time available. However, once a level of experience is reached further reduction in time given tends to detrimentally impact direct member control.
Homogeneity	Consensus is facilitated by group homogeneity; diversity incurs a social cost in terms of collectivist decision-making. As such, collectivist organizations tend to attract homogenous populations. Substantial and clear agreement on values, goals, and processes is necessary in order to ensure stability.
Emotional Intensity	The closer, more familial, relationships within collectivist organizations may yield greater satisfaction than the impersonal relations of bureaucracy but they are also more emotionally involved and this can generate unanticipated social costs. Furthermore, the intimacy of face-to-face decision-making can lead to issues becoming personalised.
Nondemocratic Individuals	As a result of socialisation, conditioning, or deeply held individualistic convictions, some people are not suited to participatory democracy. This is in part due to the non-collectivist behaviour-shaping institutions that dominate education and wider society. There is only so much that can be done by a collectivist organization to counter and/or avoid such individuals.
Individual Differences	This relates to individual characteristics and how they play a role in collectivist-democratic functioning. Within a single organization there are likely to be individuals who are more articulate, more committed, more energetic, or more compassionate than others. These individuals may gain status within even an egalitarian organization, potentially leading to tensions and instability. However, these individual competencies are inevitable and programmes such a job/task rotation can help to redistribute levels of influence.

Nilsson (2001) identified four conditions that influence the likelihood and extent of issues arising in co-operative organizations, two of which echo those identified by Rothschild-Whitt (1979). Firstly, in relation to the extent of membership homogeneity or heterogeneity; and secondly, in terms of the degree of 'goal alignment' between members and between members and the organization with relation to achieving consensus. Nilsson's third condition introduces the issue of member perceptions regarding relative financial and value contributions of other members. Nilsson's fourth constraint is the potential for discord regarding the degree of individual involvement in decision-making across the organization, assumption being that the more involved in decision-making the members are, the greater the level of commitment and extent of goal alignment attained.

Expanding on this issue of member alignment, Varman and Chakrabarti (2004) first pointed to Gherardi and Masiero's (1987) explication of 'foundation' and 'coalition' WCs: delineating co-operatives by their reason for being. While foundation co-operatives are developed around a set of common ideals shared by the membership, coalition co-operatives are primarily formed to meet economic needs/objectives. The implication here is that the purpose for which a co-operative is founded will shape its ongoing democratic functioning based on the intentions with which members approached its formation. Varman and Chakrabarti built on this in drawing from the longitudinal work of Hadley and Goldsmith (1995), which identified motivating forces within common-ownership organizations, labelled developers, coalitionists, and managerialists or convergers. Developers were a minority group, aligned with the ideological intentions of the organizational founders, viewing these as the basis upon which the organization should move forward. 'Coalitionists' were a majority group subdivided into three categories: 'minimalists', who expected little from the organization; 'the satisfied', who felt their voice was heard and the organization was operating democratically; and 'the critics', who were dissatisfied with the degree of participation but were unlikely to take steps to change the status quo. Lastly, there were the 'managerialists' (convergers) who felt the organization should be run akin to other 'mainstream' organizations (IOCs) and would support increased managerial discretion. This classification helps to understand the competing interests that can potentially emerge within WCs.

The foundations of the degeneration thesis are located in Weber's (1978) postulation of the inevitability of bureaucracy within organizations and society along with Marxist and Socialist criticisms and critiques of co-operatives. However, it was cast into apparent ontological truth by Michels' (1915; all references henceforth to this edition) postulation of the 'iron law of oligarchy'.

Table 2.5 Michels' process of oligarchization (Diefenbach, 2019)

STEP	DESCRIPTION	PAGE REFERENCES (Michels, 1915)
1	Organization is based on division of labour, and division of labour leads to specialisation	58, 64–65
2	Specialisation makes specialists indispensable and, thus, leadership must be provided by specialists ('expert leadership')	25, 58, 64–65
3	Specialisation (differentiation of functions) leads to hierarchisation/stratification: to a minority of superiors ('the leaders') and a majority of subordinates ('the masses')	26
4	Professional specialists become professional leaders who decide without consultation and are uncontrolled	27, 28
5	Discipline and strict observance of hierarchical rules become necessities for subordinates	27, 96, 100–101, 127
6	Leaders isolate themselves, leadership turns into a cartel or 'closed caste', and leaders make their dominance and ruling permanent	67, 92, 98–102

Diefenbach (2019) summarised Michels' thesis in six essential steps (see Table 2.5). These steps follow the logic that reliance on functional necessities of organization will inevitably result in increasingly hierarchical structures, the stratification of individuals, and the emergence of behaviour that conforms to and subsequently confirms the existence of hierarchy. In turn, this results in the emergence, development, and continuation of an elite. According to Diefenbach, Michels' proposition is particularly powerful for three reasons. Firstly, it applies to all and any forms of organized social system. Secondly, it provides a foundation for the dismissal of attempts to fundamentally change the state of human organization towards less hierarchical and oligarchic modes of organizing, enabling accusations of unrealistic utopianism and naivety. Thirdly, that if all organization is destined for oligarchy then there is no purpose to the existence of attempts to organize otherwise. Furthermore, Michels' did not specify a horizon for oligarchisation to occur; this means his 'law' remains 'true' regardless of how long an organization remains non-oligarchic as the transition may nevertheless occur at some future point.

2.2.2 Oligarchy and legitimacy

Nevertheless, organizations have persevered in attempting to overcome the purported inevitability of oligarchy and researchers have duly attempted to crystallise the systems,

mechanisms, and practices by which oligarchy may be resisted. For example, Cornforth (1995) explored four relatively long-standing and successful UK-based WCs with seven to thirty members between 1971 and 1985, examining the effects of new management structures and more specialised division of labour. Voss and Sherman (2000) explored the revitalisation of the American labour movement, examining factors that enabled social movement organizations (SMOs) to break out of bureaucratic conservatism. Leach (2013a) reflected on her observations from studying radical leftist movements in Germany to offer insights into how 'structures of tyranylessness' could be maintained. Sutherland, Land, and Böhm (2014) shared insights from an empirical study of four SMOs in exploring understandings and performances of leadership and the balancing act between managing meaning and defining reality without compromising ideological commitment. These examples are offered to underscore the diversity of research into this issue. Later in this chapter I attend to other research closer to the focus of Cornforth's and my own.

Authors have criticised the so-called 'iron law'. Leach (2005, p. 313) noted that early criticisms focused on the validity of Michels' assertion that power rises in bureaucracy (citing Bukharin, 1925; Hook, 1933). However, by the mid-20th Century the understanding that bureaucracy emerges, and that power rises in this bureaucracy, had become accepted and critical eyes were turned to the supposed inevitability of oligarchy. Furthermore, interest grew in the potential for structures to be designed so as to both limit power and hold it to account (for example Edelstein, 1967; Gouldner, 1954; Lipset, Trow, & Coleman, 1956; Schumpeter, 1943). Further to this, in part due to the proliferation of participatory, non-hierarchical workers' collectives, communes, cooperatives, and political groups in the 1970s, authors started to question the applicability of the 'iron law' to smaller and/or non-bureaucratically structured organizing (for example Rothschild & Whitt, 1986). However, while such organizing may succeed in avoiding bureaucracy and formalised authority, it is nevertheless exposed to the potential emergence of an informally dominant minority and thus to the threat of oligarchy.

In concluding his systematic exploration of the conceptual and methodological underpinnings of Michels' original theory, Diefenbach (2019) suggested that while Michels' law may not be universally true, the 'threat of oligarchy' is always present in organizing. He posited the threat of oligarchy is present in any social system in five

ways. Firstly, in the incompleteness of even the most carefully designed and comprehensively democratic system there is always the potential for circumvention and that structures alone cannot prevent the emergence of anti-democratic forces. Secondly, that the design of systems of authority and accountability and their careful practice cannot fully insure against the abuse of power and/or influence. Thirdly, some individuals will attempt to gain and/or expand power through illegitimate means in order to satisfy ambitions, interests, and agendas and this produces non-transparent and undemocratic outcomes. Fourthly, informal leaders and dominant groups will inevitably emerge through informal engagement in administrative affairs, the accumulation of specialised knowledge, personality traits, communicative capabilities, and social connectivity. Fifthly, through non-participation on the part of members, participants, or citizens, be this due to a lack of will, interest, or ability.

Freeman's (1970) concept of the "tyranny of structurelessness" posited that in the absence of the structure normally provided by bureaucracy collectivist organizations would inevitably be exposed to informal oligarchy. However, Rothschild and Whitt (1986) argued for a more nuanced understanding, suggesting that collectivist-democratic organizations are neither always able to sustain a fully participatory form of democracy nor always unable to do so. More recently, this has been captured by Kioupkiolis (2010) in the notion of 'antiperfectionism'. This calls for neither ignoring nor acquiescing to the inescapability of inequality, verticality, and domination; instead encouraging a "keen suspicion of utopian visions" and "instead of postulating quasi-transcendental limits, democratic thought should switch modes and speak of ever-present possibilities" (Kioupkiolis, 2010, p. 149).

Leach (2005, p. 321) conceived of oligarchy in collectivist-democratic organizations as neither a feature of structure (e.g. hierarchy) or behaviours (e.g. bureaucratic conservatism) but instead as a particular distribution of power. This distribution contrasts and undermines the intended conception of democracy. From the perspective of the participatory, collectivist-democratic iteration of cooperative prefiguration outlined in Section 2.1, the problem with oligarchy is its inherent illegitimacy; regardless of its formal or informal character. This question of legitimacy is important to hold at the front of our minds in considering what constitutes degeneration and the structures and practices that might contribute to its resistance. For Leach (2005, pp. 325–326), legitimacy requires the consent of those having authority imposed on them

or on their behalf and/or being led through informal influence. Consent must be evidenced for subjective legitimacy to exist. Furthermore, legitimacy requires an understanding of who may exercise power, the scope of this power, and the means acceptable in its exercise. Collectivist-democratic legitimacy is closely associated with and indeed validated by practices that are viewed as being democratic, with undemocratic practices being viewed as illegitimate. Legitimacy may be conferred democratically yet bureaucratically through elections (essentially an iteration of representative democracy). It may also be conferred through a kind of Weberian value-rationality wherein those exemplifying or best practising the shared set of values and principles of the group are granted some means of exerting disproportionate influence; the structurelessness of which leaves room for the tyranny warned of by Freeman and others.

In turn, a distinction must be made between formal and informal power and between their respective oligarchic and non-oligarchic manifestations. Although coercing others through the application (or threat) of formal authority would be considered oligarchic, the application of authority in a situation that sits within a formalised remit would not be considered oligarchic. While using informal influence to manipulate others into supporting decisions that go beyond collective norms would be oligarchic, that others decide to accept the proposals of an individual or group based on their informal influence (or credibility) does not necessarily constitute oligarchic rule. Indeed, members may regularly support the proposals of a group, yet this would not be considered oligarchic. Exerting authority through function or influence based on credibility does not necessarily constitute ruling by oligarchy. Lines must therefore be drawn in order to understand where formal authority exceeds its functional bounds and/or where informal influence becomes so concentrated it is no longer legitimate. Oligarchy is here understood as,

> …a concentration of entrenched illegitimate authority and/or influence in the hands of a minority, such that de facto what that minority wants is generally what comes to pass, even when it goes against the wishes (whether actively or passively expressed) of the majority. (Leach, 2005, p. 329)

Lack of leadership turnover, minority control of resources, and low levels of participation are all suggested by Leach (2005, p. 331) to be indicative of potential oligarchy. Like open wounds, when left unattended such issues 'fester' and slowly

undermine the quality of democratic practice (Chatterton & Pickerill, 2010, p. 481). Oligarchy necessarily involves the exceeding of the boundaries of legitimate power, it may or may not be intentional; an individual or group may not have set out to assume control. Indications of illegitimate applications of power might include where the majority or part of the majority have been promised material rewards, threatened with material or emotional sanctions, or are unaware of an intentional information asymmetry. However, where a minority gets their way due to the majority being convinced by their arguments or aspiring to the acceptance/approval of said minority, this would not constitute an illegitimate application of power and thus not constitute oligarchy.

2.2.3 Summary

In this section, I have offered an exploration of the challenges faced by the collectivist-democratic WCs that are the subject of this study. 'Degeneration' is a useful heuristic for understanding how these organizations can atrophy, resulting in either their ceasing to be 'unconventional' or ceasing to exist. The power of the 'iron law of oligarchy' (Michels, 1915) stems from an apparent applicability to all forms of organizing, its dismissal of any alternative narrative as being unrealistic, its undermining of any attempts to otherwise organize, and a lack of specified horizon. While the 'law' may not be universally true, the 'threat of oligarchy' is ever-present in organizing. Democratic organizing is imperfect and perpetually fraught with tensions. Oligarchy is not a feature of behaviour or structure but a distribution of power that is inherently illegitimate in the context of democratic organizing. Meanwhile, legitimacy requires consent and this must be evidenced in an understanding of who may exercise power, the scope of this power, and the means acceptable in its exercise.

My research contributes to this literature through constructing empirically grounded conceptual contributions that illuminate how these tensions emerge and are experienced in WCs that have been established for more than two decades and have grown beyond a size at which members can easily 'relate'.

2.3 Sustaining cooperation

In the face of degeneration, oligarchy, and indeed the prevailing winds of conventional organizing, WCs sustain themselves. They may not often grow to be the biggest or most

'successful' businesses, but many do survive. This section explores the extant literature concerning how democratic organizing can potentially be sustained or maintained. I first attend to various 'conditions for success' that have emerged in the literature before exploring how our understanding has developed toward more process-driven approaches that embrace the tensions present in democratic organizing. I then turn to the notion of democratic organizing as 'spaces of possibility', highlighting research attending to larger instances of worker ownership and control as well as looser, less formal, and/or less economically oriented organizing in social movements and SMOs before focusing in on particularly pertinent literature. In the final sub-section, I continue to narrow my focus through examining proximal research into sustaining collectivist-democratic organizing in WCs.

2.3.1 Conditions for survival

In 'The Tyranny of Structurelessness' (1970) Freeman considered the duality of prefigurative organization and how the tension between structurelessness and structuredness might affect the quality of the prefigurative polity. She crystallised the need for prefigurative social movements to find means of sustaining a balance between these poles and outlined seven principles upon which she believed such a balance could be achieved: 1) Delegation of specific authority, 2) Responsibility of the selected to the selectors, 3) Distribution of authority amongst as many individuals as is reasonably possible, 4) Rotation of tasks among individuals, 5) Allocation of tasks along rational criteria, 6) Diffusion of information to everyone as frequently as possible, 7) Equal access to resources. Although Freeman's focus was on prefigurative movements, as opposed to WCs, her insights nevertheless provide a foundation for reflecting upon the tension between structurelessness and structuredness in WCs.

In exploring how WCs might overcome the seemingly overwhelming pressures of degeneration and the threat of oligarchy I first turn to the work of Rothschild and Whitt (1986, pp. 73–115). The authors offered six internal conditions that might facilitate the perpetuation of collectivist-democratic organizing, indirectly addressing the constraints outlined previously in Table 2.4.

1. **The presence of a more provisional temporal orientation**, as opposed to an orientation toward the permanence of organizations, structures, power, and practice. They suggest this mitigates against the risks of ossification,

oligarchisation, goal or mission drift, and the sustaining of the organization as an end in its own right. However, an overly provisional orientation can result in organizational failure due to a lack of structure and an inability to plan, grow, or indeed organize.

2. **A culture of mutual aid and self-criticism.** They suggest this can address emergent inequalities in influence and reduce the ability of individuals to assert illegitimate power. However, where this drifts into an ambivalence towards legitimate leadership and authority or results in the over-criticism of a valuable individual this condition can prove detrimental to the sustainability of the cooperative.

3. **The intentional limitation of size and growth** is suggested to protect the ability sustain collectivism and a familiar level of relating. This requires finding a position that is large enough to benefit from economies of scale and small enough to comfortably sustain collectivism; it is not suggested to bear any inherent disadvantages.

4. **The sustained homogeneity of membership.** More commonality along ethnic and/or cultural characteristics may reduce friction in decision-making and organizing more generally. However, excessive homogeneity also reduces the representativeness of the cooperative, runs somewhat in the face of cooperative values, and runs the risk of limiting the supply of new ideas and energy needed to sustain the cooperative.

5. **Maintaining dependence on internal and client support**. This is primarily focused on the risks associated with receiving external financial support from beyond the prefigurative ecosystem in which the WC exists, although other forms of support may be applicable (e.g. business services). Reliance on the relatively limited financial and business support available to WCs can be limiting in terms of growth and the cost of doing business. However, maintaining independence is viewed as being critical to protecting member participation, responsiveness, and goal maintenance.

6. **The deliberate diffusion of knowledge and technology**. Echoing Freeman (1970), this condition addresses the threats of specialisation, monopolisation, and mystification emerge where technology and/or knowledge are developed to a high level of sophistication. It is suggested that collectivist WCs need to

deliberately find means of diffusing this knowledge through practices such as job sharing and/or job rotation. However, this approach is acknowledged as bearing costs in terms of efficiency and productivity. Importantly, it also increases the inherent complexity and demands of the core member role.

To this list can be added the need for developing a "democratic consciousness" amongst members (Bernstein, 1976, p. 505). This describes a mode of behaviour or approach to practice that is broadly receptive, flexible, self-reliant, accountable, compromising, inquisitive, aware of others' needs, avoidant of preconceptions, self-critical, aware of limitations, willing to engage in deep analysis, and with a long-term orientation (Bernstein, 1976, p. 506). In a similar vein, Harnecker (2009) called for members to practice "awareness of the interests and problems of […] co-workers; a willingness to contribute resources towards their solution; and the materialization of this disposition into statements and/or actions" (p. 107-108). Luhman (2007) also emphasised the need for members to develop and practise a "consciousness of cooperation, and a consciousness of the greater good" (p. 468) in order sustain the interdependency and shared value framework necessary to have effective conversations and decision-making. Likewise, Johnson (2006, p. 261) connected the need for 'democratic consciousness' with that of sustaining the fullest participation in discourse possible in order to overcome hegemonic relations.

Several authors point to the importance of sustaining organizational commitment to the cooperative principles (Cornforth et al., 1988; Novkovic, Prokopowicz, & Stocki, 2012; Sacchetti & Tortia, 2015). Cornforth et al. (1988, p. 120) highlighted the principles of open membership and equal democratic control as being particularly critical. Open membership presents a challenge as it runs counter to any limitations or barriers put in place to prevent or slow the process of employees becoming members. To prevent goal displacement Cornforth et al. (1988, p. 122) argued that members need to have control over areas of organizing and commercial strategy that determine and reflect the quality of shared values and principles. Such controls include investment and resource allocation, wages and wage differentials, product choice, and the means by which production takes place. These feed into the factors they identify as important for resisting internal (or organizational) degeneration, namely, members' ability to determine the conditions of employment.

Other factors highlighted include reducing vertical supervision and discipline and, in agreement with Rothschild and Whitt (1986), adopting approaches to work organization and job content that facilitate the avoidance of specialisation and/or the concentration of authority. It is also emphasised that just as external factors play a key role in expediting degeneration, external resources and support can likewise play an important role in neutralising degenerative tendencies (Blasi, Mehrling, & Whyte, 1984; Kleinman, 1996; Paton, 1989).

Where cooperatives address the conditions for sustaining organizational democracy, it is not only possible for degeneration to be resisted but also for regeneration to occur. Cornforth (1995, p. 514) concluded that regeneration is possible through continued commitment to the cooperative principles and a willingness to constructively identify and address signs of degeneration. Echoing Meister's (1974) process of degeneration, Batstone (1983) suggested that where cooperatives were able to overcome the first few crucial years and become established organizations, a period of ascendency would likely follow wherein one would expect to see a decline of the 'frontier spirit' that shaped the early years along with a rise in specialisation and managerialism as workers become increasingly competent and their roles increasingly formalised. However, assuming the cooperative was able to survive this intermediate period, Batstone's findings indicated that a second wave of democracy could emerge. While seemingly reassuring for the persistence of democracy in cooperatives, Batstone indicated that the form of democracy before and after this intermediate period was different. Where at first a more 'primitive', direct, form of democracy had prevailed, in the second iteration of democracy a more representative, committee-based manifestation would be found. Thus, while Batstone's findings offered some hope for overcoming total degeneration, they also suggested an inability to sustain a more collectivist iteration of participation.

2.3.2 Processes of reproduction

The work of Stryjan (1987, 1989, 1994) regarding the potential for the reproduction of democracy in cooperatives moves us closer to the knowledge base this thesis seeks to contribute to. Although his subject was not specifically WCs, Stryjan draws our attention to a problematic in the discourse regarding cooperative organizing: the conception of cooperatives as a duality comprised of one-part members' association and one-part commercial enterprise. Stryjan argued that it is necessary to instead view

these as different aspects of the same 'complex', wherein the organization's actions and members' actions should be considered in terms of their impact on both the membership and the position of the business.

Stryjan (1994) posited that the "success of self-management should thus be seen as the manifestation of an ongoing 'process' of reproduction; degeneration as a reproduction breakdown" (p. 62; emphasis added). On the understanding that self-managed organizations are as fallible as any organization, their difference lies in the challenges they face and the solutions and/or approaches that are available to them. Stryjan suggested our focus should be on how organizations and their constituent members experience and face these challenges as opposed to searching for some model of perfection. The 'reproduction perspective' proposed by Stryjan built upon: Hernes' (1976) reproduction model, Giddens' (1984) theory of structuration, and Sjostrand's (1985) institutional perspective. It placed the concept of membership and the actions of members at the centre of a process-oriented framework for understanding organizational stability and change. This process of continuous redesign is illustrated in the reproduction loop (Figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2 The reproduction loop (adapted from: Stryjan, 1994, p. 64)

Assumptions shape decisions that generate organizational routines…

Practice reproduces routines and assumptions…
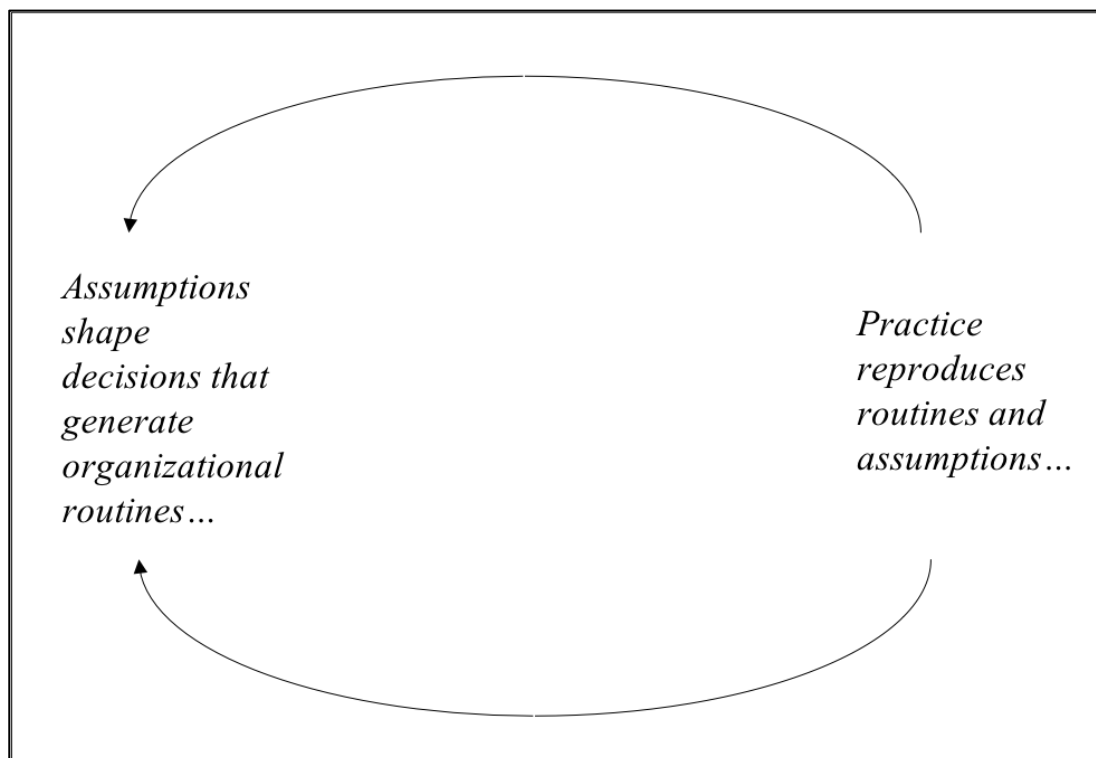
At its heart is the premise that the organization and its membership are continuously being redesigned and remoulded through the interactions between individuals, and between individuals and the structure that constitutes the organization. Three interconnected factors are included in the framework: affiliation, stability, and governance. In the context of this thesis, 'membership' is the mode of affiliation, characterised by mutual dependence, entry being conditional on acceptance, and the position conferring privileges in the organization. Stability concerns the extent of commitment and continued engagement in the ongoing process of redesign and (re)socialisation. Governance concerns the continuous process of monitoring, steering and redesigning the organization; which in self-managed organizations is carried out by the same members as those being continuously resocialised by the structure they are continuously redesigning.

Therefore, Stryjan argued that the foremost activity of prefigurative organizing is the 'shaping' of members so as to ensure they are able to: 1) Run the organization; 2) Engage in the ongoing process of redesign; 3) Accommodate and subsequently 'shape' future members. This process is described as the "reproduction of membership" (Stryjan, 1994, p. 65). Stryjan suggested that this process entails the selective replenishment of members (and/or potentially the growth in number of members), upholding a shared frame of reference that guides the actions of members, and the ongoing maintenance of an established repertoire of options for the actions and inputs of members.

Following their seven-year study of the SAMITI hybrid-model WC featuring external partners and a semi-stratified structure, Varman and Chakrabarti (2004) proposed that "organizational democracy is more in the nature of a long-drawn process that can be conceptualized as an evolving reality, which manifests through the interaction of contradictions over time" (p. 187). They pointed to the interplay of external issues of social hierarchy (relative: social status, professional status, economic power, network and contacts) and institutional demands (expectations of the environment, irrational laws and their arbitrary functioning) with internal contradictions of democratic

organizing[1]. Varman and Chakrabarti (2004) argued for a focus on process and the movement towards ideals that evolves amid the pushes and pulls of contradictions. They found that maintaining a balance between the contradictions of democratic organizing calls for "progressively creating slack" (p. 204).

In a similar vein, following her study of a large industrial cooperative in Mexico City, Hernandez (2006) argued for a 'paradox perspective' that embraces the inherent tensions in cooperatives. Building on contributions from Westenholz (1999) and Cornforth (2004), Hernandez described moving from a unitary logical perspective (A or non-A) to a dialogical perspective that allows for the coexistence of paradox (A and non-A) within a cooperative; expecting neither synthesis nor progress. Change therefore may be influenced by both forces through a process of ongoing conflict and tension, which may not in fact be 'resolved' by this change. In concluding, Hernandez (2006) described cooperatives as being "best understood as a site of unresolvable contestation between oligarchic and democratic forces" (p. 129).

This perspective embraces and moves beyond interpersonal relations, accounting also for the structural and cultural factors that are at play; understanding that these will contribute in different ways to both the democratic and oligarchic tendencies of the organizing. Thus, cooperatives are viewed as perpetually imperfect, unable to fully achieve their prefigurative vision yet nevertheless important in their manifestation as spaces in which oligarchy and conventional organizing are challenged. Hernandez (2006) advocated turning our analysis to this contradictory process and the forces at play across the levels of organizing (individual, cultural, and structural). She suggests that cooperatives are likely as diverse as any other kind of business or organization, with different paradoxes and manifestations of conflict to be found within them. If this diversity is to be understood, it is necessary to explore how such internal contradictions are experienced in different cooperatives and different kinds of cooperative.

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[1] Varman and Chakrabarti (2004) identified eight internal contradictions: 1) Economic organization vs. social movement; 2) Contradictory expectations; 3) Work vs. home (boundaries); 4) Efficiency vs. accountability; 5) Structure vs. culture (attention balance); 6) Oligarchy vs. open participation; 7) Information sharing vs. processing capabilities; and 8) Control vs. member initiative.

As I will return to in Chapter 4, my understanding of this processual conceptualisation of sustaining collectivist-democratic cooperation is captured in Figure 2.3. In this original conceptual model, I have sought to capture the idea of there being more-or-less 'cooperative' structuredness and/or structurelessness.

Figure 2.3 Sustaining prefigurative cooperation (I)
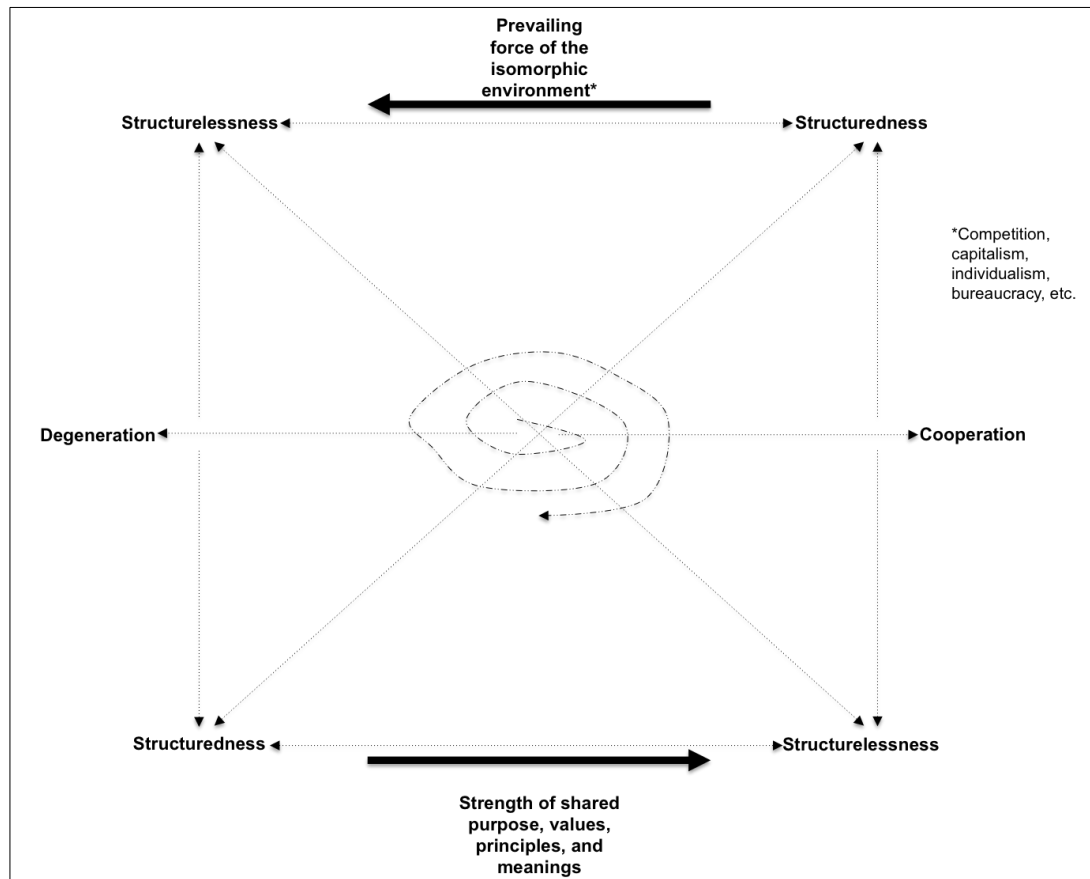
In my model, the contradictory forces and conditions that are suggested to undermine or sustain cooperation are pulling in opposing horizontal directions. While Storey et al. (2014) described a "degeneration–regeneration see-saw" (p. 628), suggesting an on-off process of switching between states, in my conceptualisation organizing is depicted as a spiral in the centre of the diagram. This idea is influenced by the work of Nonaka et al. (Nonaka, 1991, 1994; Nonaka & Konno, 1998; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995) who

depict the concept of 'Ba', the essence of knowledge creation, as a spiral [2]. I argue that the spiral better captures the existence of growth, change, development, evolution and the passage of time. Furthermore, its imperfections provide illustrative representation for appreciating the multiplicity of more-or-less degenerative or regenerative factors influencing organizing at any given moment as well as the increasingly extreme pull of both these forces as the organization grows.

2.3.3 Spaces of possibility

In this sub-section, I drill down to the most proximal literature to my exploration of sustaining collectivist-democratic organizing in established and scaled WCs. Before doing so, I position this literature between studies that attend to larger, more bureaucratic, instances of democratic organizing, and studies that attend to less formal, potentially more radical, or less economically oriented instances of prefigurative organizing.

Much attention has been paid to larger instances of democratic organizing that are closer to representative than direct democracy, arguably due to a somewhat understandable interest in the scalability of these projects. The Mondragon Corporation and its member WCs stand out as being particularly well attended, the following are merely a sample of these investigations. Basterretxea and Albizu (2010) examined the role of management training in both attracting and retaining managers and delivering competitive advantage. Flecha and Ngai (2014) searched for cooperative values in the face of organizational internationalisation. Bretos and Errasti (2017) delved into the problems of replicating the cooperative model in subsidiaries and explored the associated challenges and opportunities for regeneration. Bretos, Errasti, and Marcuello (2018) explored the diffusion of HRM practices in multinational WCs. Basterretxea,

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[2] The concept of 'Ba' was introduced as means of addressing questions concerning the conditions, loci, and 'management' of knowledge creation. 'Ba' roughly translates as 'place'. It is attributed to Japanese philosopher Nishida (1970, 1990) and later developed by Shimizu (1995). Reconceptualised for knowledge creation, 'Ba' may be considered a shared space for emerging relationships. This may be physical, virtual, mental, or some combination of these. It captures the key platform of knowledge creation as the 'phenomenal place'. Participation in 'ba' means to involve oneself and transcend the limited perspectives and/or boundaries of the individual (Nonaka et al., 2000).

Heras-Saizarbitoria, & Lertxundi (2019) studied tensions between human resource management and cooperative ownership. While the scale of Mondragon limits its pertinence to my own investigation, the work of Heras-Saizarbitoria (2014) is of interest because it explored the cooperative values and understandings that persist. He argued that the 'ties' that continue to 'bind' when cooperation is scaled across multiple entities and thousands of members are the primacy of secure membership and guaranteed employment (Heras-Saizarbitoria, 2014, p. 645).

Although not a WC, the John Lewis Partnership in the UK has likewise been studied as a site of worker owned democratic organizing at scale (Cathcart, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c; Paranque & Willmott, 2014). Cathcart's (2013b) work is notable for addressing the paradoxes of democratic participation in the highly ossified structure of the Partnership. She found that, "the decision-making structures that characterise the Partnership, and that are protected by its constitution, are under constant threat from the discursive struggle to define partnership in a way that privileges managerial interests" (p. 762). Also of note is Storey et al.'s (2014) undertaking of a comparative analysis concerning the efforts to manage and resist degeneration at Mondragon and John Lewis.

Studies closer to my own, i.e. those that contribute to processual and relational understandings of sustaining prefigurative democratic organizing, are more prominent in the literature regarding social movements and SMOs. Some of these have already been referenced, but I believe it worthwhile to highlight several of these at this juncture before moving to focus more closely on the most proximal literature in terms of organizational context and democratic practice.

Chatterton (2006) explored the potentialities for extending dialogue on uncommon ground into common places, reflecting on the interface between activism and the public in the context of a demonstration to shut down an oil refinery in the UK. Pickerill and Chatterton (2006) examined the development of 'autonomous geographies', spaces of collectivist, non-capitalist prefiguration, "through a combination of resistance and creation, and a questioning and challenging of dominant laws and social norms" (p. 745). Furthermore, they highlighted the contradictions of living between worlds:

> Autonomous spaces are an incomplete terrain where daily struggles are made
> and remade, both symbolically and materially, and where people live by their

beliefs and face contradictions from living between worlds – the actually existing and the hoped for. (Pickerill & Chatterton, 2006, pp. 736–737)

Chatterton (2010) investigated how autonomous urban social centres offer spaces in which shape and meaning can be given to the idea of 'anti-capitalism'. Participants demonstrated that "anti-capitalist practice is not just 'anti-', but also 'post-' and 'despite-' capitalism; simultaneously against, after and within" (p. 730). Chatterton and Pickerill (2010) focused on the 'everyday practices' of autonomous activists in the UK; presenting the argument that it is in and through these quotidian practices that the true meaning of 'post-capitalism' is rendered, given life, made accessible, exciting, feasible, and powerful.

Chen's (2016) ethnographic study of the organizing activities behind Burning Man between 1998 and 2001, with follow-up research in 2012, shed light on the potential for loose collectivities to maintain and augment participatory practices over increasing scale. Her work illuminated how the organization was sustained through, "(1) decentralising agency, (2) contextualizing norms and practices via storytelling and discussion, and (3) 'communifying' labour [spreading the work throughout the community]" (p. 71). Maeckelbergh's investigations into the Alterglobalization Movement (2009, 2011) and the 15 May movement in Barcelona (2012) provide insight into the decision-making processes found in the collective spaces of global (and national) movements. In extrapolating a frame for alternative democratic praxis, Maeckelbergh attends to processes of prefiguration, consensus/conflict, horizontality, diversity, democracy, and connectivity; this work continues to be drawn upon throughout my thesis.

Land and King (2014) studied the experiences of a voluntary organization in the UK that sought to integrate anarchism-inspired non-hierarchical working practices. They examined processes of organizational change through the translation and transformation of practices across contexts. The findings emphasised the need to find points of common ground, in this case not wanting hierarchy, and create discursive space in order to democratically negotiate its transformation. Reedy, King, and Coupland (2016) explored the concept of 'individuation' in the context of a prefigurative 'alternative group' in the UK. Their argument was "that in such groups, identity, organizing and politics become a purposeful set of integrated processes aimed at the creation of new forms of life in the here and now, thus organizing is politics is

identity" (p. 1553). Through a participatory action research study in a small education charity, King and Land (2018) examined the issue of introducing and instilling democracy where it may not be wanted. Following extensive interventions, participants democratically rejected democracy. The authors reflected on this failure that to them emphasised "the need to more carefully unpack the difficult relationship between power and equality when seeking to facilitate more democratic organizational practices." (King & Land, 2018, p. 1565)

Griffin, King, and Reedy (2020) contributed to the 'paradox perspective', drawing upon Lewis' (2000) interpretation of paradox as "contradictory yet interrelated elements – elements that seem logical in isolation but absurd and irrational when appearing simultaneously" (p. 760). Building on a foundation of research carried out over several years, involving thirty-five expert interviews and one-hundred and ten 'organizational practitioner' interviews in various forms of democratic organizing across twenty-four case studies from around the world (including UK, Finland, and the US), their paper focused on twelve organizations that had already transitioned or were in the process of transitioning to 'Sociocracy'[3]. In terms of similarity to my own study, not all the twelve case studies were WCs; two had over fifty members, two over forty, and two over thirty; no indication of the age of the organizations was provided. Furthermore, 'Sociocratic organizations' are not 'flat', as many democratic organizations are, rather they seek to flatten hierarchies, and move from 'hierarchy of role' to 'hierarchy of purpose'. Griffin et al. (2020) focused on three paradoxes to "explore how they operate and effect people's actions in a variety of different ways" (p. 16): 1) Desiring to relinquish power whilst yearning for hierarchy (to retain control); 2) Desiring to be more collective/yearning to individualise; 3) Desiring for authenticity whilst yearning for efficiency or whatever works. Through their analysis they made the following salient contributions.

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[3] Sociocracy (sometimes 'dynamic governance') is a form of consent-based decision-making and feedback using circular structures to organize in order to enhance 'equity of voice' (Eckstein & Buck, 2018; Rau & Koch-Gonzalez, 2018).

The authors highlighted the simultaneous idealisation and criticism of democratic organizing by researchers based on 'ideal types' and a black-and-white approach to 'degeneration' as resulting in perceptions of organizational members as having 'failed'. They argued this precipitates a 'persistent gap' between theory and practice. This is unhelpful toward understanding effective ways to 'do' democracy because it fails to appreciate processes of learning that are integral to sustaining prefiguration as well as limiting the 'relevance' of academia (Birkinshaw, Lecuona, & Barwise, 2016). Instead of 'failures', the authors recast struggles in democratic organizing as 'paradoxes'; which are understood as inevitable and intrinsic part of democratic organizing (Audebrand, Camus, & Michaud, 2017). These are inherently messy and need to be negotiated and navigated over time, with participants learning to do it better with every encounter. Moving beyond purity to 'embrace paradox' not only acknowledges paradox as an integral part of organizing but also as the starting point for learning. Griffin et al. (2020) suggested that participants can develop 'paradoxical mindsets' that assist in identifying and working through paradoxes (Liu, Xu, & Zhang, 2019; Miron-Spektor et al., 2018; Sleesman, 2019). They held paradoxes neither as 'problematic' or 'productive' tensions but as starting points for 'collective political acts'. Politicised paradoxes become opportunities for collective attendance of the inevitable tensions that will arise, not because of failure on their part but as "arising from structural conditions which shape but are beyond individual organizations or practitioners (p. 33). In concluding their analysis, Griffin et al. (2020) argued this recasting of paradox illuminates democratic organizations not as an end state but rather "a practice to be worked through in seeking to transform power-relations, where collectively working through politicised paradoxes are the starting point for social transformation" (p. 34) .

Contributions from Cornwell (2012) and Kokkinidis (2012, 2015) focused more specifically on sustaining the mode of direct, collectivist-democratic organizing delineated in Section 2.1; both utilised the idea of 'spaces of possibility'. Cornwell built upon the work of Gibson-Graham (2006) in exploring how cooperatives can provide spaces for 'becoming'. She used the concept of 'spaces of possibility' because:

> They are not things, or immobile structures or logics. Rather they are the spaces (open processes with multiple heterogeneous trajectories) of governance, surplus and growth. They constitute dynamic challenges and opportunities for

sustaining and cultivating co-operative cultures and businesses. (Cornwell, 2012, pp. 740–741)

The argument is that such spaces are sustained in part due to the transformative experience of 'becoming' a democratic subject through the modes of work and collective participation. A similar understanding emerges from the theoretical work of Kioupkiolis (2010) with regard to nurturing a more nuanced understanding of radical democracy, drawing on themes of contingency, antagonism, contestation and openness. He argued for a processual and progressive balancing act in place of absolutist positions regarding structuredness of culture and practice through "autonomous, inclusive, and imaginative spaces" (Kioupkiolis, 2010, p. 150). Central to this is the notion of 'antiperfectionism', highlighted in Section 2.2.2 ('Oligarchy and legitimacy'). Indeed, Gibson-Graham (2006) argued that imagination is sustained through continual reworking of space in response to threats. Speaking to this ongoing reworking, Varman and Chakrabarti (2004) noted the pertinence of Selznick's (1966) delineation of 'ideals' and 'operational goals' in contemplating how this balancing act plays out:

> The point of anti-utopian criticism is not that it degenerates ideals. Rather it asks that such ideals as self-government be given their proper place in human affairs. Ideals are definers of aspirations. They are judgements upon us. But they are not surrogates for operative goals. The latter have the special virtue, and suffer the peculiar hardship, of striving to be reasonably adequate renderings of the moral ideal while taking due account of the human condition and the historical setting. A practical goal which does not rise to the opportunity is unworthy; but one that ignores limitations invites its own corruption. (pp. x-xi)

The point to be driven home here is that imperfections will persist and only through the perpetual melding of prefigurative ideals with practical goals in spaces of possibility and imagination can the balancing act be sustained. An example of this emerges from Cameron's (2009) observations of community enterprises in Australia. She noted that while an aversion to planning and risk-taking is potentially problematic, it may also provide the necessary conditions for maintaining 'spaces of possibility'.

In 'searching for workplace democracy', Kokkinidis (2012) challenged the prevailing understanding that representative democracy is the only 'realistic' option for democratic organizing. He argued that despite being advocated as an alternative to

hierarchical governance, representative democracy serves to reproduce and partially legitimise the very hierarchy it is supposed to substitute. Kokkinidis posited that more direct iterations of democracy can overcome supposed coordination and knowledge application limitations if they are guided by horizontality and prefiguration. Furthermore, he suggested that research into cases such as the Alterglobalization Movement (Maeckelbergh, 2009) evidenced the potential for direct democratic organizing to overcome supposed limitations of scalability.

Maeckelbergh's (2009, 2011, 2012) work extends my conceptualisation of a participatory, collectivist-democratic iteration of cooperative prefigurativism. In particular, the centrality of 'diversity' and 'horizontality', which she described as being staples of anarchist prefiguration. Maeckelbergh posited that for diversity to be possible, conflict must be transformed from either an appeasing or adversarial mode to one that is constructive, embracing the inherency and power of conflict. This echoes Mouffe's (1999) argument for an 'agonistic model of democracy' that reveals the impossibility of 'consensus' without exclusion, warns us against the illusion of perfect democracy, and thus forces us to engage in ongoing democratic struggle. The process of engaging in 'constructive conflict'[4] in 'conflictive spaces' is continuous and is both sustained and reinforced by the practice of 'horizontality' (Maeckelbergh, 2009, p. 100). In turn, horizontality requires a further ongoing process, that of active decentralisation of forms of power. The resulting distribution of power across multiple loci ensures ongoing diversity. When it is given space for expression, the conflict produced by this distribution of power is viewed by movement actors as being not only productive but essential to sustaining both diversity and horizontality (Maeckelbergh, 2009, p. 37).

Kokkinidis' (2015) exploration of worker self-management in Greece provided empirical support for his earlier theoretical assertions. The 'social experiments' he explored offered insights into the power of creating spaces where prefiguration could become manifest and individuals could experience the relational process of democratic organizing. In the words of Kioupkiolis (2010), the bringing together of:

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[4] A term notably coined by Follett (2003b) and one I return to in Chapter 4 when developing my conceptual frame.

> …the singular and the common. All differences retain their singularity, yet they share similar conditions and are nested in the same net of communication. Commonality does not reside in identity but mainly in the dynamic collaboration and the interaction of differences. (p. 142)

Furthermore, Kokkinidis (2015) highlighted the awareness amongst participants of the limitations of standing apart from the economy and wider society, as well as the implications of this detachment for marginalisation and a failure to 'connect' the challenge to its capitalist target. They were also aware of the increasing pressure to shift toward a more conventional model that comes with operating inside the capitalist context. Indeed, while democracy remains limited to formal structures, ongoing incoherencies of identity will persist and undermine the development of a collective identity (Beeman, Guberman, Lamoureux, Fournier, & Gervais, 2009).

Perhaps the most interesting reflection from Kokkinidis' (2015) study pertains to the nature of autonomy in prefigurative democratic organizing. Current discourses on autonomy and participation serve to fragment intersubjectivity, "fashioning productive forms of subjectivity, workers who are simultaneously self-directed and manageable" (Weeks, 2011, p. 56). Instead of a liberal, individualistic conception, Kokkinidis' prefigurative autonomy is predicated on the capability of individuals to participate collectively in creating their own rules, engaging with the governance of their affairs, and ultimately connecting 'means' to 'ends' in rendering their prefiguration. According to Kokkinidis (2015, p. 868), this concept of autonomy reshapes both living and connecting because it supports inclusive participation, encourages the socialisation of 'rule-creating' as opposed to 'rule-following' individuals. This describes a process of 'becoming' that individuals and organizations must be continuously engaged in for cooperative prefiguration to be sustained.

2.3.4 Worker cooperatives in focus

Kokkinidis (2015) acknowledged the social experiments he studied were context-dependent and relatively small and semi-formalised. In this sub-section I move closer to studies of the organizational form and phenomena in which I am most interested: sustaining collectivist-democratic WCs. Three examples of contemporary research focusing on WCs in the UK and Ireland are worth noting. Set in Northern Ireland, Nolan et al. (2013) examined how, in the right circumstances, WCs could provide the strategic

foundations for radical social change through their inherent democratising principles. Gavin et al. (2014) reviewed the status and future prospects of the WC sector in the Republic of Ireland. As part of a wider-ranging report published by the ICA, Cannell (2015) offered an ethnographic account of working at Suma Wholefoods. Cannell's section focused on the centrality of conversation and 'consensual management' for sustaining more-or-less direct democratic organizing in the UK's largest WC.

In order to further elucidate both my problematisation and research gap I first turn to Ng and Ng's (2009) investigation of three new and relatively small WCs supported by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Hong Kong. I then turn to what I regard as the most temporally, contextually, and to some extent methodologically proximal research drawn upon in this review: the work of Langmead (2016, 2018) exploring three relatively established, small collectivist-democratic WCs in the UK.

Ng and Ng (2009) embraced Varman and Chakrabarti's (2004) conception of workplace democracy as an 'evolving reality'. Their research emphasised the centrality of education, training, and information in attempts to reduce the differential in knowledge and resist informal hierarchies. They noted the immediate and ongoing need to narrow the gap between ostensible 'leaders' and 'followers' in order to mitigate tensions between democracy and leadership. While acknowledging the 'de facto inequality' built into the equity principle of collective organizing (Rothschild & Whitt, 1986), Ng and Ng (2009) also pointed to an ongoing issue with structurelessness regarding 'leadership trashing' (Sirianni, 1994). This balancing act was held as being made more challenging by the inherency of intra-group conflict (Rothschild-Whitt, 1979). Ng and Ng (2009) linked this to the emotional intensity of direct democratic participation and cooperative working practices. They noted that consensus creates a pressure to agree, even normalises it, and that when combined with the intimacy of members, issues become personalised. In turn, this means that any issue carries its inherent 'costs' as well as additional personal costs for those who potentially disagree with the majority or a vocal minority.

Ng and Ng's (2009) findings highlighted how young and small WCs can successfully implement and internalise cooperative best practice, subsequently benefitting from this demystification and knowledge sharing, The 'democratic consciousness' of enthusiastic and energised members can be harnessed to proactively reduce knowledge and power gaps (Bernstein, 1976). In their case studies, there was limited need for

worrying about the reducing cost of democracy due to scale and the presence of support structures (Blasi et al., 1984; Cornforth et al., 1988). The cooperatives could afford a high level of investment in education and training of members as well as the cognitive and emotional effort invested required for disseminating and presenting accessible information. Furthermore, they recognised that in these young WCs there was a strong sense of ideological resistance to concepts of 'leadership' and 'management' suggesting that the concerns of members were tilted toward 'democracy' over 'efficiency'. Ng and Ng (2009, p. 199) acknowledged the potential for difficulties in maintaining current provision and practice as their WCs grew. They suggested that time and scale would call for more personal and mutual confidence as well as embracing elements of delegation and specialisation (Rothschild & Whitt, 1986).

More recently, Langmead's (2016, 2018) investigations of democratic praxis in smaller UK WCs highlighted the importance of ongoing processes of 'individual-collective alignment' to sustaining democratic praxis, drawing on the work of Wenger and others (Humphreys & Brown, 2002; Wenger, 2000). Her work is especially noteworthy as it bears similarities to the focus and approach of this thesis. Using an iteration of ethnographic grounded theory, Langmead explored three case studies of small UK WCs and conceptualised "democracy as an interconnected praxis of values, organizational form and daily practice, focusing specifically on how this interconnection challenges degeneration" (Langmead, 2016, p. 81). She drew upon, and contributes to, the work of Sommerville (2007), Eikenberry (2009), and Kokkinidis (2012) in finding that democracy serves as more than a method of decision-making. Langmead argued 'democracy' offers and can facilitate a discourse that enables participants to develop coherent collective responses to problems, challenges, and the inherent contradictions of prefigurative organizing.

Langmead's findings revealed that members viewed democracy as a 'relational process'. More than simply participation in the frame of formal structures and routinised practice, these are instead viewed as fluid and negotiable 'loose frameworks for action' by members (Langmead, 2016, p. 94). Shared values of equality, interdependence, responsibility, autonomy, and a respect for the creative potential of diversity combined with this structural fluidity to create the space for the ever-present and ongoing processes of 'individual-collective alignment' as well as embracing multiplicity of perspective in addressing problems and contradictions. Furthermore, her

findings suggested a high degree of openness in smaller WCs with regards to adapting to new members and in turn integrating their skills, knowledge, and perspectives into the organizational fabric. Where degenerative pressures emerged, typically around the need for efficiency, it appears this openness and fluidity were largely effective in turning these pressures into creative and productive moments for prefigurative innovation. Several additional insights stand out as noteworthy.

Members shared an understanding of democracy as "an act of being open to present and future others as communicative beings" (Langmead, 2016, p. 86). Langmead noted how this spoke to Byrne and Healy's (2006) assertions regarding the need to keep the space of decision-making and creation open as opposed to focusing on the construction of the subject (individual) with respect to a particular symbolic order (the organization). Thus, openness to change and adaptations supersedes the need for a concrete or absolute understanding of the purpose and meaning of structures (e.g. governing documents). Langmead (2016, p. 86) described how members expressed a "comfiness" in the extent to which the practice of equality emerged and became manifest in their cooperatives. She suggested that through this acceptance and practice of quality, WCs were able to harness the advantages of bringing together a diverse group for a shared purpose. However, Langmead (2016, p. 88) pointed to ongoing issues regarding equality of participation ("women still get talked over in co-ops") and informal hierarchies, the financial constraints associated with membership and participation (see also Sandoval, 2016), and concerns regarding the homogeneity (white and middle-class) of workers and customers.

Reinforcing the findings highlighted by Kokkinidis (2015), Langmead (2016, pp. 86–87) underscored how autonomy in the context of cooperation serves as a vehicle for individual responsibility within the frame of collectivist-democratic organizing, equality, and accountability. Thus, as opposed to driving degeneration through individualistic behaviour, autonomy is instead reframed as a 'collective project' that shapes the connections between individuals and reinforces shared responsibility through interdependency. Langmead (2016, p. 90) described how the introduction of a business plan in one WC resulted in the creation of systems that supported transparency and participation, strengthening the cooperative. Thus, while conventional business tools and structures such as business plans might be conceived as potentially a source of managerial degeneration, when developed and implemented through processes of

individual-collective alignment they have the potential to sustain cooperative practice. Through acknowledging the ongoing presence of these interconnected issues, Langmead asserted that WCs can better and more critically engage with them; ultimately improving their ability to resist associated degenerative effects.

2.3.5 Summary

In this section I explored how democratic organizing might be sustained in the face of the challenges and tensions set out in Section 2.2. Several conditions were identified to enable resistance of degeneration, including a provisional temporal orientation, practising 'democratic consciousness', and reducing specialisation and the concentration of authority. It is not only possible for degeneration to be resisted but also for regeneration to occur. Collectivist-democratic organizing can be sustained through continuously acknowledging inherent paradoxes, engaging in cycles of redesign, embracing imperfection, and developing capable members. Democracy is therefore understood as an 'evolving reality' that manifests through the ongoing interaction of contradictions.

There has been extensive research attending to larger, more bureaucratic, instances of democratic organizing as well as smaller, less formal, more radical, or less economically oriented instances of collectivist-democratic organizing. The latter contributes more to extant processual conceptualisations, including those of 'spaces of possibility', 'becoming' through collective participation, the rejection of absolutist positions, and the need for 'antiperfectionist' pragmatism. Diversity, horizontality, and 'constructive conflict' are held as mutually reinforcing factors in sustaining collectivist prefiguration. Likewise, alternative understandings of autonomy were highlighted; predicated on developing 'rule-creating' as opposed to 'rule-following' subjectivities. Contemporary studies that are similar to mine have supported the need for ongoing collective education as well as the role of processes of 'individual-collective alignment' in overcoming degenerative challenges and foregrounding democratic praxis.

This section has established the existence of a solid conceptual foundation and range of practices for sustaining collectivist-democratic organizing. My research contributes to this by investigating the experiences of members in WCs that sit between larger and smaller scale organizing, have received limited contemporary attention, and hold valuable insights; in part due to the tensions resulting from their liminality.

2.4 Chapter summary

In this literature review I have explored WCs and prefigurative collectivist-democratic organizing; degeneration, oligarchy, and legitimacy; the conditions for sustaining WCs; the rise of processual narratives regarding sustaining prefigurative cooperation; the concept of 'spaces of possibility'; and research into smaller collectivist-democratic WCs.

'Prefiguration' is the present manifestation of an aspirational reality. 'Cooperation' is a form prefigurative practice based on a set of common values and principles. My interest is in more 'radical' interpretations and lived examples of this prefigurativism; WCs that are directly owned and controlled by their worker-members and aspire towards a mode of highly participatory collectivist-democratic organizing. An 'ideal-type' would feature collective authority, limited formal rules and structures, deliberative decision-making processes, minimal stratification, limited division and/or specialisation of labour, an egalitarian culture that emphasises solidaristic practices. These organizations are faced with several challenges. The concept of 'degeneration' helps us explore how these unconventional organizations can atrophy, ultimately ceasing to be 'unconventional' or failing entirely. We can categorise these threats as constitutional (ownership and control), external (pressure of the isomorphic environment), or internal (structure and practice) (Cornforth et al., 1988).

The 'iron law of oligarchy' (Michels, 1915) shaped conventional understanding of the inevitable rise of bureaucracy and oligarchy in organizing. Bureaucracy is problematic because it creates over-structuration, while oligarchy is problematic due to its lack of legitimacy. Legitimacy is an important concept and it will be returned to. Despite being told otherwise, the search for ways to better organize collectively and resist this 'inevitable' degeneration has continued. For example, designing structures and practices to prevent the concentration of power and ensure ongoing accountability. Others explored the potential for smaller organizations to avoid bureaucratic structures, but unfortunately they are still vulnerable to informal oligarchy. The conclusion of these explorations is that the 'threat of oligarchy' persists due to the 'incompleteness' of democratic systems, the abuse of power and/or influence, attempts to gain and/or expand power through illegitimate means, the inevitable emergence of informal leaders and dominant groups, and the non-participation of members (Diefenbach, 2019).

Oligarchy emerges irrespective of structuredness or structurelessness, structuration only determines formality. It is not a feature of behaviour or structure but a distribution of power that is inherently illegitimate in the context of democratic organizing. Legitimacy requires consent; an understanding of who may exercise power, the scope of this power, and the means acceptable in its exercise. However, not all exertions of authority are necessarily oligarchic, only those that are illegitimate. Oligarchy exceeds the boundaries of legitimate power; it does not require intent. These boundaries are nuanced and thus must be explored and negotiated by participants.

Organizational conditions suggested to be conducive to resisting degeneration have been proposed by authors such as Freeman (1970), Rothschild and Whitt (1986) and Cornforth et al. (1988). Others have explored the possibility of regeneration and/or renewal of the quality of collectivist-democratic organizing. Of particular interest are contributions from: Stryjan (1994), who positions self-management as an ongoing process of reproduction and redesign; Varman and Chakrabarti (2004), who call for the progressive creation of 'slack' in balancing the contradictions of democratic organizing; and Hernandez (2006), who draws on the 'paradox perspective' in conceptualising collectivist-democratic organizations as sites of unresolvable contestation. These supported my own processual conceptualisation, in which I position the organization as being continuously pulled apart and reshaped by the varying strengths of the more-or-less cooperative and degenerative forces acting upon and emerging within them. Using an imperfectly formed spiral to depict the organization I capture a sense of growth, change, development, and the passage of time, along with the need to appreciate the multiplicity of more-or-less degenerative factors influencing organizing at any given moment.

Scale and the process of scaling are acknowledged as particularly challenging for sustaining collectivist-democratic organizing. I noted that much attention has been paid to the few examples of large-scale democratic organizing. However, the development of processual understandings has been more prominent in research exploring social movements and SMOs. Important emergent concepts include: paradoxes as politicised opportunities for collective learning (Griffin et al., 2020), prefigurative organizations as spaces of possibility and imagination (Cornwell, 2012; Gibson-Graham, 2006; Kokkinidis, 2015); the mutually reinforcing of diversity, horizontality, and constructive conflict (Maeckelbergh, 2009); and the need for an alternative conception of autonomy

that ultimately connect 'means' to 'ends' in rendering prefiguration meaningful (Kokkinidis, 2015). A further recurrent theme in the processual literature is the understanding of democratic organizing as ever imperfect and continually in flux, this is captured in Kioupkiolis' (2010) concept of 'antiperfectionism'.

I highlighted the work of Ng and Ng (2009) as one example of proximal research into collectivist-democratic organizing in WCs. Their cases were younger and smaller than those I have studied, this difference was evident in the findings which underscored the benefits of lower costs in terms of education, training, and informing and high levels of enthusiasm, energy, and high prefigurative alignment on the part of members. The other research attended in the final sub-section was that of Langmead (2016, 2018). I consider her research to be the closest to my own in all but the size of the cooperatives she studied, which were relatively small. Her contributions emphasise the importance of ongoing processes of 'individual-collective alignment', framing democratic praxis as enabling participants to develop coherent collective responses the tensions of prefigurative organizing. Through viewing democracy as a relational process, Langmead characterises formal structures and routinised practice as 'loose frameworks of action' with praxis guided by shared values, the potentiality of diversity, and the ongoing processes of individual-collective alignment. Her findings emphasised a need for openness, integration, and avoiding the pressures of efficiency toward making organizing less fluid. Langmead's work provides a bridge into the literature I draw upon in developing my conceptual framework (Chapter 4). Particularly in terms of relational processes and the engagement and alignment of members.

In this literature review I have sought to gradually build an understanding of the object and subject of my research based on the extant body of knowledge. The 'object' in this case being established and scaled collectivist democratic WCs, the subject being the sustaining of prefigurative democratic organizing despite time and scale. While primarily seeking to build a strong foundation of literature, this chapter has also served to highlight the 'gap' that I view my research as addressing. That is, the dearth of contemporary research into WCs that are 'neither here nor there', no longer as 'collectivist' as they might aspire to be but also not as ossified and bureaucratic as theory might expect them to be. They are remarkable because they are some of the very few cases of such organizations we have in the UK and this alone marks the experiences of members as valuable to our shared body of knowledge. My study will contribute to

the relational process perspective by further crystalizing mechanisms and practices for (sustaining) democratic organizing, seeking understandings of how these play out and are attended over time and scale, and identifying practices, processes, and heuristics for wider practice.

In the following chapter (Chapter 3) I set out and discuss the methodological approach through which I have sought to develop this knowledge. Following this, in Chapter 4 I introduce my conceptual framework, the set of four emergent heuristics developed from my analysis, and I explore their application across layers of organizational 'space'. The subsequent four chapters develop my conceptual framework through empirical analysis across four 'levels of organizing'; individual, cultural, structural, and decision-making.

3.0 Methodology

This chapter explains, justifies, and provides reflection on my methodology, research design, and practice. In Section 3.1, I attend to the motivations and intentions behind this work, offering insight into where my interest and sense of purpose developed from. I also highlight my research questions, which were initially introduced in Chapter 1. In Section 3.2, I discuss my research philosophy, constructivist grounded theory (CGT), and its implications for my research process. In Section 3.3, I outline my emergent research strategy, highlighting its emergent and iterative character as it developed across two distinct phases. In Section 3.4, I turn to the specific methods used in this project, emphasising the centrality of expert and practitioner interviews. In Section 3.5, I discuss my analytical process; moving from transcription, to coding, to memo-writing, building concepts and theory, and finally 'writing-up'. In Section 3.6, I reflect on ethical considerations and their influence on my research as well as the contemporary debate around 'critical performativity'. Section 3.7 addresses the issue of research quality through an eight-point evaluative framework. Finally, I bring the chapter to a close with a summary that integrates the preceding section and sets the scene for the conceptual and empirical chapters to follow.

3.1 Motivation, direction, and research questions

The motivation and direction driving this project developed over time, in part due to changes in my supervisory team and in part due to the evolution of my knowledge and understanding. From the outset I knew I wanted to further explore the world of worker cooperation in the UK, although my exact direction was unclear. My Masters by Research thesis in 2015/16 focused on a small network of young cooperatives and cooperators in the UK, the Young Cooperators Network (YCN). Primarily based in the South, although there were one or two exceptions, this group sought to build a mutual support network. The YCN had emerged from the Young Cooperators Prize (Coop News, 2015), a programme supported by Co-ops UK (2020), the national apex organization, and established worker cooperators through the 'Solid Fund' (2020). My academic interests at the time were organizational learning and participation. The YCN provided me with an opportunity explore these areas further in an unusual context where participants were engaged on a value-led and democratic basis. However, I was also interested in this network because of its underlying narrative regarding the worker

cooperative (WC) model's potential for empowering individuals and addressing wider social and economic issues. This aligned with my own social-democratic tendencies and value-led sensibilities. Most of those involved, including me, had 'come of age' during the 2008/09 financial crisis and had witnessed first-hand the callousness and destructive tendencies of neoliberal capitalism. Likewise, a shared awareness of the extant, ongoing, and impending global environmental crisis conferred a sense of urgency to exploring alternative ways of organizing, living, and being.

While the YCN proved to be fraught with complications and ultimately went dormant shortly after my research concluded, during my time with the 'young cooperators' I had become increasingly engaged with the cooperative movement. I had attended events at Co-ops UK headquarters (Holyoake House, Manchester), the 'Worker Co-op Weekend' (a national gathering for WCs), and had been part of the UK delegation to the second formal gathering of the Young European Cooperators Network (YECN) in Brussels. Through these experiences I became acquainted with some of the leading practitioners-cum-consultants who, off the back of their experiences working in WCs, acted as semi-official ambassadors of worker cooperation and worked with cooperatives as well as other 'horizontal' organizations to overcome issues and promote best practice. Furthermore, I had met several particularly active members of WCs across the UK. These cooperatives ranged in size (3-150 members), age (0-50 years-old), sector (e.g. wholesale, retail, design, web development, scientific testing), and all had their own issues and particular 'takes' on how they approached cooperative practice and organizing.

As my time with the YCN came to an end, I began to consider my next steps in studying democratic organizing, as this had become my primary academic interest. I was particularly curious as to why the WC sector in the UK was so small, what challenges it faced, and how organizational learning theory might help to understand and address their issues. My motivations for undertaking this project were not only personal: the infrequency of WCs and the challenges they face matter for two prominent reasons. First, the collectivist-democratic WC model sits at a frontier of our understanding of the possibilities and limitations of human organizing, and as such its exploration contributes to our collective development. Second, the potential for the WC model to broaden capital ownership and returns, which could facilitate a more stable, balanced, and fairer economy (Blasi & Kruse, 2012; Lawrence et al., 2018). The need for such

research has been advocated by authors including Cheney et al. (2014), who stated that "…further research is needed on the resources, structures, and practices that contribute to the resilience of worker cooperatives." (p. 595)

My initial proposal was for a qualitative investigation focused on the role of the fifth cooperative principle "education, training, and information" (ICA, 2019) in sustaining cooperation. My intention was to study WCs of varying sizes, ages, and in different sectors to develop a rich understanding of the organizational learning practices and processes across UK WCs. This combined my curiosities with my existing knowledge of organizational learning and a sense that this principle might hold the 'key' to sustaining worker cooperation. To this end, I spent a significant amount of my first year and a half of studies learning about 'sensemaking' (Holt & Cornelissen, 2014; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995), an area of organizational learning theory that I still believe has insights to offer worker cooperation and organizational democracy. However, once I started the research I began to question my focus on one particular 'principle of cooperation' (ICA, 2019). In the second year, changes in my supervisory team in late 2017 / early 2018 enabled me to gradually shift towards a grounded theory approach, and consequently letting go of my a priori notions of 'applying' the sensemaking literature.

While I considered the need to develop understanding of the experiences of newly founded WCs and the potential in exploring the emerging community of small, tech-oriented WCs in the UK, I decided to focus on the experiences of members in established and scaled aspirationally collectivist WCs. As I highlighted in Chapter 2, these organizations are not typical of most WCs in the UK, or indeed worldwide, in that they have survived more than twenty years and expanded beyond fifty worker-members. However, they are not of the exceptional scale exemplified by the much-studied Mondragon Corporation, the largest WC federation-cum-corporation. They share more in terms of their prefigurative aspirations with smaller WCs and collectivist social movements. However, along with facing the difficulties associated with sustaining the practice of cooperation, their scale and age present additional challenges that make them particularly rich spaces for exploring prefigurative democratic organizing. In these organizations I knew I would find few 'founder members', placing strain on the integrity of the original cooperative culture, and the presumably degenerative effects of attempting sustain direct democratic participative cooperation across so many

individuals. Furthermore, since Cornforth et al. (1988) the handful of such organizations (approximately six) have gone largely unattended as a unique group in the landscape of the British economy.

3.1.1 Research questions

With these organizations in focus, I established the following overarching research question:

- How do members of worker cooperatives that have aged, scaled, and are still growing experience the tensions involved with sustaining organizational democracy?

In developing my response to this overarching research question, I explore and respond to three sub-questions that clarified and directed the desired outcomes of the project.

- Where do tensions emerge in sustaining and expanding worker cooperatives?
- How do members make sense of and attempt to address these tensions?
- What are the implications for growing and sustaining organizational democracy?

While my core motivation to explore worker cooperation remained unchanged, over the course of this study the specific contextual and theoretical directions evolved. This evolution was driven from a personal desire to make the world a qualitatively 'better' place through empirically exploring instances of organizing where something special is happening. From my academic endeavour, I believe lessons can be learned for both similar organizations but also for wider organizing and society with respect to the limitations and potentialities of humankind.

In the following section I address my philosophical position, research approach, and their implications for my research practice.

3.2 From position to approach

In this section I reflect on my philosophical positioning and consider its implications for undertaking and presenting my research. Nicolini (2012) argues that distinguishing between theory and method is a futile exercise and that instead we should be constructing "coherent practical package(s) of theory and method" (p. 217). In order to be effective, these packages must be internally coherent combinations of ontological

assumptions and methodological choices. He suggests that investigating organizational practice calls for adopting a relational ontology which in turn requires a 'toolkit approach' to practice theory in order to effectively engage with the multifaceted and multidimensional phenomenon that is practice. Through developing coherent packages of theory and method along with a flexible 'toolkit approach' to practice, Nicolini suggests we can develop thick, nuanced understandings of the world as opposed to simplified or reductionist answers. Practice must always and actively be brought to the fore, be made visible, and rendered "an epistemic object in order to enter discourse" (Nicolini, 2012, p. 217).

3.2.1 Philosophical position

For this project, I adopted an iteration of the constructivist approach to grounded theory (CGT) established and developed by Charmaz (2000, 2006, 2014). Using Cunliffe's (2011) revisioning of Burrell and Morgan (1979), in Figure 3.1 I have highlighted my philosophical position, between subjectivism and intersubjectivism [5]. Cunliffe's framework provides both a sense of where my philosophical position is located between subjectivism and intersubjectivism and offers indications of the implications this has for my approach, methods, and typical features.

I assumed a philosophical position that focused on the emerging interrelationships between people and their surrounds, acknowledging the inherency of diversity of experience and interpretations. Pulled between subjectivism and intersubjectivism, I took the view that social experience can be both fleeting and highly contextualised in the socially constructed spaces of subjective and intersubjective experience. Leaning more towards intersubjectivity, I held 'meaning' to be indeterminate, imaginative, most powerful in the moments between people and, more broadly, negotiated and specific to time and place; that is, despite our shared ability to confer a potent sense of permanence to subjective and intersubjective meaning. With respect to historicity, I assumed the position that while time and place are subjectively experienced, the inherency of our

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[5] This is indicated at first by the bold red line running between the two 'problematics' set out by Cunliffe and from 'core ontological assumptions of research methodologies' onwards by the central set of cells with the bold red outline.

embeddedness in intersubjectivity inevitably frames this subjective experience and shapes our collective imagination and negotiation.

Figure 3.1 Between subjectivism and intersubjectivism (adapted from: Cunliffe, 2011, pp. 654–655)

PROBLEMATIC DIMENSION	INTERSUBJECTIVISM	SUBJECTIVISM	
Relationality — the nature of relationships.	Interrelationships emerging and shifting in a dialectical interplay between ourselves, others, and our surroundings. Experienced differently by different people. **Intersubjectivity**	Relationships contextualized between people and their surroundings. People are reflexively embedded in their social world, influenced by and influencing discursive practices, interpretive procedures etc. **Interactions** **Intertextuality**	**OBJECTIVISM**
Durability — of society, meanings, knowledge etc., across time & space.	Social experience and meanings as ephemeral, fleeting moments. Although some common 'sense' of social and linguistic practice plays through our interactions	Social realities, meanings, discourses, knowledge are contextual: constructed yet experienced as objective and relatively stable. Perceived, interpreted and enacted in similar ways but open to change.	
Meanings — what & where meaning is located	Indeterminate. Neither fully in nor fully out of our control. Language is metaphorical and imaginative. Meanings in the moment between people.	Shared meanings immanent to the 'artful practices of everyday life', to discourses and texts. Negotiated & specific to time and place.	
Historicity — concept of time & progress.	We are inherently embedded & embodied in historical, cultural & linguistic communities. Time experienced in the present — in living conversations with others.	Time and place are subjectively experienced. Progress as a situated human accomplishment — potentially iterative, ruptured or hegemonic.	
Mediation — the place of the researcher in the research	Reflexive hermeneutic. Research as a dialectical interplay between research participants. Focuses on experiences between people. Embodied & embedded researcher.	Double hermeneutic. Researcher embedded in the world, shaped by & shapes experiences and accounts, mediates meanings of actors. Experience in the world. Researcher as outsider or insider.	
Form of knowledge — epistemology.	Pragmatic 'knowing': situated, knowing-from-within. Transitory	Pragmatic or syntagmatic: common sense knowledge — naturally occurring actions, interactions,	

	understandings and 'witness' thinking. Micro level focus. Research as embedded and embodied.		conversations. Mundane activities. Non-replicable knowledge situated validity. Macro and micro level focus.	
Core ontological assumptions of research methodologies (The nature of social reality)	Social reality relative to interactions between people in moments of time and space. Relationally embedded. Social community.	Socially constructed realities, emerging objectified, and sometimes contested in the routines and improvisations of people. Context is human actions and interpretation.	Reality as symbolic and linguistic meaning and interactions. Contextualised in a social site.	Discursive realities constructed by discursive and non- discursive practices and systems. Contested and fragmented. Discursively contextual.
Assumptions about human nature (How we relate to our world)	Humans as intersubjective, embodied, relational, and reflexively embedded.	Humans as intentional and reflexive subjects, constructors and enactors of social realities within linguistic conventions or routines. Storytellers.	Actors, interpreters, sensemakers. Choosing linguistic resources, managing impressions.	Humans as subjectivities, products of discourse, contested and conflicted discursive sites.
Research Approaches (Philosophical/theoretical underpinnings)	Hermeneutic phenomen-ology, relational constructionism, dialogism.	Ethnographic, existential phenomen-ology, hermeneutic. Constructionism and constructivism. Dialogic. Inductive.	Ethnomethod-ology, aesthetics, symbolic interactionism, hermeneutic, syntagmatic or pragmatic. Detached or involved researcher. Inductive. Interpretive procedures.	Poststructural-ism, postmodernism, postcolonialism. Syntagmatic. Detached researcher. A critical stance.
Research Methods (Examples of methods used)	Narrative ethnography, reflexive autoethno-graphy, dialogic action research, social poetics,	Narrative and discourse analysis, story, grounded theory, content analysis, poetry, participative	Dramaturgy, story analysis, discourse and conversation analysis, symbolic analysis, grounded	Semiotics, textual analysis, critical discourse analysis, deconstruction.

	dialogic analysis, poetry. **Dialogic**	inquiry, Autobiography.	theory, content analysis, action research. Semiotics.	
Some linguistic features of research. (Typical words used in research accounts)	Betweenness, living conversations, possible meanings, la parole (embedded speech and relationships), interpretive insights.	Narratives, talk, text, metaphor, culture, themes, multiple meanings, sensemaking, la parole/la langue.	Scripts, plots, performances, roles, stage, mask. Symbolic meaning, artefacts. Managing impressions. Actor, actions, and talk. La langue. Social practices.	Discourses, marginalization, resistance, power, domination, colonization, suppression, subjectivity, body.

I believe my research practice walked a fine line between the double and reflexive hermeneutics. Aspirationally, a manifestation of a dialectical interplay between the participants and myself but inherently shaped by my own mediation and a liminal existence that certainly leaned closer to my identity as 'researcher' than 'cooperator'[6].

My epistemological stance gradually shifted toward a pragmatist position. This shift was evident in both my adoption of Charmaz's CGT approach, born from Strauss's pragmatist influence on grounded theory (Charmaz, 2009, p. 128), and in the development of my conceptual framework around the works of Follett, who's integrative process interweaves a relational ontology with a pragmatist epistemology (I discuss this further in Section 4.1). Thus, unintentionally, pragmatism came to shape not only the process but the outcome of my project. A similar narrative emerged regarding my ontological position; 'relational process' came to shape both my methodological approach and the findings, conclusions, and contributions of my research. My position foregrounded the relations between participants and the constructs they objectified, focusing on how these were contested, improvised, and

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[6] 'The cooperator' was an identity I had started to become more comfortable assuming during the latter stages of my previous research project, yet here the context felt very different and I often found myself internally questioning or making excuses for the legitimacy of this identification.

evolved. Revealing once again my internal struggle between a more-or-less subjective or intersubjective positionality; my assumptions about human nature 'creak' somewhere between holding humans as being relationally embedded and as intentional and reflective constructors and enactors of realities.

The CGT research approach reflected these philosophical positions with respect to my work being interpretivist and constructed using qualitative data. Interviewing, observing, coding, memo-writing, and theory-building are shared features of grounded theory, but divergent core assumptions shape contemporary studies. As Charmaz (2009, p. 136) highlights, grounded theory is a method for studying process that in itself is neither fixed nor static; it is a method 'in process'. These divergences can be traced back to Glaser and Strauss' (1967) initial integration of positivism, influenced by the traditions of Columbia University, and pragmatism, influenced by the 'Chicago School' approach, in the crucible of grounded theory. Charmaz's CGT sits closer to the 'Chicago School' approach to social science in that it does not subscribe to the objectivist, positivist assumptions underlying some formulations of grounded theory.

CGT emphasises the studied phenomenon over the methods used to study it and assumes a reflexive stance with regards to the "modes of knowing and representing studied life" (Charmaz, 2005, p. 509). As such, it pays close attention to empirical realities and our intersubjective renderings of said realities. CGT holds social processes as open and emergent, thus studying action and seeking to address temporality. From this position the world consists of the subjective meaning attached to objects and emergent from human experience (Reynolds, 2003). Furthermore, there is a foundational assumption of a dynamic, reciprocal relationship between action and interpretation; with social life being a patchwork of diverse forms of conduct, intersubjectively negotiated between people (Blumer, 1979). It is noteworthy that CGT does not subscribe to some of the more radical positions of constructivism, such as individual reductionism, instead seeking to position research relative to the intersubjectivities (social context) in which it is situated and affected.

3.2.2 Implications for research practice

Grounded theory is broadly united in its beginning with abductive logic, subjecting data to rigorous analysis, and the aim of developing theoretical analyses; or theory-building (Charmaz, 2009, p. 127). However, CGT challenges core assumptions of more

positivist grounded theory regarding the creation of abstract theory, instead calling for us to develop 'situated knowledges' (Haraway, 1991) while likewise moving toward a more interpretive approach to social science practice (Charmaz, 2009, p. 136). Positivist theory-building searches for causal relationships, assumes a deterministic position, and places emphasis on the need for the 'scientific qualities' of generalisability and universality. In contrast, the interpretive theory-building of CGT calls for the development of imaginative understandings, assuming the presence of multiple realities, an ongoing state of indeterminacy, the interweaving of facts and values, truth as provisional, and social life as processual (Charmaz, 2006, p. 126). 'Meaning' is the beating heart of interpretivist qualitative research, it holds the key to unpicking the ways in which both individuals and groups conceive and construct the world around them (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). According to Flick (2007), interpretivist qualitative researchers achieve this by analysing:

- The experiences of individuals or groups through capturing their everyday knowledge, accounts, or stories
- Interactions and communications 'in the making' through observing and recording practices of interacting and communicating
- Documents or other materials produced within or relating to a given subject or context.

These are all directed toward capturing representations of meaning generated by people or peoples and interpretivist research focus on capturing them in their natural context, in as close to the way as those who created them or engage with them do. One of the central divergences of interpretivist and positivist research traditions is that of the role of the researcher and the extent to which they are 'involved' in the research process (Weiss, 1995). This was evident in the intensive involvement required by CGT, both in terms of my engagement with my participants through interviews and instances of observation and in terms of my engagement with the data through iterative cycles of coding and memo-writing.

An essential consideration when undertaking interpretive qualitative research is self-reflexivity regarding my role as researcher and co-creator in the project (Tracy, 2020). The baggage I bring with me as a young, white, ostensibly middle-class, educated, male with a set of values and personalised knowledge cannot be swept under the proverbial

rug. It shapes my approach to communication, engagement, relating, and conceptual development and while these analytical resources assist me in many ways, it is also important to acknowledge their potential to limit my interpretive capacity. Addressing this involved first-and-foremost an initial reflection on my philosophical position. While this position developed over the course of the study, as can be seen in my earlier reflections on the shift towards pragmatism, there was value in having considered where I believed I was 'coming from' prior to embarking on the journey.

My decision to write this thesis primarily in first-person helped to maintain my voice and 'active presence' in the creation and narration of the project. The use of the first-person was noted by Bryant (2017, p. 360) as a potentially powerful and persuasive technique for communicating grounded theory research. He notes that the conventional third person or passive voice can create ambiguity and fail to communicate the role of the researcher. Furthermore, this approach is congruent with my pragmatist positioning which requires the balancing of the research as an active participant and the groundedness and contingency of the concepts being developed (Bryant, 2017, p. 342). The first-person enables clear statements to be made regarding the initial rationale and motivations of a research project (see Section 3.1) as well as reflections throughout the process, Bryant argues these are preferable to accounts that avoid these issues and attempt to present research in an impersonal fashion.

The central 'logic' of grounded theory involves the researcher going back from the data and forward into analysis before returning to the field to gather further data and using this to refine and develop a theoretical framework. To this end, conventional grounded theory methodology provides a set of flexible analytic guidelines. CGT brings with it some of these common practices of grounded theory as well as those of Chicago School constructivism and ethnographic research. Charmaz (2006, pp. 5–6) summarised the core practices of grounded theory as follows:

- Simultaneous involvement in data collection and analysis
- Constructing analytical codes and categories from data, not from preconceived logically deducted hypotheses. In contrast to the type of hypotheses that are used to test already existing theories, the grounded theorist produces hypotheses from empirical data that can be tested by others;

- Using the constant comparative method, which involves making comparisons during each stage of the analysis;

- Advancing theory development during each step of data collection and analysis

- Memo-writing to elaborate categories, specify their properties, define relationship between categories and identified gaps

- Sampling aimed toward theory construction, not for population representativeness.

These practices facilitate and encourage a close proximity to the studied world, successive levels of data analysis, intensive conceptual development; and the abductive building of middle-range theories (Charmaz, 2000, 2003; Glaser, 1978, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). Drawing on ethnographic approaches, CGT seeks to explore and glean explanation of what is happening in the setting and ultimately develop a conceptual rendering of these actions (Charmaz, 2006). In general, ethnographic research is not inherently driven toward theoretical development; integration with grounded theory effectively shifts it in this direction through developing description to abstract categories and theoretical interpretation (Charmaz, 2006, p. 23). While CGT retains the open-ended research approach enshrined in ethnography, it adds rigour and structure by systematising confirmation processes in data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2006, p. 23). Charmaz (2005) summarised the intended outcome of the CGT approach, stating it develops "a set of theoretical concepts from empirical materials that not only synthesise and interpret them but also show processual relationships" (p. 508). These practices shaped my decisions regarding methods and likewise my 'deliberately emergent' strategy for data collection, which I discuss in the following section.

3.3 A deliberately emergent strategy

In his discussion of the process of interpretive inquiry, Wagenaar (2011, p. 241) challenged both the notion of 'research methods' as a singular object detachable from the wider research process as well as of a 'research strategy' as some well-thought-out-in-advance project plan. Wagenaar cited Cerwonka and Malkki's (2007) conception of the interlocked research process as "more a spiral in nature than linear and cumulative" (p. 17) as offering a more suitable foundation for inquiry. However, Wagenaar (2011) made the argument that this improvisational process of interpretation is methodical and

not mere trial-and-error, as it is founded on "assumptions and slowly accumulating knowledge and expertise" (p. 241).

Although interpretive research may be unsuited to a wholly 'deliberate' strategy, a strategy is nevertheless 'emergent' within the research process. Furthermore, it is impossible to enter the field and engage in pure induction, even with the most grounded of intentions (Charmaz, 2005, p. 528). So too is it impossible to entirely avoid some degree of deliberate strategy in the research process. In the canon of grounded theory, the term 'theoretical sampling' is used to describe a form of inquiry-driven purposive sampling which Glaser and Strauss (1967) defined as;

> …the process of data collection for generating theory whereby the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyses his [sic] data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in order to develop his [sic] theory as it emerges. The process of data collection is controlled by the emerging theory, whether substantive or formal. (p. 45)

Theoretical sampling involves going where necessary to maximise opportunities for the discovery of new data variations and the thickening of categories in terms of their properties and dimensions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). To engage in theoretical sampling is therefore to engage in a 'deliberately emergent strategy' that relies on approaching and responding to the field as is necessary to gain access and to capture the most relevant and pertinent data possible. By following the threads of data and categories that emerge from the research process the researcher is led toward a holistic understanding of the pattern, ultimately reaching a point of critical mass referred to as 'theoretical saturation', discussed further in Section 3.5.

What follows in this section is an overview of the 'deliberately emergent strategy' I used to frame my fieldwork and overall project. It is structured in two phases: Scoping (Phase 1) and Developing (Phase 2). Within my explanation of each phase I outline its purpose, the participants engaged, and the methods used (these are discussed further in Section 3.4).

3.3.1 Phase 1: Scoping

Phase 1 of my fieldwork was undertaken during the first three months of 2018. It was purposed toward attaining an overview of the environment and capturing initial insights regarding the challenges faced by WCs. This phase facilitated the focusing of my

research on established and scaled WCs, the identification of organizations of interest, and in some instances providing means of accessing them by way of key individuals or 'gatekeepers' (Tracy, 2020, p. 111). Furthermore, it provided an opportunity for me to re-sensitise myself to fieldwork and the world of worker cooperation after almost a year behind a desk.

Participants in this phase were individuals involved in establishing, sustaining, and developing WCs. Their individual titles and pathways to engagement varied but they are herein collectively labelled 'Cooperative Movement Actors' (CMAs). Three of these contacts had been established while undertaking research for my MARes dissertation. From this group additional names were obtained; these were either asked after by me or offered organically by participants. I thus combined 'purposive' and 'snowball' participant selection. Purposive participant selection involves the researcher intentionally selecting participants based on the needs of the investigation. Snowball participant selection describes how from an initial set of participants further participants are recommended, leading to a 'snowballing' of the number of participants (Bryman, 2012, pp. 202–203). Table 3.1 provides information about my Phase 1 participants whilst maintaining anonymity.

Table 3.1 Phase 1 participants

IDENT.	DESCRIPTION	MINS.
CMA1	Current WC member and consultant	116
CMA2	Ex WC member and consultant	100
CMA3	Network development for apex organization	74
CMA4	Ex development officer and consultant	70
CMA5	Ex WC member and consultant	62
		422 min

Interviews, which I discuss in greater detail in Section 3.4, were the only method used in this phase of fieldwork, although I did make some field notes during and after the interviews. Their purpose was to open-up the investigation and reveal potential avenues of exploration. I developed an interview guide that provided a frame around which each

interview flowed in a reasonably conversational manner (see Appendix 3.1). The guide consisted of an introduction and a main body (core interview), this was divided into the following sub-sections: locating involvement, WC insights, WC challenges, and additional comments. Within each part of the interview the guide included 'main questions' and corresponding probes, these were used where necessary. No two interviews were the same, all five of these participants were dynamic and engaged, thus the interviews naturally developed to focus on different aspects depending on their expertise and/or interests.

These interviews were extensive, one lasted almost two hours, and covered a breadth of issues. After coding all five interviews I developed an initial framework of threads around which I proceeded to create five extended analytic memos (see Section 3.5). I say 'extended' because they were longer than most of the others I produced; the longest, Memo 4, was fifty pages[7]. However, this approach was useful for this phase. It meant I was able to remain 'open' to the breath of insights shared by the CMAs and avoid unnecessarily tightening my focus ahead of Phase 2. The five memos focused respectively on: the role of the external environment in supporting the creation of cooperatives; the worldviews and cultures of WCs; the importance of members and the process of developing them; the operating of WCs as businesses; and lastly, power and control in WCs. The foci of these memos were intended to incorporate as many of the emergent codes as possible, prioritising those individual codes or groups of codes that were particularly 'fat' or that I had noted as having especially interesting insights. My aim was to lay a broad foundation from which my case study research could build, regardless of the route taken by the investigation.

While I was coding and memo-writing (see Section 3.5), I was also looking for potentially fruitful avenues of exploration. As noted in Section 3.1, three potential avenues emerged from my interviews with the CMAs. Firstly, the process of creating new WCs. Secondly, the emerging interest in the WC model among small tech and

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[7] This formed a key part of my learning process with regards to how to analyse data, I found that keeping memos somewhere between 15-20 pages tended to force me to really synthesise and tighten-up my thinking and selection of direct quotes. Furthermore, longer memos became difficult to 'access' when returning to them later in the process.

digital companies. Thirdly, the ongoing strains and challenges found in more established WCs that had experienced growth beyond more 'manageable' membership size (e.g. 5-20 members). While I found both the first and second avenues interesting, after reflecting on the available literature as well as my own extant knowledge, I determined that the third avenue held the most value for me and my research. As noted in Chapter 2, contemporary research in the WC model and collectivist-democratic organizing more broadly has tended toward either focusing on smaller and/or less formal instances or on the few instances of large-scale formal democratic organizing. Therefore, there was a legitimate 'gap' in the literature for exploring formal instances of democratic organizing that were somewhere between these focal points. Furthermore, I believed that through investigating the tensions and strains experienced in established and scaled worker cooperation, I could develop my personal understanding and better position myself for future research.

3.3.2 Phase 2: Developing

Phase 2 of my fieldwork formed the main body of the research. Following Phase 1 of data collection and analysis, I turned my attention to identifying and accessing the WCs I would be using as case studies.

Flyvbjerg (2006, p. 221) argued that case studies are valuable for two reasons:

1. The case study produces the type of context-dependent knowledge that research on learning shows to be necessary to allow people to develop from rule-based beginners to virtuoso experts.
2. In the study of human affairs, there appears to exist only context-dependent knowledge, which therefore rules out the possibility of epistemic theoretical construction.

Departing from positivism or interpretivism in case study research creates apparent differences in purpose, respectively seeking either the 'general' or the 'particular'. While positivists search for means of rendering cases as generalisable as possible, interpretivists emphasise the value in deepening our understanding of a case or group of cases in and of itself. Interpretivist case study research emphasises description and understanding: "the aim is particularisation – to present a rich portrayal of a single setting to inform practice, establish the value of the case and/or add to knowledge of a specific topic" (Simons, 2009, p. 24). Indeed, from the interpretivist position, one

should invariably be suspicious of attributions of causality to complex social situations given the interrelatedness of events and their contextual boundedness (Stake, 2014). As noted in my discussion of CGT, interpretivist research practice foregrounds reflexivity and context, embracing intersubjectivity as not only legitimate but as an inevitability that only becomes problematic if researchers fail to remain attuned and open regarding their membership and participation (May, 2010, p. 224). The role of the researcher is to 'co-construct perceived reality through the relationships and joint understandings we create in the field' (Simons, 2009, p. 23).

From the outset of this research, I knew I wanted to undertake research across multiple cases as opposed to focusing on a single case. Furthermore, I knew I was interested in the challenges of sustaining worker cooperation in the UK. I wanted to focus on the UK as opposed to engaging in cross-country analysis because my prior research experience had highlighted the distinctiveness of environmental factors across European countries; in particular with respect to the legal status of cooperatives, their regulation, the extent of government support, and the integratedness of the cooperative sector. While I may not seek generalisability, I did want my research to have a consistency of context that would enable me to foreground member experiences within reasonably comparable environmental circumstances. For example, although the UK has a long history of cooperation, the cooperative sector at large has been greatly reduced since the halcyon years of the 1970s. This period included the creation of national cooperative development programmes by the Labour Government, their subsequent dismantling by the Thatcher Government, and the promotion of 'social enterprises' in place of cooperatives by New Labour.

However, I remained unclear as to exactly where the arrowhead of my study would point until towards the end of Phase 1. Stake (2014, p. 5) refers to the combination of characteristics used to focus multi-case study research on a particular group, category, or phenomenon as the 'quintain'. The 'quintain' is the object, phenomenon, or condition to be studied; or combination of these. The 'quintain' for my project narrowed to focus on members' experiences of the tensions and strains involved with sustaining organizational democracy in established and scaled WCs based in the UK. While the cases themselves were important in providing the contextual boundaries of my study, the true focus of my research was on the experiences of members in this grouping of organizations. The consequence of this focus was that while some appreciation and

understanding of the individual cases was important, it was the experiences of members across the individual organizations that would be foregrounded (Stake, 2014, p. 6). Following the 'constant-comparison' approach that is central to grounded theory, I would be cross-analysing interview data and observations around the themes I was constructing through coding.

Case studies can be described as either 'instrumental' or 'intrinsic'; the former is favoured by positivists searching for maximising generalisability while the latter is favoured by interpretivists searching for depth of insights over breadth of understandings (May, 2010, p. 233). This research sat towards the intrinsic end of this continuum, drawing on a small set of cases and attempting to attain as much depth of insight as possible. I created a set of six case selection criteria in order to focus the investigation, ensure some consistency of environmental/ecological forces, and increase the likelihood case organizations had faced and overcome a range of challenges:

1. They had to be based in the UK; I wanted to guard against widely different political and legislative environments and histories.
2. They had to self-identify as WCs; preferably holding membership of Co-ops UK, the national apex organization.
3. Their ownership and control had to rest entirely with the worker-members; no external investors or shareholders.
4. They had to, at least aspirationally, be invested in sustaining collectivist-democratic control. While difficult to establish, this criterion was central to the presence of tension between prefiguration and degeneration. I relied on my interactions with members from the case cooperatives and the recommendations of the CMAs to guide me.
5. They had to have been operating as WCs for at least twenty years (>20 years); this somewhat arbitrary number was set in order to increase the potential for founder-member and early member turnover.
6. They had to have grown to more than fifty members but still have less than 200 members (50-200 members). This number was set to ensure a similar level of strain across the organizations, tightening it any further would have reduced the number of potential cases too much (bearing in mind that less than ten organizations in the UK fit the criteria I set).

I considered other factors such as growth, profitability, sector, and governance mechanisms as potential selection or exclusion criteria but found these to be either irrelevant or potentially limiting to the findings of the investigation. However, my main concern following Phase 1 of the research was to engage cases where age and scale were straining the quality of organizational democracy.

At the 'Worker Coop Weekend' (WCW) in May 2017 I had started talking with individuals from WCs of various sizes and ages about the possibility of studying their cooperatives. By May 2018 my focus had narrowed and at the WCW I sought to gain the interest, if not commitment, from members of WC1, WC2, WC3, and WC4 as well as another large WC in the South of England. I sent out emails to my target cases outlining the project as it was at the time ('Sensemaking in Worker Cooperatives'), these were accompanied by an 'Initial Project Brief' (Appendix 3.2) and a 'Letter to members' (Appendix 3.3). Details for each case are set out in Table 3.2 below.

Table 3.2 Case study overviews

CASE	REGION	DESCRIPTION	AGE	MEMB.	INTS.	MINS.	OBS.
WC1	N. England	Wholefood wholesaler	43	150	1	67	None
WC2	N. England	Grocery	23	70	8	453	2 days (extensive)
WC3	Scotland	Wholefood wholesaler	40	55	16	588	4 days (extensive)
WC4R	S. England	Grocery	47	60	6	214	1 day (limited)
WC4W	S. England	Wholefood wholesaler	33	69	9	384	2 days (limited)

The clarity of the responses I received, and the length of time over which negotiations took place varied from case to case. WC1 were quick to respond yet very nearly rebuffed by approach entirely. Their cooperative has been (and continues to be) the subject of much academic interest and this meant that the members felt unable to engage with yet another project. After some back and forth, I managed to secure the offer of an interview with one well situated member; and not one that I had encountered previously. Only thanks to WCM01's breadth of experience and generosity did this become an extended in-depth interview that enabled me to draw on this case as much as I have done in my analysis.

At WC2 I had the contact information of two members, they were quick to respond and the process of gaining consent from the wider membership seemed straightforward. The opportunity I missed with this case was that I was not bold enough in what I was asking for, relying instead on the gatekeepers and other members to suggest what would be suitable. They offered me two days over two weeks when many members would be on site and there would be coordination and training activities taking place. In hindsight, I wonder if I could have gone and volunteered/worked there for a week or more. However, I only realised this once I was in the field and my plans were agreed.

Two points of contact at WC3 yielded a quick response but the decision as to whether to grant me access took some time as the membership were dealing with a range of other issues in their meetings. I was invited to come for a full week and a member had volunteered to host me for the duration of my stay. This was without a doubt the most positive response I had to my proposal.

WC4 proved slightly trickier to gain access to because of its unusual structure sitting across two largely independent entities. The enthusiasm of my primary contact at WC4W and the eventual buy-in of an established member at WC4R proved the key to successful access negotiation. However, the process took several months, and I remained unclear as to exactly how long I would visit each part of the cooperative or how many individuals I would have access to until I was 'in town' for the agreed week. Ultimately, I ended up spending two days at WC4W and one day at WC4R. Despite a brief tour of each site, I spend most of these days in a room with members coming to see me one at a time for interviews. Accommodation in this case was found through a contact from the Young European Cooperators Network (YECN) who happened to have a friend that was willing to lend me their house for the week while they were away; fortunate indeed as my funds were limited.

It would be fair to say that due to access limitations observation became very much 'second fiddle' to my interviews during my analysis. On reflection, I believe this was in part due to my inexperience in negotiating and developing access relationships. As reflected on above, at WC2 I probably could have pushed for more regular access over a longer period had I foreseen their openness. On the other hand, upon arrival at WC3 it became instantly clear that they expected me to be around for the duration of the working day and throughout the week I was 'in town'. Almost by accident, WC3 emerged as my first genuine experience of ethnographic observation in a formal

organization. It felt very different to the highly involved role I had played in researching the YCN, which in hindsight I now regard more as action research.

Ultimately, I took what I was offered and counted myself fortunate. Had I perhaps had more time, returned over the course of several months, or found other routes into building multiple points of contact, I could probably have gained greater access to these cooperatives. However, I could not help but feel extremely grateful for the time I was given; every minute of my WCM interviews was time paid for by the given cooperative. I was acutely aware that for the privilege of interviewing one member, several others were picking up slack somewhere along the line; these unheard voices were implicitly supporting my research.

As with participants in Phase 1, I determined to provide all individuals and case organizations with as much anonymity as possible. This decision was primarily driven by an ethical desire to reduce the risk of individuals or organizations deciding not to participate or give access. Furthermore, given my logic of foregrounding the experiences of members across the case studies, as opposed to focusing on the cases in singularity before cross-analysing, I believed pooling the experiences and insights from across the cases was appropriate. Furthermore, I anticipated this would reduce the challenge of protecting individual anonymity. I reflect on this decision more in Section 3.6 with regards to ethics, responsibilities, and practicalities of research.

As in Phase 1, participant selection in Phase 2 can be described as a combination of the snowball and purposive techniques. I first approached individuals who were either previous known to me or had been identified by participants in Phase 1. As noted above, early participants were also purposively accessed by directly contacting WCs that met my selection criteria and through face-to-face interactions with the WC movement at events such as the WCWs. Once a relationship with one or more members was established, I again engaged in the hybrid of 'snowballing with intent' participant selection. I encouraged participants to suggest other members I might speak to, preferably with an introduction, and independently sought out members that might add further insights/meaning to emergent insights and narratives. No requirement was placed on the length of individual tenure at the cooperative or extent of previous experience in cooperatives; nor indeed any other individual-level exclusion criteria. I felt it was important to speak with members who had varying levels of experience and

tenure in their current position or positions. Information about my Phase 2 participants is presented in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3 Phase 2 participants

CASE	IDENT.	TIME		CASE	IDENT.	TIME
WC1	WCM01	67		WC3	WCM21	60
WC2	WCM02	54		WC3	WCM22	37
WC2	WCM03	57		WC3	WCM23	22
WC2	WCM04	102		WC3	WCM24	50
WC2	WCM05	64		WC3	WCM25	39
WC2	WCM06	69		WC4W	WCM26	40
WC2	WCM07	52		WC4W	WCM27	56
WC2	WCM08	29		WC4W	WCM28	41
WC2	WCM09	26		WC4W	WCM29	42
WC3	WCM10	37		WC4W	WCM30	43
WC3	WCM11	33		WC4R	WCM31	27
WC3	WCM12	32		WC4R	WCM32	36
WC3	WCM13	45		WC4R	WCM33	24
WC3	WCM14	41		WC4R	WCM34	64
WC3	WCM15	37		WC4R	WCM35	26
WC3	WCM16	32		WC4R	WCM36	37
WC3	WCM17	23		WC4W	WCM37	59
WC3	WCM18	18		WC4W	WCM38	27
WC3	WCM19	54		WC4W	WCM39	47
WC3	WCM20	28		WC4W	WCM40	29
						1706 min

Interviews (see Section 3.4.1) were the primary method engaged in this phase of my fieldwork. As illustrated in the interview guide (Appendix 3.4), the first time each participant was interviewed a series of questions were asked in order to locate the individual in relation to the WC and experiences in/of the wider cooperative movement. Again, I deployed a standardised interview guide around which each interview might flow in a conversational manner. The guide consisted of an introduction and a main body (core interview), this was divided into the following sub-sections: personal cooperative journey, WC story, WC challenges, WC development, and additional comments. For each part of the interview I included 'main questions' and corresponding probes, these were used where necessary to guide the conversation and elicit further insights from participants. Having the interview guide to hand was useful in the sense that I had something of a checklist to work through, but it largely served as a crutch for

getting the conversation going and avoiding points where the conversation seemed to be running dry.

In the following section I discuss my methods of data collection in more depth.

3.4 Methods of data collection

In this section I explain my choice of methods, their appropriateness to this project, and their associated considerations. I first turn to interviews, highlighting their purpose, flexibility, and rationalising why I adopted 'relatively unfocused semi-structured interviews'. I also reflect on face-to-face interviewing, choosing the right space, using recording devices, note-taking, preparation, self-presentation and identity, as well as how I responded to more challenging interviews. I then turn to participant observation, reflecting on having been a passive participant, the challenge of remaining open, the opportunities I had to explore and informally converse with members, and my approach to taking field notes.

3.4.1 Interviews

The primary source of material for this research was qualitative interviews; not to be confused with more quantitatively focused survey interviewing. Weiss (1995, pp. 27–30) identifies a number of reasons for using interviews in qualitative research, these are set out in short form in the bullet point below[8]:

- Developing detailed descriptions
- Integrating multiple perspectives
- Describing and explicating processes
- Constructing holistic descriptions of systems
- Learning how events are interpreted
- Bridging intersubjectivities
- Defining variables and framing hypotheses for quantitative research

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[8] All but the last of these reasons are directly relevant to this research. However, there is no reason a future quantitative study might not utilise aspects of this research to inform its variables and frame its hypotheses.

Interviews offer an effective means of capturing the multiple-perspective accounts of historical and contemporary democratic organizing in order to develop theory that sits in congruence with my research philosophy. In turn, my desire to further understanding of the means by which democracy is sustained from the perspective of members' experiences fits with my rationale for using qualitative interviews. Weiss (1995) outlines some issues associated with the interview method; namely the time-intensive nature of interviewing multiple participants, transcribing recordings, and analysing transcripts. Furthermore, Weiss highlights the challenge of determining what kind of interview to undertake, as there are compromises to be made with regards to the extent interviews are structured.

The interview method is flexible and diverse. Various iterations may be placed along a continuum based on the extent of structuration (May, 2010, pp. 136–137). Brinkmann (2018) argues that the terms 'relatively-structured semi-structured interview', 'semi-structured interviews', and 'relatively-structured interviews' are more accurate than the conventional terms due to the impossibility of achieving an entirely structured or unstructured interview. Considering this, I have included two further points on the continuum: 'relatively-focused' and 'relatively-unfocused' semi-structured interview. I position my interviews as 'relatively unfocused semi-structured interviews' and offer the illustration in Figure 3.1 to highlight where I see my interviews sitting in terms of structuration.

Figure 3.2 Continuum of interview structuration
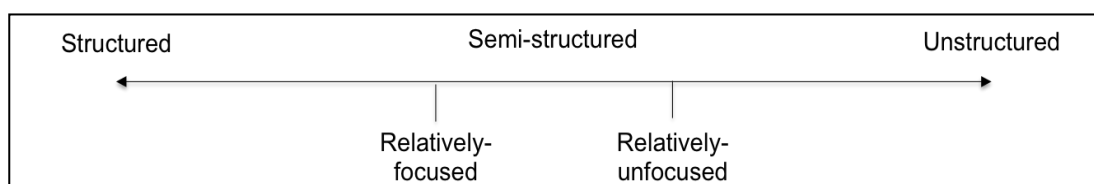
Structured interviews sit at one extreme of the continuum. They are characterised by their fixed-question-open-response format, are generally associated with survey research, and are more closely aligned with the positivist paradigm. As positivist studies aim for generalisability, they attempt to standardise the interview questions, format, and presentation in order to reduce bias and maximise comparability, replicability, and objectivity (May, 2010, p. 132). The limitations of the survey interview and structured interview methods lay in their inflexibility and unresponsiveness to participant responses, the consequence of which may be a lack of depth or texture. Weiss (1995, p.

13) provides an example of the shortfalls of structured interviews in showing how without the ability to reactively probe participant response the interviewer risks failing to elicit deeper meaning – perhaps capturing 'the headline' but missing 'the story'. This approach was not appropriate for either phase of my investigation because even though I had some idea of what I was interested in, Phase 1 had to be sufficiently open as to allow unanticipated threads to surface and be followed there and then. A similar need was present in Phase 2, beyond having some idea of the various 'angles' I might question participants from I was going in relatively blind and needed to adopt an approach that would enable responsiveness and reflexivity.

At the other extreme of the continuum sit 'unstructured interviews'. These interviews are more like conversations and, though perhaps directed by a topic or theme, are supposed to be allowed to flow as naturally as possible (Brinkmann, 2018; Weiss, 1995). This does not mean the interviewer is a 'passive' participant in the interaction; quite the opposite, they are actively engaged in the conversation. The benefits of unstructured interviewing lays in the organic tailoring of each interview to the given participant, such a custom-made conversation allows for gains in terms of coherence, depth, and density of material (Weiss, 1995). The constraints of unstructured interviewing lay in their open-endedness and the extent to which the participant might direct the interview, creating the risk of not obtaining responses to questions or thematic areas the interviewer is interested in (Weiss, 1995). Unstructured interviews are a mainstay of ethnographic research (Angrosino, 2007) and are likewise popular in biographical research projects (Weiss, 1995). Admittedly, unstructured interviews could have been an interesting method for this project had I been in each setting for longer or had multiple opportunities to access the same participants with sufficient time to code and write memos between interactions. They may have opened my research further and led to additional or different threads being followed. However, given the access restrictions, time available, and most importantly the fact that I wanted to focus on members' experiences of tensions and strains; the wholly unstructured interview was not appropriate for my investigation.

Semi-structured interviews sit at the mid-point between structured and unstructured interviews. Neither entirely open, in the vein of unstructured interviews, nor rigidly structured, in the vein of structured interviews. Instead, semi-structured interviews seek a balance of the two extremes. The benefits of this form of interviewing are that it is

directed yet the researcher is able to follow threads of interest in order to expand the horizons or indeed narrow the focus of the research (May, 2010, p. 135). In semi-structured interviewing researchers often use some form of an interview guide that provides a frame around which the conversation can develop. These range from simply lists of themes or topics to be discussed to a series of open-ended questions with accompanying probes. As noted in the previous section, I developed distinct interview guides for the cooperative movement actors (CMAs) interviewed in Phase 1 of the fieldwork (see Appendix 3.1) and the WC members interviewed in Phase 2 of the fieldwork (see Appendix 3.4). In all but a few interviews, these guides simply provided a tool for me to occasionally refocus the conversation or decide what to ask about next. However, in interviews in which participants were slow to open-up or did not really open-up throughout, the guides proved an essential tool for developing and/or maintaining the dialogue.

The interviews conducted in this investigation were all face-to-face. While Internet enabled video calling might have offered a more economical means of reaching and communicating with participants, the face-to-face interview was felt to offer more potential for developing rapport and eliciting insights (Tracy, 2020, p. 188). As such, the setting in which I conducted my interviews became an important consideration. Where possible, I carried out my interviews in quiet spaces that were familiar to the participants; such as their homes, offices, workspaces, or local cafés (Tracy, 2020, p. 182). It is worth noting that I found cafés leave something to be desired in terms of being able to contend with background noise and the extent to which participants are willing or able to relax and 'open up'.

Although a recording device may risk creating a barrier between interviewer and participant, in my view the benefits outweigh such issues. Some researchers argue that to record an interview might detrimentally influence the willingness of participants to share insights or encourage them to 'brush over' difficult issues. Some suggest it is possible to either remember sufficient details, others possess the increasingly rare skill of stenography (Angrosino, 2007; Weiss, 1995). On the other hand, the benefits include: the accuracy of the data captured, the ability to both read the transcripts and re-listen to the recordings, and the elimination of the need to take constant notes, meaning more attention can be paid to the participant and what they are saying at the time. For this research I determined it would be best to record all the interviews. As

such, I ensured that each interview was recorded on two devices; either a 'Dictaphone' (mp3) or laptop (m4a) with a second copy on a mobile phone (m4a). At no point during my interviews did I feel there was an issue with using a recording device, participants seemed comfortable to speak openly. I did make some notes during the interviews, but their purpose was primarily to map the topics covered and identify questions or probes that could be used to elicit further insights.

Drawing on recommendations from others, including Brinkmann and Kvale (2015, pp. 194–195), Tracy (2020, p. 184) suggests that good interviewers are:

- Knowledgeable about the topic and the interviewee
- Purposeful and clear
- Gentle and forgiving
- Sensitive
- Open-minded and not quick to judge (verbally or nonverbally
- Attentive and critically curious
- Actively interpretive (clarifying and extending participant's answers)

While I aimed to hold to all of these throughout my interviews, one of the key differences between the interviews undertaken during Phase 1 and Phase 2 was how I presented myself and engaged with the participants (May, 2010, p. 140). In Phase 1, I sought to keep to the role of a 'young researcher', somewhat knowledgeable yet also reverent to the experience of the experts and professionals I was interviewing. While I was willing to probe them and challenge them to substantiate assertions, I tried to maintain a position that meant they fully explained their responses as opposed to assuming a priori understanding on my part. This was notably more difficult with those participants I had already interacted with but all five were experienced communicators and facilitators which played in my favour in terms of the quality of the interactions.

Phase 2 called for a more varied approach; drawing on my being a social researcher, a business student, and a 'cooperator'. None of these identities were false, they are all part of who I am, but different situations called for emphasis to be placed on aspects of my identity. My interview guide provided for a short introduction and an initial check for any questions from the participants, depending on the extent of our prior interaction I would offer more or less of a preamble about the project and my own background. Some participants would want to know more, others seemed more hurried and wanted

to 'get on with it'. In the Phase 2 interviews I did my utmost to hold a naïve stance, one that allowed for participants to really explain things in their own way. However, some participants, notably those with more authority, experience, or academic or commercial backgrounds, clearly wanted more from me and in these instances. In response to this, I would try to engage them 'on a level'. For example, by using acronyms and 'jargon'.

Listening back to interviews I would identify where I had slipped-up and tried to ameliorate my self-presentation and engagement correspondingly. Regardless of flexibility, interviews are unpredictable. Two interviews during Phase 2 were unexpectedly challenging, one because a participant had just come out of a meeting in which there had been a disagreement and the other because a participant evidently had been looking for someone to talk to about the extent of their misgivings. In such situations I tried to remind myself of my role, the need for appropriate distance, and the risks to myself, participants, and the organization if I were to unintentionally 'put my foot in it'. Fortunately, I was able to navigate these interviews without incident and by the end of each managed to elicit some thoughts as to the positives or benefits of cooperative working. However, for better or worse, I believe my 'steps' were inevitably more cautious in the interviews that followed. Overcoming these moments of difficulty and regaining my composure required focus, reflection, and reflexivity.

3.4.2 Observations and field notes

I incorporated observation as a method to enhance the texture of the output and thickening my understanding of the subject and context in focus. The observation method developed through social anthropology, ethnography, and the Chicago School of social research (May, 2010, p. 163). Angrosino (2007) defines observation as, "the act of perceiving the activities and interrelationships of people in the field setting through the five senses of the researcher" (p. 37) and " noting a phenomenon, often with instruments, and recording it for scientific purposes" (p. 54). These definitions are useful in conveying the difference between the kind of observation that characterises everyday life and that in which researchers engage. Indeed, though observation is a skill that is almost so natural it goes unnoticed as we go about our lives, in research it is a nuanced and challenging method that takes time to develop into an effective tool (Tracy, 2020, p. 130).

Angrosino (2007) suggests observational methods are suited to research that deals with specific settings, events (sequences of activities longer and more complex than single actions), and demographic factors (e.g. observable socioeconomic differences, gender, age, etc.). In the case of my research, the role of the observation method added an additional layer of confirmation and differentiation, both with respect to my extant knowledge of the literature and to the insights elicited from interview participants. The contemporary interactions I observed served to both attune me to the dynamics of 'live' democratic organizing. The usefulness of observation was particularly evident after I had undertaken several interviews and I was aware of what participants believed was important to the process. Sensitised to their reality, I was aware of what to look for and what might be missing; for example, espoused versus actual strategies, practices, and processes. While my research was not specifically interested in the demographic factors that were observable in my case WCs, such features still made for valuable observations in terms of unpacking the cultures and power structures of the organizations.

My engagement as an observer may be classified as that of 'observer-as-participant' and the extent of my involvement as being 'passive'. Angrosino (2007) highlights Gold's (1958) classic typology of four different role types for observational researchers:

- Complete observer: The researcher is as a detached as possible from the participants and setting (neither seen nor noticed)
- Observer-as-participant: The researcher engages with the participants and setting for brief periods and is known and recognised in their capacity as a researcher
- Participant-as-observer: The researcher is fully integrated into the participant group and is "as much as friend as neutral researcher" (Angrosino, 2007, p. 55), yet is still acknowledged as a researcher
- Complete participant: The researcher disappears into the setting and essentially becomes a participant, possibly to the extent of not acknowledging their research agenda.

At both extents of this spectrum ethical issues emerge, in both cases this concerns participants being unaware there is a researcher present or that they are being observed. I adopted the role of 'observer-as-participant' because it enabled me to maintain my position as 'researcher' while also engaging with the situations in which I found myself. Reflecting on the extent of my engagement, Spradley (1980) offers a typology more

focused on the degree of involvement (see Figure 3.2). In his typology Spradley identifies five types of participation ranging from nonparticipation to complete participation. While non-participation and complete participation are largely equivalent to the corresponding extremes in Gold's (1958) typology, Spradley includes three more nuanced degrees between the two extremes: active, moderate, and passive.

Spradley's (1980) notion of passive participation best describes the overall character of my observational activities while in the case organizations. This type of participation involves limited participation in the activities of the subject group; instead, the researcher assumes the role of 'bystander'. Passive participation requires the researcher the remain at arm's length from much of what goes on, the rewards of this distance are that the researcher is able to take in the situation and pay close attention to the actions of others – without the distraction of direct engagement. Passive participation is different from 'nonparticipation' in that the research is 'there but not there' as opposed to not being there at all. For example, I attended a committee meeting at WC3 yet beyond introducing myself to one or two new faces I did not speak or engage until the end of the meeting when the conversation opened up. I was not invited for my opinion, nor in this instance would it have been appropriate for me to have involved myself; the members had collectively agreed to my involvement on a certain basis and it was important for me to try to honour that collective agreement.

Figure 3.3 Types of involvement (adapted from Spradley, 1980, p. 58)

DEGREE OF INVOLVEMENT	TYPE OF PARTICIPATION
High	Complete
	Active
	Moderate
Low	Passive
(No involvement)	Nonparticipation

Moderate participation describes situations where the researcher seeks a balance between being considered an 'insider' and an 'outsider'. When I attended WCWs I

adjusted my behaviour to be more participative and used these instances as a means of building relationships and functional connections with the cooperative movement. I recognised the potential value in engaging with the subject group in terms of developing rapport and deepening my understanding of the world of worker cooperation in the UK. Indeed, I doubt I would have been able to gain the access to the CMAs and WCs without having engaged to a greater extent over the course of the WCWs.

Active participation denotes instances where the researcher seeks to engage in the activities of the subject group in order to "not merely gain acceptance, but to more fully learn the cultural rules for behaviour." (Spradley, 1980, p. 60). Though it would have been interesting to engage more 'actively' perhaps through some form of action research (see recommendations for future research in Section 9.5) this level of participation was not an option in this instance. As noted with regards to negotiating access to the case cooperatives in the previous section, had I been willing to push for greater access from the outset or let the relationships play out over longer time periods I may have increased my level of involvement. However, I doubt I would have been able to increase my access across all four cases and I believe there is real value in the extensive interviews I was able to capture across the four organizations.

An issue facing those engaged in observational research are the 'filters' through which we naturally perceive the work around us. These include both our preconceptions about demographic characteristics and the way we 'tune out' aspects of our immediate environment; such as sounds or conversations around us (Angrosino, 2007, pp. 37–38). Thus, it is necessary for researchers to be conscious of their own filters and attempt, where possible, to open themselves to the environment they are observing. In attempting to attune myself to the environment, where possible I would try to sit or step back every so often; allowing myself to look around and listen to the sounds of the world around me. Likewise, when I was not interviewing, I tried to explore the spaces without interfering in the operational activities of the WCs. For example, at WC2 and WC4R I spent time on the shop floor, browsing like a customer and even buying something. Over the course of my four days at WC3, I was able to more thoroughly explore the office and warehouse spaces, also meeting various members on their breaks. One of the most interesting interactions happened when I joined a group outside enjoying a fleeting moment of sunshine in an otherwise overcast and cold week. They spoke of it being the first year the WC had not thrown a summer party and why it was

an important event for them; a time to bring everyone together, including families and some customers. Sharing this moment of reflection not only revealed something about how under pressure the members had been recently but also gained me two more interviews.

The central activity of the observational research is the taking of field-notes. These may include records of observed or reported action (both individual and collective), anecdotes and observations, descriptions of critical or significant processes, highlight what participants find interesting or problematic, detail participants' language use, locate actors in actions or contexts, and recordings of the researcher's own analytical developments (Charmaz, 2006, p. 22). There is no universally accepted format for field-notes; researchers' preferences may range from highly structured checklists, grids, and tables to free-form narratives. However, Angrosino (2007, p. 40) suggests that good field-notes should approximately include the following:

- A statement about the setting
- An enumeration of the participants
- Descriptions of the participants
- Chronology of events
- Descriptions of the physical setting and all material objects involved
- Descriptions of behaviours and interactions
- Records of conversations or other verbal interactions

My own field-notes varied in content depending on the character of my engagement in the field. For example, while carrying out individual interviews in Phase 1 my notes were limited to describing the setting, characterising the participant, and noting any particularly intriguing aspects of the verbal interaction, usually on a copy of the interview guide. Conversely, during Phase 2 of my fieldwork my notes became more developed, responding to the character of my interactions as involving multiple participants, more varied settings, and a range of activities. I would try to ensure I kept track of names, specific or regularly used terminology and phrases (such as 'headspace' at WC2), as well as a detailed track of where and when different interactions happened. I would also leave space around my initial notes for me to expand on them with further reflections at the end of each day. Following my fieldwork at each of the case organizations I prepared a 'post-fieldwork pre-analysis' (PFPA) summary document.

In the following section I explain and reflect upon my methods of data analysis.

3.5 Methods of data analysis

In this section I offer explanation of how Charmaz's (2005, 2006) constructivist approach to grounded theory (CGT) informed my analytical process; including multiple levels of coding, the use of analytic memo-writing, reflexive theory-building, and finding closure at a point of pragmatic saturation. Even though this discussion deals with each separately, these activities are non-linear and often occurred simultaneously as part of a reflexive and iterative process.

3.5.1 Transcription

My analysis was conducted electronically using the NVivo 12 application, a CAQDAS (Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis System). Though this has limited bearing on the outcome of the research and serves primarily to increase the efficiency and efficacy of the process, it may nevertheless be of interest to others. Electronic analysis does necessitate a standardised approach to transcription of interviews and the digitisation of field-notes. The style of transcription I used was 'intelligent verbatim', this could also be described as mid-level detail transcription (Tracy, 2020, p. 375). This approach is primarily concerned with capturing 'what' is being said by the participants as opposed to 'how' it is being said; which would be of interest if I were to engage in discourse or narrative analysis. Using this style, certain elements are excluded, such as: hesitations (ums, ahs, eh); fillers (e.g. 'you know'); repeated words (unless for emphasis); stutters and stammers; non-standard language (e.g. ain't); all interruptions (e.g. throat-clearing, coughing, etc.). On the other hand, long sections of speech are broken up into meaningful paragraphs in order to increase the sensibility of the text.

During Phase 1 and at the start of Phase 2 of data collection and analysis, I personally transcribed each interview used in this project. The main reason for this was my belief that for as long as scale permitted there was value in personally re-experiencing the interviews through the process of transcription. In line with Tracy (2020, p. 203), I found that it is one thing to conduct an interview, another to listen back to it, and a wholly deeper experience to engage in the process of transcription. Not only does it sensitise you to the content of the data, but it also yields benefits in terms of interview technique. Furthermore, there are aspects of verbal communication which are inevitably

lost in the process of transcription. For example, hesitations and tone of voice. This level of detail and nuance can be valuable, even essential, to some research (Morse, 2018, p. 1389). However, in this case I felt it would make it more difficult to really drill down on the meanings I was searching for and thus decided to proceed with intelligent verbatim. Further into Phase 2 I used a confidential transcription service so I could focus on coding and memo-writing. Working with the contractor, who had come recommended by another researcher, I established the standard I wanted and after a few trial samples was able to trust in the quality of the transcripts.

3.5.2 Coding

The process of coding is the bridge between data and the interpretation of meaning. "A code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data." (Saldana, 2013, p. 3). As is common in grounded theory methodology, I coded the data over iterative rounds of initial, focused coding, and axial coding. A full copy of my NVivo codebook is included for reference in Appendix 3.5. It only occurred to me at the end of the process that exporting a copy of the codebook at several points throughout the project might have yielded some interesting insights as to how my codes and grounded theory developed.

'Initial coding' involved defining the action of the data statement with codes that were predominantly active, immediate, and short. Coding can be done word-by-word, line-by-line and incident-by-incident (Charmaz, 2006, p. 51). For the most part, I used incident-by-incident coding. One of the main reasons for this is the way NVivo works with respect to 'extracting' all sections of text coded under a code (or 'node' in NVivo). When I selected a code, for example 'unlearning and learning', having small blocks of text around what might well be a single word or line of interest enabled me to retain the context without having to reopen the full transcription file. For every 'incident' I coded I would also write a brief annotated note in which I would highlight if a particular word or line had seemed significant or what my rationale had been for ascribing a given code or grouping the extract under an existing code. These annotations also enabled me to deal with any overlaps in coding blocks. For example, if lines 10-15 were coded 'A' and 12-19 were coded 'B' I might have decided to retain the full block of ten lines for

contextual reference and use the annotation to remind myself of which lines had spoken to which code.

The focus of initial coding is on "defining action, explicating assumptions, and seeing processes" (Charmaz, 2005, p. 517). Some coding may be typified as being 'in vivo', verbatim codes using participants' own words, or as 'process' action-centric coding that uses gerunds. Process coding is particularly useful as it deals with "ongoing action / interaction / emotion taken in response to situations, or problems, often with the purpose of reaching a goal or handling a problem" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, pp. 96–97). Examples of these kinds of coding can be seen in my codebook; 'Bigger picture' is an in vivo code while 'Guiding' is a process code. However, other codes such as 'Fitting (the glove)' and 'Following the dog' are examples of simultaneously in vivo and process codes.

'Focused coding' involved taking a wider view of the codescape generated through initial coding in order to identify themes, connections, and relationships. It is during this phase that the comparative nature of grounded theory comes to the fore, as the researcher compares data with data, data with categories, and category with categories (Charmaz, 2006). Essentially, every piece of data and every unit of analysis generated from said data become answerable to not only what has come before but also what comes after. As such, an initial or focused-phase code may further evolve following the emergence of new codes or categories in more recent data that illuminates the data in a thicker of deeper manner. If we consider the role of initial coding to be the splitting or sundering of the data into individually coded units, we may likewise consider the role of focused coding to be the steps we take toward bringing the data back together in a manner that offers new meaning and carries us toward the rendering of a theoretical construct.

One example of how focused coding emerged in my analysis is 'Unlearning and learning', which started out as a code in its own right. However, over time, a set of other codes were clustered around it. When participants were highlighting issues around 'Sharing (the load)', 'Guiding', and 'Appraising' they were speaking both to this particular thread but also to the wider thread of 'unlearning and learning'. One of the benefits of using NVivo was that I was able to move codes around relatively easily and experiment with where they seemed to fit and how they spoke to each other.

Building upon focused coding, my 'axial coding' developed through determining the properties and dimensions of a category. These served as 'axes' or points of orbit around which the data fragmented through initial coding could be brought together as a coherent, meaningful, whole (Charmaz, 2006, p. 60). Properties consist of the interrelated characteristics and attributes of the category's constituent codes and content. Dimensions concern the location of properties across a range of contexts, conditions, interactions, and associated consequences or outcomes. Axial coding moves further into the conceptual level of analysis. Much of the development of axial coding emerged through the process of writing analytic memos, which I attend to in the following sub-section. Saldana (2013) notes the importance of memo-writing in facilitating the development and usage of axial coding with the focus being on the "emergent and emerging codes themselves" (p. 221) as well as the categories' own properties and dimensions. Due to the reflexive and iterative character of grounded theory investigation, axial coding builds toward achieving 'saturation' even while further qualitative data collection and analysis is being undertaken. Continuing with the example of 'Unlearning and learning' from the previous paragraph, this emergent focused code developed into being part of the axial code 'Nurturing' which is a top-level category code focused on the practices of developing members individually and collectively.

Rounds of coding were not necessarily linear; they occurred in a cyclical and cumulative fashion. Once I had begun to collect and analyse data, initial coding of those early interviews in 'Phase 1' moved into focused coding as data collection for 'Phase 2' began. Emergent codes generated from new data began to reshape the codescape of earlier data as I returned and reconsidered my earlier codes in a new light. As I moved toward completing analysis of data from Phase 2, dramatic changes in my coding and categorisation structure became less frequent and a more stable theoretical 'picture' became increasingly clear. Theoretical coding, sometimes referred to as selective or conceptual coding, may be considered to sit on a further level of analysis, above all other codes and categories generated; it functions "like an umbrella" (Saldana, 2013, p. 223). This form of coding requires determining the central or core category that unites the data analysis and essentially explains what the research is all about (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The core category then serves to systematically link all of the emergent categories and subcategories identified throughout the analytical process – acting as the

backbone or spine of the theoretical construction. The critical activity during this cycle of theory building is addressing the 'how' and 'why' questions in order to develop an explanatory narrative of the subject phenomenon or practice (Hennink, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011). The theoretical codes and constructs I developed emerged through the practice and process of writing extended analytic memos, these are discussed in the following sub-section.

3.5.3 Memo-writing

When reading methodology textbooks, particularly those directed at grounded theory, coding and memo-writing present somewhat of a 'chicken or the egg' conundrum; which is to be given precedence and does it really matter? On the one hand, Charmaz (2006) and others discuss coding, or at the very least first level coding, prior to entertaining the process of memo-writing. Meanwhile, Saldana (2013) introduces analytic memo-writing ahead of his chapters on first and second level coding procedures. Although emphasising the ongoing interrelationship between coding and memo-writing (and the role the former plays in the eventual integration of the latter into the final presentation of the investigation), in his brief discussion of the grounded theory coding canon Saldana highlights Gordon-Finlayson's (2010) assertion that "coding is simply a structure on which reflection (via memo-writing) happens. It is memo-writing that is the engine of grounded theory, not coding" (p. 164). As such, we may consider memos as the lubricant of the analytic machine (Birks & Mills, 2011, pp. 40–41); the mortar to the bricks of coding (Stern, 2007, p. 119); or, extending Charmaz's (2006, p. 45) metaphor of coding generating the bones of the analysis, their subsequent integration in categories as the skeleton, and concepts developed through memo-writing as the blood which gives life to the theoretical construction.

The purpose of memos

Analytic memos consist of more than the labels and short phrases used for coding, they are the embodiment of the thinking that goes on through the process of analysis, theory building, and presentation. Likewise, they are not the same as field-notes, which are written documentation from instances of participant observation. The 'MEMO' mnemonic from Birks et al. (2008) offers an accessible overview of the purpose and functions of analytic memos (see Figure 3.4).

Figure 3.4 'MEMO' functions mnemonic (adapted from: Birks et al., 2008)

- **M**apping activities – Providing a decision-making trail that serves to both guide the research and facilitate reflection/audit of the theory-building process.
- **E**xtracting meaning – Structuring/buttressing the extraction of meaning from the data and the fieldwork/analytical process.
- **M**aintaining momentum – Supporting the researcher's exploratory journey through the data, particularly during periods of flux and/or dissonance.
- **O**pening communication – Enabling the researcher and research team to effectively share progress in terms of 'thinking' in a way that permits feedback.

Saldana (2013) highlighted eleven examples of ways analytic memos can be used in the research process to reflect and write about:

- How you personally relate to the participants and/or the phenomenon.
- Your study's research questions.
- Your code choices and their operational definitions.
- Emergent patterns, categories, themes, concepts, and assertions.
- The possible networks (links, connections, overlaps, flows) among the codes, patterns, categories, themes, concepts, and assertions.
- An emergent or related existing theory.
- Any problems with the study.
- Any personal or ethical dilemmas with the study.
- Future directions for the study.
- The analytic memos generated thus far.
- The final report for the study

Indeed, memo-writing's overall purpose is the codification of reflection in order to facilitate both successive reflective turns and the communication of this reflection through the findings of the investigation. The list highlights how memos continue to play a role in the later stages of the study, in the crafting of both the grounded theory and the final report.

My memo-writing process

In Table 3.4 I have set out the twenty memos I produced for this project. The first five of these were developed from my interviews with CMAs during Phase 1.

Table 3.4 Memo titles and descriptions

M.	TITLE	DESCRIPTION	PGS.
1	Scaffolding	Changes in the extent and character of structural support available to worker co-ops and the co-operative movement	19
2	Worldview	How WCs view the external environment and how they view themselves in relation to said environment; notions of purpose, identity, values, branding, relationships, and the negotiation of collective understanding	25
3	Nurturing	The development of 'members' into 'co-operators'.	23
4	Workers incorporated	Attending to the 'business' side of the dual characteristics of WCs and how these interplay with democratic organizing	59
5	Reconciling	How WCs 'reconcile' the power dynamics inherent in organizing and interpersonal relationships.	18
6	Adapting and beyond	How the need for change emerges and is responded to by members	15
7	Jacks and masters	How the organization of work interfaces with organizational democracy	17
8	Narrow pathways	Further exploration of member development	19
9	Slipping	Reflecting on and building-up the emergent notion of 'slipping'	7
10	Consenting and autonomy	Returning to the notion of consenting to authority and exploring this through the lens of individual autonomy	16
11	Creaking	Reflecting on and building-up the notion of 'creaking'	24
12	Empowering keepers	Returning to the notion of consenting to authority and exploring this through the lens of empowering individuals with authority over others	15
13	Cutting the knot	The practices, processes, problems, and tensions related to making and taking decisions in WCs, unintentional emergence of notion of 'relevance' as being important	24
14	The same but different?	Returning to the notion of worldview, focusing on the senses of uniqueness and exceptionalism found in WCs	11
15	Keeping it together	Tensions and reflections around losing and/or sustaining a shared worldview	22
16	Structuration	The creaking and slipping of structures, introduces in vivo concept of the 'Goldilocks zone', notion of 'relevance' emerges again and starts to connect the dots	28
17	Competing	Beginnings of exploration into competitive and strategic practices of WCs	27
18	Taking stock	Synthesis of key ideas from across previous memos, development of conceptual model	18
19	Turning the hourglass	Working over and through three conceptual heuristics of relevance, creaking, and slipping	9
20	Analysis to write-up	Drawing all ideas and concepts together, mapping out interconnections and planning write-up	27
		TOTAL PGS.	**423**

My focus in producing these, and the memos that followed, was on trying to capture the breadth of insights shared by participants whilst also paying close attention to points where insights converged, contrasted, or seemed recurrent. Through their production I began to refine my analysis into something of a frame around which further coding and memo-writing evolved. The following twelve memos drew primarily on my interviews with WCMs, supported by my observational field notes. Memos 9 and 11 are worth particular attention as in these I focused on working on two conceptual heuristics that run as golden threads through my findings and conclusions. However, it is important to emphasise the significance of each memo in gradually moving me towards the point of understanding at which I began to bring my journey and the findings of this project to a close.

Figure 3.5 Deciding what to focus on (Memo 10)

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<u>Moving forward</u>

As I have moved forward with my analysis, 'consenting to authority' has developed in its analytical structure. At present, it encompasses several secondary and tertiary codes.

- Firstly, 'individual authority' pertains to insights regarding the power and authority of individuals within the organisation. It consists of three tertiary codes: 'autonomy', 'functional authority', and 'disciplining'.
- Secondly, 'group authority' pertains to insights regarding concentrations of power and authority in sub-groups of the organisation; these may be temporary or permanent and vary in the remit and importance of their authority.
- Thirdly, 'structuredness' pertains to the structures that enable and/or constrain power and authority within the organisation; the means by and extent to which collective power is channelled at authority.

While it is my intention to explore most of these areas in the course of my analysis, given the amount of material available and the distance yet to be travelled in terms of bringing further data into the analysis I will focus separately on the individual aspects in shorter memos. The first of these being a memo on the notion of 'autonomy' as I have not specifically attended to this area and feel it is of some importance to my understanding.

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Somewhat inevitably, my process of memo-writing developed over the course of the project; not always 'improving' but always progressing. After coding three to four interviews, I would reflect on where points of interest were emerging or coalescing. In

Figure 3.5 above I reflect on how my analysis of 'consenting to authority' and consider the pathways my analysis might take and explain why I chose to focus on the notion of 'autonomy' in the main body of Memo 10. Having selected a particular code, theme, category, or concept that had been speaking to me during my analysis, I would then explore around this focal point of data extracted across my NVivo 'nodes'. I would then begin copying-in extracts alongside any associated annotations into a standardised memo template (see Appendix 3.6). While I would try to prioritise the newly coded interview data, I regularly went back to earlier data in order to ensure I was capturing as much meaning as possible. Once I was satisfied that I had included all the pertinent material available at the time, I would start exploring how these fitted together. This entailed using sub-headings to start creating a kind of narrative structure that would hold the memo together. As Charmaz (2006) highlights, "Making subcategories into explicit subheadings is useful when on unfamiliar terrain. Unconventional ideas and abstract conceptual schemes require more signposts." (p. 162). Sometimes these sub-headings would be directly taken from codes, sometimes they would be built around a specific word, sometimes they would be newly taken 'in vivo' from an extract, and sometimes I would come up with something entirely novel in order to capture the essence of the content. As this would often lead to me moving extracts into different sections, in order to keep track of where quotes and extracts came from, I would retain the original code in the bracketed reference after a quote (I deleted these in later drafts to avoid confusion). I would often write short paragraphs linking various parts together or create series of bullet-points that captured my thinking. Once the 'pieces of the puzzle' were in a suitable state, I would then begin to write around the content and to develop the 'memo proper'.

This process would sometimes take a matter of days but sometimes lasted several weeks. As a rule, I would only work on one memo at a time and would normally focus solely on developing that memo until it was complete. If I 'hit a wall' with my memo writing while there remained further interviews to be transcribed or coded, I would occasionally continue with some of this work, but this was not an approach I would encourage. To I concur with Lempert's (2007, pp. 253–254) recommendations regarding reviewing and reflecting on earlier memos in order to overcome sticking points and find new routes forward. The best results came when I pushed through the 'wall' as with each new memo, my 'framework' of understanding, and therefore my coding, would evolve,

sometimes in unexpected and novel directions that changed the way my future coding and memo-writing was approached and/or framed. An example of this would be how after completing Memo 9 'Slipping' a new heuristic concept was interwoven into my thinking and my writing. In combination with 'creaking', 'slipping' profoundly changed the way I thought about how members experienced tensions.

While I had a sense as to areas I wanted to explore with memos, there was no pre-ordained order to the memos I ended up writing. The most logical set of memos were the first five I wrote; I believe this was the result of having transcribed all five interviews first and then decided on how best to explore the resultant coding structure. However, my approach for most of my analysis involved balancing where I felt there were 'gaps' in my analysis and the ideas, notions, themes, feelings that were speaking to me from the coding and previous memos. This more organic and 'grounded' technique meant that I would often change my mind about what memo to write next, either after finishing the previous memo or after finishing a piece of coding. Charmaz (2006, pp. 80–81) provides a useful distinction between 'early memos' and 'advanced memos' that provided me with both guidance and reassurance as I engage in this challenging bur rewarding analytical activity.

A further point for clarification is that I did not return to my memos. They were not 'works-in-progress' that developed over time, more cairns marking the route(s) explored along my analytical journey. Once a memo was complete, that was it. After I had received my final set of feedback from my supervisors, I would save the 'finished' memo as a PDF, print a copy, as well as upload it to my NVivo project. This meant that I had paper copies to be referred to or carried with me for further reading and reflection as well as versions readily accessible within NVivo; although I never returned to them for recoding. As noted above, I would often return to earlier memos as a means of finding ways forward in my analysis and improving my approach to memo-writing. In some cases, there were specific ideas or angles to be explored that felt substantial enough to justify a stand-alone memo. For example, Memos 9 and 11 in which I developed the heuristics of 'slipping' and 'creaking'.

Later in the project, my memo-writing process began to focus on integrating elements from earlier memos as opposed creating new material from the raw data and coding. I reflect on this in the following sub-section.

3.5.4 Saturated closure

As noted at the start of this section, grounded theory involves a form of sampling known as 'theoretical sampling'. This differs from conventional qualitative approaches to sampling in that it is does not serve as the departure point for a research project. It follows a period of initial sampling wherein preliminary data are purposively collected. It serves to describe the process of using analytic memos, initial coding, and focused coding to guide further collection. As such, theoretical sampling is based on the principles of comparison, reflection, and reflexivity; it is the means by which we move toward "theoretical elaboration and refinement" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 100).

Theoretical sampling continues in a cyclical manner until a category, enriched through theoretical coding, is 'saturated' with data. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998) this saturation point is reached when "(a) no new or relevant data seem to be emerging regarding a category, (b) the category is well developed in terms of its properties and dimensions demonstrating variation, and (c) the relationships among categories are well established and validated" (p .212) According to Charmaz (2005), determining the point at which saturation, and thus closure, occurs presents one of the more contentious issues in grounded theory. In particular, issues arise when grounded theorists make claims of achieving theory on the basis of limited material. In this, the criterion of 'saturation' itself is the central problematic. It is a somewhat vague criterion because it relies on the subjective decision of the researcher as to when they have enough data to warrant not collecting any further primary or secondary materials. In acknowledging the critiques levied on the basis of saturation, Charmaz poses the questions of, 'What does saturation mean?' and 'To whom?'. Morse (1995) accepts the definition of 'data adequacy' and an operationalises it as "collecting data until no new information is obtained" (p. 147). Indeed, when saturation is used to justify or excuse small samples it diminishes the credibility of grounded theory as a methodological approach.

This study involved something of a twist on the orthodox grounded theory practice of iteratively returning to the field following successive rounds of analysis. Instead, my fieldwork and analysis intertwined until there was no more fieldwork to be undertaken. At this point, I kept returning to the data, exploring new avenues or attending to previous ones that had grown through coding or seemed perhaps more significant than they had done. This process continued until I and my supervisors began to reflect that fewer novel ideas were emerging, four clear streams (Individual, Cultural, Structural,

Decision-making) had gained definition, and the relationships or golden threads connecting these had become increasingly well established. Memos 14, 15, and 16 had started to reflect this shift in the level of analysis, feeling more and more conceptual. Memo 17 on the other hand felt like something of a step backwards, an avenue that had not been directly attended since Memo 4 nor seemed as interconnected at others. Thus, in Memos 18 and 19 I turned to capturing the essence of the main categories as well as their interconnectedness. Finally, in Memo 20 I started the process of putting these together in a coherent structure from which I then moved to the process of writing-up my empirical chapters. I believe that the writing-up of these chapters played its own role in my analytical journey, reflecting the 'constant comparative' practice that is central to grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As the insights and ideas took more solid form, knots that I was aware of and others I was not began to be worked over and unravelled. Explored in detail in Chapter 4, the theory that I constructed through this process focuses on understandings of democratic organizing as an ongoing process of balancing contradictions in which members experience the 'creaking' and 'slipping' of structures and practices as they strive to sustain 'relevance' and stay close to the 'Goldilocks zone'.

3.5.5 Writing-up

> The phrase "writing up" suggests that, before you write, you must already have the meaning, the findings, and the answers in your head. Thinking that you must first have it all figured out is bad. Very, very bad. This belief just encourages pain and procrastination. (Tracy, 2020, p. 322)

As highlighted in the quote from Tracy, the 'writing-up' stage can, and did, come with a sense of finality. However, for qualitative researchers, writing-up is in fact an extension of the analytic process. Tracy emphasises that the notion of 'writing-up' is a hangover from positivist practice. She likens qualitative research to the work of an artist or sculptor as opposed to the process of writing-up a chemistry experiment. Through the iterative process of writing, making mistakes, getting stuck, and finding new pathways qualitative researchers "come to know" (Tracy, 2020, p. 322). Thus, the creative process is more akin to play than to the reporting of experiments.

Charmaz (2006) spoke to this process in the context of CGT. She explained that when 'pulling the pieces together' it is to be expected and welcomed that further insights will

be generated, ideas will interconnect in previously unidentified ways, implicit arguments will be brough to the fore, and with each successive draft the research will grow more theoretical and comprehensive (Charmaz, 2006, p. 154). To this end, Charmaz (2006, pp. 155–156) suggested a series of reflective questions to assist with this process of integration and construction:

- Are the definitions of major categories complete?
- Have I raised major categories to concepts in my theory?
- How have I increased the scope and depth of the analysis in this draft?
- Have I established strong theoretical links between categories and between categories and their properties, in addition to the data?
- How have I increased understanding of the studied phenomenon?
- What are the implications of this analysis for moving theoretical edges?
- For its theoretical reach and breadth? For methods? For substantive knowledge? For actions or interventions?
- With which theoretical, substantive, or practical problems is this analysis most closely aligned? Which audiences might be most interested in it? Where shall I go with it?
- How does my theory make a fresh contribution?

When I started to 'pull the pieces together' I began by developing my conceptual chapter from the later conceptual memos and then moved to develop my four empirical chapters using earlier analytic memos. I dropped the memos I wanted to work with into a single document and began the process of crafting my analysis and findings. As noted in Section 3.5.3 regarding memo-writing, I used sub-headings as a way of either integrating or breaking up my analysis and extracts. Although I initially tried to hold on to my original memo content and structure, this proved limiting and problematic in places. As I opened to the process and allowed myself to be more reflexive, I found notions, ideas, and concepts fitting together in different and exciting ways.

In the following section I discuss the ethical considerations I accounted for during this research.

3.6 Ethics and critical performativity

The role of social researcher carries with it a degree of responsibility and accountability. Depending on the characteristics of a study or investigation, participants or even raw data may be exposed to a range of risks and this requires researchers to be aware of their ethical responsibilities; before, during, and after they have undertaken their research. In this section I reflect on my ethical responsibilities, my negotiation of access to the individuals and organizations studied, and how this interfaces with contemporary debate regarding 'critical performativity' (Spicer, Alvesson, & Kärreman, 2009).

My research was carried out in accordance with Bangor University's (2015) 'Academic Integrity in Research: Code of Practice' and followed the ethics procedures detailed by the College of Business, Law, Education and Social Sciences (2018). This entailed submitting an ethics application for approval prior to fieldwork being undertaken with a 'Participant information sheet' (Appendix 3.7) and 'Consent to interview and record form' (Appendix 3.8). The main challenge I encountered with this process was gauging when it was appropriate to present potential interviewees and case organizations with these documents. To begin with, I sent everything out as a 'package' attached to my initial email but later I started to make contact first and then follow up with more detail and documents once I had gained their attention and/or interest.

The Social Research Association's (2003) ethical guidelines identify that researchers have obligations to society, funders and employers, colleagues, and to participants. In this investigation, the primary area of risk, and therefore ethical responsibility, was the need to protect both the participants and participating organizations; both at the time of carrying out the research and following its publication. Protecting participants involves respecting their rights, interests, and sensitivities (Spradley, 1980, p. 21). Murphy and Dingwall (2001) distinguish between 'consequentialist' and 'deontological' ethical concerns; consequentialist approaches focus on the outcomes of research whilst deontological approaches focus on the inherent rights of research participants. Murphy and Dingwall (2001, p. 339) highlight the list of areas of ethical concerns from Beauchamp (1982, pp. 18–19) as a typical combination of both deontological and consequentialist issues:

- 'Justice': that people who are equal in relevant respects should be treated equally;

- 'Autonomy' or 'self-determination': that the values and decisions of research participants should be respected;

- 'Non-maleficence': that researchers should avoid harming participants;

- 'Beneficence': that research on human subjects should produce some positive and identifiable benefit rather than simply be carried out for its own sake.

With respect to treating all participants equally, I ensured their right to autonomy or self-determination was respected by making them aware of the voluntary nature of the interviews and instances of observation. Likewise, the consent form I produced (Appendix 3.8) clearly informed them of their right to withdraw. Furthermore, prior to and at the start of my interviews and observations I sought to be as transparent as possible with the research process by being clear from the outset with regards to the purpose and objectives of the research.

My interest in the challenges that have been overcome and are being faced by WCs necessitated some difficult avenues of questioning throughout my investigation. I tried to limit the extent of distress this might have elicited from participants by ensuring each was aware of their right to withdraw and being sensitive in how I presented and discussed these particularly difficult issues in my reporting. As noted in my reflections on interviewing earlier in this chapter, there were instances where participants expressed frustration, anger, and distress. In these situations, I tried to focus on my role as researcher, balancing expressions of empathy and understanding with allowing the individual to speak. At no point did I feel it necessary to entirely move away from a line of inquiry, but I did reframe questions and try to find more productive routes forward. Furthermore, towards the end of interviews that I felt had developed toward being especially negative I would try to ask a question that focused on what the participant did enjoy, like, or find appealing about their work and their organization. Invariably this resulted in participants expressing that their intense emotional responses were driven by how much they valued, enjoyed, or believed in the cooperative and the way they worked most of the time.

I have sought to ensure the consequences of my research did and do not cause harm through participation (non-maleficence), primarily by anonymising participants and participating organizations. While to some extent this is an effective means of reducing risks, due to the infrequency of WCs and the relatively heterogeneous particularities of

participating organizations, those familiar with the participating organizations will probably be able to recognise them and (some of) the participants. Tracy (2020, p. 89) describes this ethical challenge as 'deductive exposure'. I have sought to further reduce the potential for harm through identification by removing comments that were directed at specific individuals. Furthermore, the time that has elapsed between my fieldwork in 2018 and the completion of my thesis and publication of any data means that some distance from the challenges and tensions that were present has been achieved.

Likewise, I was confident that this investigation was not being carried out for its own sake and I believe its findings and conclusions will yield practical benefits for WCs and democratic organizing, both in the UK and beyond. But is this enough? I had thought through most of my ethical considerations in advance of my research and the assurances given or promises made to participating individuals and organisations came almost as standard; part of the 'research package'. I did not set out to harm anyone, I wanted my work to be as credible as possible, and I wanted to present and talk about the work after the fact. Yet does this really mean I fulfilled my 'responsibility' as a researcher to my participants or to society more broadly? The debate surrounding 'critical performativity' (Spicer et al., 2009) in critical management studies (CMS) offers both cause for concern and comfort, but most importantly an opportunity to reflect further on the access I negotiated and the responsibility this carried and continues to carry. Spicer et al. (2009) argued that CMS could and should be "conceptualized as a profoundly performative project" (p. 537) One that assumes an active, caring, pragmatic, interventionist stance on specific debates as well as encourages progressive practice in management. They proposed that, instead of resisting performativity and seeking a critical neutrality, CMS scholars should attempt to question, challenge, and re-imagine practice through direct intervention.

Alvesson and Spicer (2012) extended on this position, focusing on a critical approach to leadership and in doing so eschewing 'dominant' functionalist and interpretive approaches. The critical approach addresses the dialectics of control and resistance as well as the ideological dimension of leadership. However, highlighting the predominance of a negative view of leadership within this emergent strand of literature Alvesson and Spicer (2012) argued the need for a "performative critique of leadership that emphasizes tactics of circumspect care, progressive pragmatism and searching for present potentialities" (p. 367) Through this turn, the authors suggested CMS could

move toward counteracting problematic authority relations whilst cultivating responsibility and acknowledging asymmetries between individuals in terms of experience, skills, and other characteristics. They indicated this would involve navigating the inherent tension between being 'relevant' to those engaged in leadership whilst being sceptical about 'leadership' itself. Alvesson and Spicer (2012) posited that through employing tactics such as, but not limited to, the 'tactics' proposed by Spicer et al. (2009) (circumspect care, progressive pragmatism, and present potentialities) a more reflexive framing and monitoring of leadership could be nurtured and facilitated. They suggested such activity would entail "collectively asking some profound questions about the scope and scale of leadership in organizations" (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012, p. 385).

Pointing to a dearth of published examples of such 'critical performativity' being put into practise, King (2015) provided four illustrative cases of interventions which examined the tensions and contradictions of 'the academic' interfacing with the world of work. Moving beyond the 'for and against' debates regarding the production of performative knowledge, King argued that direct engagement is more complicated and messier than proponents of critical performativity had acknowledged. However, he did not view these challenges as being prohibitive. Drawing on the work of Gibson-Graham (2006), King suggested these challenges should be viewed as integral features of practice, requiring the development of new sensibilities for conceptualising, theorising, and exploring the possibilities for action. He concluded that researchers could either withdraw or "find ways to live with and transform these power-relations and challenges which come with engagement" (p. 263). Pointing to other fields in which performative engagement is more established, such as urban anthropology and radical and feminist geography, King underscored the potential for 'successfully' producing meaningful research whilst navigating the inherent tensions of direct engagement. Indeed, only through such practice can researchers learn how to cope with and respond to such dilemmas; progressively maturing their capacities (citing Gibson-Graham, 2008). King surmised that while the potential for 'grand transformations' was perhaps beyond the present horizon for CMS, numerous small-scale interventions could have a positive impact on organizing and that working alongside practitioners can yield many opportunities for such interventions.

More recently, Butler et al. (2018) carried out semi-structured interviews with critical leadership scholars to explore how these academics engage with practitioners whilst seeking to maintain their respective critical positions in relation to the subjects and objects of their research activities. Their work further highlighted the challenges of direct engagement with respect to compromising the integrity of research as a result of practitioner demands and institutional pressures. Echoing King (2015), Butler et al. (2018) point to the inherency of dilemmas in performative engagement with practitioners. However, they went further in their criticism of 'critical performativity'; pointing to its propagation of the "myth of the 'heroic-transformational academic' who is single-handedly able to stimulate critical reflection among practitioners and provoke radical change in organizations" (p. 428) Their findings suggested that the concept in its present form was plagued by the inherent contradiction between its intention to challenge harmful and dominant discourse and structures and its own rise as a potentially harmful and dominant discourse. The implication being that 'critical performativity' risks moving from problematic heroic and idealistic notions of leadership to heroic and idealistic notions of academic practice, thus reproducing the problem it had initially set out to resolve. Butler et al. (2018) argue that the path forward for critical performativity lays in its proponents reflecting on and letting go of some of the more harmful elements of their own discourse and practice. In doing so they might manage to declutter and disentangle the confusing and contradictory position it has come to occupy. Alternatively, proponents might consider relinquishing the term 'critical performativity' altogether and simply focusing on enhancing 'practitioner engagement'. In making such proposals, the authors intended to provoke debate, yet in doing so they also wiped some of shine from critical performativity as a theoretical construct and as a practicable approach.

In summarising the debate outlined above, I suggest there are three threads. Firstly, there is the principle that researchers owe something to the individuals and communities they research; regardless of the extent or character of this engagement. Secondly, there is the assertion that research may increase in value and/or relevance by being more performative or engaged. Thirdly, that through performativity researchers risk subjugating or the individuals and communities they research to their own requirements or ideas. This is problematic for two reasons. On the one hand, researchers are not necessarily bound to seeing this change through nor to living with the consequences.

On the other hand, such imposing engagement inevitably changes the lived reality researchers might have wished to understand or observe.

The implications of this debate for my own research manifest on two fronts. First, with respect to the extent of my performativity and stance toward intervention in undertaking my fieldwork. Second, with respect to my post-research practitioner engagement. Addressing these in turn, this research would have been a rather different project had I set out to engage with practitioners with a view to actively addressing the tensions they were experiencing. Whether due to a lack of confidence or an awareness that I was not yet in a position to offer potential interventions, I did not set out to actively engage practitioners but rather to understand their experiences through questioning, encouraging reflection, and listening intently. As such, my access negotiations focused on obtaining opportunities to hear from as many practitioners as possible in order to facilitate capturing a rich and textured understanding of the 'realities' of aspirationally collectivist-democratic organizing in established and scaled WCs. Had I sought to engage more performatively, my approach would have likely been to obtain greater access to one or two WCs and spend more time with them in order to become more meaningfully engaged in their organizing and problem-solving. However, my chosen approach, which was distinctly un-performative, does not preclude having a meaningful and beneficial impact on the practitioners I engaged with and cooperative practice more broadly.

Turning to the second implication of 'critical performativity' for my research, I believe that my duty or responsibility as a researcher does not end when the fieldwork is done, my analysis complete, and my thesis written. Instead, I view this as only the beginning of my 'critical performance' as an academic. With my findings, concepts, conclusion, and the affirmation of my academic peers in hand, the task before me is to return to my participants and, in this case, the wider cooperative community and share what I have found, be open to their comments, questions, and perhaps criticisms, and seek ways to render my intellectual labours practically 'relevant'. I provide explanation of how I intend to do this in Section 9.4.1 (Implications and recommendations).

In the following section I reflect on the quality of my research using a set of philosophically and methodologically appropriate criteria.

3.7 Research quality

In crystallising the crux of Burrell and Morgan's (1979) work, Cunliffe (2011) stated that "there are no universal criteria with which to judge 'good' knowledge; rather criteria are based on the assumptions underpinning work within a particular paradigm" and goes on to highlight the assertion of "the need for more philosophically informed and diverse ways of theorizing organizations that reflect broader developments within social science" (p. 648). Therefore, grounding one's research in a philosophical paradigm, as I have done in Section 3.2, is critical to determining the basis upon which its qualities may be judged, and its contributions integrated into the wider body of literature.

The once-conventional, positivist goals of validity, reliability, representativeness, and generalisability are not appropriate for this interpretivist qualitative research. Building on the criteria proposed by Glaser and Strauss, the Chicago School tradition of rigorous study of context, and Christian's (2000) and Denzin's (1989) criterion of 'interpretive sufficiency' (i.e., considering cultural complexity and multiple interpretations of life), Charmaz (2006, pp. 182–183) proposed a set of four criteria suited to this approach: credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness. However, I evaluated this work based on an expanded set of eight criteria proposed by Tracy (2010): worthiness of the topic, rigorousness, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significance of contribution, ethical appropriateness, and coherence.

A worthy topic

My research is 'relevant' given the infrequency of these organizations despite their theoretical economic and social potential. It can be considered 'timely' given the tensions and strains our democratic and economic systems are currently under, particularly with respect to the rise of populism and simple answers to complex questions that call for greater and more nuanced democratic engagement and participation. I assert that this work is of 'conceptual value' in having investigated a gap in the contemporary literature and integrated a conceptual framework that unites a strong theoretical foundation with more practical literature. Likewise, I believe it is of 'practical value' not only to the handful of established and scaled WC in the UK but also to smaller UK WCs, the wider cooperative movement, and other forms of organizing seeking to maintain horizontality and/or sustained member engagement. Furthermore, this project was and remains 'interesting' because of the scarcity of such

organizations and their ability to provide insights into the potentials and limitations of contemporary human organizing.

Rigorousness

I conducted a preliminary literature review ahead of fieldwork and analysis. I personally carried out data collection through fieldwork over a twelve-month period. In total I collected five extended 'expert' interviews, forty member interviews, as well as observational field notes across three of four case organizations. Furthermore, I obtained internal documents from two case organizations that supported my understandings, analysis, and findings. During and in the months following this fieldwork I carried out gounded theory analysis carried out over twenty-four months, involving: extensive coding and annotating of all data, production of twenty extensive analytic memos building from early thematic groups to conceptual development to theoretical saturation. As explored in Chapter 4, I constructed my conceptual framework through the integration of strong theoretical foundations, practical implications, and integration with analytical constructs. Following the development of my conceptual framework, I undertook and produced an expanded literature review (see Chapter 2) and integrated this literature with my findings and conclusions (see Chapter 9). This reflective methodological chapter along with my considerations of research implications and limitations provide evidence of my self-reflexivity and are coherent with my stated philosophical position and research approach.

Sincerity

As noted previously in this chapter, consistent with my approach to producing analytic memos I wrote this thesis in the first-person and strove to ensure my participation and voice in the construction of this grounded theory project is consistently transparent and acknowledged. Furthermore, I included reflections and discussion regarding my personal motivations and philosophical positioning and sought to maintain this transparency throughout my writing. Likewise, I have remained open about the challenges I encountered and the limitations of this research.

Credibility

I achieved 'thick description' through my commitment to explicate the meanings identified in my analysis and providing extensive empirical material in support of my analysis (Tracy, 2020, p. 275). While access was limited, within these constraints I

managed to obtain insights from a range of different voices with diverse experience of my subject phenomenon. The combination of 'expert' interviews with member interviews undertaken across my four cases enabled me to move towards a position of 'crystallisation' (Ellingson, 2008; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2018). However, I acknowledge this research could have benefitted from additional sources of data and insights such as more extensive participant observation. Likewise, there could have been value in returning to my participants with my findings and asking them to reflect on these; potentially eliciting confirmations, disagreements, and reflections that could have enhanced my work.

Resonance

While the format and density of the thesis itself tends to limit its accessibility to wider audiences, I believe that my research is accessible and resonant. While qualitative research may not aspire to generalisability, its outcomes can be rendered transferable and 'naturally generalisable' (Stake & Trumbull, 1982). That is, through appreciation of findings and conclusions readers may intuitively apply them to familiar or novel situations. In Chapter 9 I make efforts to illustratively recapitulate my findings and conclusions in order to make them and their implications more digestible.

Significance of contribution

The contributions of my research are detailed in depth in Section 9.3, I consider these with respect to conceptual, methodological, and practice contributions. I believe my research makes several valuable contributions across these levels, in particular with regards to its rigorous analytical approach and secondly the heuristics it develops for exploring and understanding the contradictions of democratic organizing.

Ethical appropriateness

The ethical considerations associated with this project were discussed and reflected upon in the Section 3.6 of this chapter. I believe I upheld my ethical obligations throughout this project.

Coherence

I set out to understand worker cooperation better and contribute to the extant body of knowledge regarding these intriguing organizations. My interest was consistently in the experiences of members and, in combination with my interpretivist and constructivist

philosophical positions, this interest drove my adoption of CGT. This approach enabled me to gradually develop a thick and rich understanding of the subject phenomenon, leading to my constructing a conceptual framework involving the novel integration of theory. Ultimately, through extensive 'conversations' with my data, I produced a set of concepts and heuristics that not only have conceptual value but also hold value for practice. I connected these findings with the extant literature, carving out a clear theoretical contribution. I believe through the undertaking and production of this research project I have produced a work that is internally coherent (Nicolini, 2012, p. 217).

3.8 Chapter summary

The motivation and direction driving this project developed over time, from an initial interest in exploring organizational learning in WCs to investigating how members experience sustaining organizational democracy in established and scaled WCs. As highlighted in Chapter 2, extant contemporary research has focused on larger, more bureaucratic, instances of democratic organizations and smaller or looser manifestations of collectivist-democratic organizing.

I developed the following overarching research question:

– How do members of worker cooperatives that have aged, scaled, and are still growing experience the tensions involved with sustaining organizational democracy?

In support of this overarching question I established three sub-questions

– Where do tensions emerge in sustaining and expanding worker cooperatives?
– How do members make sense of and attempt to address these tensions?
– What are the implications for growing and sustaining organizational democracy?

My methodological approach also evolved over time, gradually letting go of a priori notions of 'applying' sensemaking literature and moving towards a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2005, 2006). This approach became central to my "coherent practical package(s) of theory and method" (Nicolini, 2012, p. 217). My philosophical position sits between subjectivism and intersubjectivism and is characterised by its pragmatist, interpretivist, and constructivist underpinnings. The

implications of this position for my research practice included an abductive research logic, subjecting data to rigorous analysis, and the aim of developing theoretical analyses; or theory-building (Charmaz, 2009, p. 127). Also of importance was my ongoing consideration of self-reflexivity regarding my role as researcher and co-creator in the research (Tracy, 2020). The outcomes of this reflective and reflexive practice are most evident in the first-person reflective approach adopted to my composition of this thesis.

CGT involves common practices of grounded theory as well as those of Chicago School constructivism and ethnographic research. The core practices include simultaneous involvement in data collection and analysis; constructing analytical codes and categories from data, using the constant comparative method; theory development during each step of data collection and analysis; memo-writing; and sampling aimed toward theory construction. CGT also draws on ethnographic approaches to explore settings and develop conceptual renderings of practice 'in situ' (Charmaz, 2006).

My approach resulted in a 'deliberately emergent strategy' that involved firstly interviewing five 'experts' before narrowing my focus and moving on to undertaking case study research with four WCs in the UK. In Phase 1 I engaged in a process of 'scoping' that involved interviewing five 'cooperative movement actors' (CMAs). Through this phase, the focus or 'quintain' of my research evolved, narrowing from an interest in the challenges faced by UK WCs to focus more specifically on how members experience the tensions and strains of sustaining organizational democracy over time and scale. In Phase 2 I engaged in a process of 'developing' the research through undertaking interviews and some observation across four case organizations. In order to select my case organizations, I created a set of six criteria regarding the geographic location (UK), identification as WCs, member ownership, collectivist-democratic prefiguration, age (>20 years), and size (50-200 members) of the WCs studied. I interviewed forty members across the WCs studied, including members with varying levels of experience and involvement in the control and coordination of the organizations. To the best of my ability I sought to anonymise all participants and organizations participating in this research

For data collection, I primarily used 'relatively unfocused semi-structured interviews' in capturing the dialogical data that provides the empirical foundation for this work. This was enhanced using participant observation where and when I was able to do so.

Two of the four case organizations studied for this project also provided access to certain internal documentation that was helpful in furnishing my understanding of these cases. I undertook grounded theory analysis of the data. This entailed iterative rounds of transcription, coding, and memo-writing. Coding moved through a process of initial, focused, axial, and conceptual development. Through this process I constructed a total of twenty analytical memos. Five analytic memos were produced from Phase 1, these then provided a framework for constructing a further twelve memos that continued to be primarily analytical but moved toward my conceptual understandings. These understandings formed the golden threads that I developed upon in the final three memos that progressively built toward the articulation of my conceptual framework and contribution. The analytical journey did not suddenly stop when I came to writing-up my research, it continued to evolve as I integrated my memos and sought to communicate my findings and analysis in a single, coherent document (Charmaz, 2006; Tracy, 2020).

With regards to ethical considerations, during the undertaking of this research I followed the requirements set by my institution; which involved the creation of participant information sheets and individual consent forms. I also sought to attend to the guidelines of the Social Research Association (2003) regarding my obligations to stakeholders and participants as well as on the implications of my research with respect to: justice and equality, autonomy and self-determination, non-maleficence, and beneficence (Murphy & Dingwall, 2001). I evaluated the quality of my research using a set of eight criteria tailored to interpretivist qualitative research: worthiness of the topic, rigorousness, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significance of contribution, ethical appropriateness, and coherence (Tracy, 2010). Furthermore, I drew on the contemporary debate regarding 'critical performativity' to consider my responsibilities to practice, reflecting on the decisions I made in undertaking this research and what responsibilities I bear following its apparent conclusion.

The following chapters are structured based on my CGT approach. In Chapter 4 I introduce my conceptual framework and core findings. Chapters 5, 6, 7, and 8 are empirical chapters that respectively address the individual level, cultural level, structural level, and decision-making level of analysis. I bring my findings and conclusions together through discussion in Chapter 9.

4.0 Conceptual frame

In Chapter 2 I argued there is both a practical and a conceptual need for further exploration of established and moderately scaled collectivist-democratic worker cooperatives (WCs). These WCs sit somewhere between smaller collectives, social movement organizations (SMOs), or WCs and the few examples of much larger WCs and employee-owned companies (EOCs) that exist and, more to the point, have been attended in the extant contemporary literature. Specifically, there is a need to develop our understanding of how time and scale affect members' ability to balance organizational structuration and sustain a shared worldview in ways that are coherent with 'prefigurative cooperation'. That is, aspirationally collectivist-democratic organizing. Such medium-size collectivist-democratic WCs are few, fraught with issues, and open to criticism from newer, smaller, or more 'radical' organizations. However, that these organizations have survived for more than two decades and continue to aspire, at the very least, toward collectivist prefiguration suggests they hold insights for furthering our understanding of the practices and contradictions of sustaining democratic organizing.

In Chapter 3 I introduced and discussed the constructivist grounded theory (CGT) approach I adopted. Through iterative cycles of data collection, coding, and memo-writing I developed a rich body of empirical findings and from these constructed my conceptual and theoretical contributions. This chapter marks the beginning of my presentation of this grounded theory research, providing a first answer to my overarching research question:

– How do members of worker cooperatives that have aged, scaled, and are still growing experience the tensions involved with sustaining organizational democracy?

In Section 4.1, I introduce the three strands of literature I draw upon for my conceptual framing: practice theory, relational process ontology, and integrative process. In Section 4.2, I introduce the four emergent concepts developed from my analysis: 'creaking', 'slipping, 'relevance', and the 'Goldilocks zone'. In Section 4.3, I illustrate how my four emergent concepts speak to the 'creaking' and 'slipping' that manifests in the interpersonal space, 'headspace' of members, and the physical spaces in which cooperation takes place.

4.1 Relating and integrating in landscapes of practice

In this section I introduce and discuss the three golden threads I wove together to construct my conceptual framework. I firstly turn to practice theory, specifically the literature regarding 'landscapes of practice' (LoPs) which I use as a foundation for conceptualising established and scaled WCs as organizations. I then introduce the 'relational process ontology' (RPO) that provides philosophical scaffolding for my conceptualisation of sustaining prefigurative cooperation before moving on to discuss Follett's 'integrative process' and its implications for organizing. Finally, I bring these three threads together in an extended section summary.

4.1.1 Landscapes and communities of practice

Practice theory is not a single theory but a collection of a wide range of conceptual approaches to practice. Nicolini (2012, p. 214) identifies the following five understandings of 'practice' that are broadly shared across streams within the practice theory literature and thus offer a frame of 'family resemblances':

- Practices constitute the horizon within which all discursive and material actions are made possible and acquire meaning
- Practices are inherently contingent, materially mediated, and cannot be understood without reference to a specific place, time, and concrete historical context
- Practices are social accomplishments, even when they are attributed to individuals. Social actors (and actants, in radical theories such as actor network theory) emerge as part of a web of relationships and mutual dependencies on which they depend and to which they contribute
- While practices depend on reflexive human carriers to be accomplished and perpetuated, human agent capability always results from taking part in one or more socio-material practices
- Practices are mutually connected and constitute a nexus, texture, field, or network. Social co-existence is in this sense situated in the field of practice, and is both established by practice and establishes practice. At the same time, practices and their association perform different and unequal social and material positions, so that to study practice is also to study power in the making.

No single theory or approach necessarily subscribes to all five of these 'tenets' of practice theory. However, Nicolini suggests that their interwoven similarities enable the possibility of mobilising them together, not through unification but rather by recognising their strengths and using these to enrich our overall understanding, while still acknowledging their differences. This is referred to as the 'toolkit approach' (Nicolini, 2012, p. 214). RPO and Follett's integrative process can be combined with practice theory in this manner because of their many philosophical similarities and, perhaps more importantly, lack of incompatible differences (Bartels, 2017). The utility of incorporating LoP is that it helps to operationalise RPO and integrative process in an organizational context. That is, it helps to understand and analyse how Follett's ideas are enacted, negotiated and contested in practice, what tensions and issues emerge, and what organizational practices there are to deal with these.

Stemming from a stream of practice theory that focuses on practice as tradition and community (Nicolini, 2012, pp. 77–95), the idea of LoPs was introduced by Wenger (1998). It builds upon earlier work regarding CoPs and situated learning through legitimate peripheral participation (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991). This literature was drawn upon by Langmead (2016, 2018) in developing her conceptualisations of autonomy as a 'collective project' and processes of 'individual-collective alignment'. It was also cited by Thompson (2015, p. 5) with regards to the formation and dissemination of specialised knowledge, as well as Johnson (2006, p. 261) with regards to the requirement for full participation if communal practices are to overcome hegemonic relations in organizing.

The simple yet versatile concept of an LoP replaces and extends the notion of a 'body of knowledge' belonging to a given 'profession': a discernible grouping of practitioners, in this case members of WC or '(worker-)cooperators'. An LoP consists of a complex system of CoPs and the boundaries between them. They provide a broad social perspective on professional learning, and learning more generally (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 13). The level at which we ascribe the label of 'landscape of practice' depends on the level at which we analyse its constituent CoPs. At a higher level we can view prefigurative worker cooperation as an LoP composed of organizations and individuals that form CoPs. However, a WC may also be described as an organizational LoP in which you can identify multiple CoPs: various teams, working groups, coordinators, and informal groups with political or social affiliations.

As such, we need to be aware that the concept of a 'landscape' or 'community' of practice is flexible and relative to the level of analysis or discussion.

In a complex LoP, various CoPs are potentially engaged in not only practicing their occupation but also in researching, teaching, managing, regulating, and many other dimensions of the practice (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 15). Likewise, CoPs develop their own histories, domains, and regimes of competence. 'Regimes of competence' describes the dimension of knowing negotiated and defined within a single CoP, whereas the concept of 'knowledgeability' manifests in the individual practitioner's "relations to a multiplicity of practices across the landscape" (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 13). Individuals may exist within and across multiple communities and landscapes. Their relative identification or dis-identification can be described using three interdependent and interwoven modes: engagement, alignment, and imagination (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, pp. 13–21).

'Engagement' refers to the most immediate relation to the landscape of practice; it involves direct interaction with experience of the practice. 'Engagement' is generally located at the level of the CoP but can also involve exploration of boundaries and even other CoPs. 'Imagination' refers to the images and conceptual understandings practitioners develop in relation to the landscape or CoP that in turn enable them to understand who they are in relation to said LoP or CoP through location and orientation.

'Alignment' refers to the congruence between the practitioner in relation to coordination, rule-following, and the implementation of intentions. This is not a one-way process of acquiescence but rather a two-way process of relating between the practitioner and the LoP or CoP. 'Alignment' serves as the central element of a CoP's local 'regime of competence' but is also critical to the coherence of the broader landscape in terms of values, strategies, rules, and problem-solving.

'Imagination', as with engagement, takes place first and foremost in the CoP as "members make assumptions about each other, recall the past, and talk about their future" (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 22). However, 'imagination' can also carry practitioners to and across the boundaries of the LoP; enabling them to experience identification far beyond their immediate engagement.

The boundaries that define and delineate different CoPs and LoPs are unavoidable and are never unproblematic. They may not be formally demarcated, but they are

unmistakable. As a result of diverse histories and regimes of competence, boundaries are spaces where misunderstandings and tensions naturally arise, yet they are also spaces of learning and development (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, p. 17). Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner note that (2015, p. 23) practitioners develop their representation and comprehension of the landscape through:

– Experiences of their own competences in CoPs
– Participation in or with multidisciplinary working (that necessarily involves boundary encounters)
– Their relative (dis)identification with various practices through engaging, imagining, and aligning
– Struggles at and with the boundaries between CoPs, and the boundaries of the LoP itself.

CoPs and/or landscapes are sustained through the creation of 'boundary objects' that give them definition and legitimacy. These may be described as being either 'instrumental' (structures) or 'visionary' (concepts) (Kubiak, Cameron, et al., 2015).

– 'Instrumental boundary objects' include artefacts, symbols, and structures such as titles, proficiency frameworks, and structures of authority and/or accountability.
– 'Visionary boundary objects' include values, principles, and shared visions and are particularly important for the internal and external alignment of the CoP and/or landscape.

Boundary objects are not only important for sustaining practice but also support boundary encounters and enable connections to take place. Kubiak et al. (2015, p. 82) highlight the importance of boundary objects to collaborative working and the sharing of practice across boundaries. Boundary objects facilitate communication and coordination by way of rendering cross-boundary alignment meaningful, offering shared language and frames of reference, and incorporating information sharing standardisation (Benn, Edwards, & Angus-Leppan, 2013; M. Edwards et al., 2020; Hadfield, 2005; Oborn & Dawson, 2010). However, although boundary objects enable connections to be made, they do not ensure or enforce consensus of meaning across CoPs and LoPs.

We are all 'boundary creatures' in the sense that we each have our own unique sets of CoPs and LoPs across which we work, raise children, study, and socialise (Kubiak, Cameron, et al., 2015, p. 65). The extent to which they overlap or are kept separate is in part determined by individual choices and in part a result of inherent congruencies and incongruences. This multi-membership entails our having varying identities across our landscapes yet these identities require an ongoing process of reconciliation in order for us to sustain as sense of coherence (Wenger, 1998). The modulation of our identities across landscapes can be explored and explained through the modes of identification: engagement, imagination, and alignment. The extent of this identification, as perceived by the individual (subjective) and by others (intersubjective), affects the 'legitimacy' and 'accountability' of the practitioner's participation in the CoP and LoP along with their perceptions of boundary objects (Kubiak, Fenton-O'Creevy, et al., 2015).

Within and at the boundaries of CoPs and landscapes tensions emerge around the varying extents to which individuals and groups 'identify'. This requires the negotiation of ways to cohere. Echoing both Follett and Maeckelbergh with respect to 'constructive conflict', Edwards (2010) argues this should not be through acquiescence to a group norm but through a process of collective negotiation that reflects inherent diversity. While all individuals experience multi and hybrid memberships that involve ongoing boundary encounters, some play a greater role in connecting and negotiating across boundaries.

These 'brokers' work at the boundaries of CoPs and the landscape (teams, departments, organizations, fields of expertise), connecting practices, introducing new practices, and facilitating cross-boundary experiences (Burt, 2005; Wenger, 1998). 'Brokering' is understood as an activity fraught with potential emotional and practical challenges, in particular around legitimacy and accountability. 'Brokering' involves, though is not limited to:

- Building trust in order to increase legitimacy
- Drawing together different types of information
- The creation of boundary objects that serve as bridges across CoPs and landscapes (e.g. common frameworks and/or shared visions)
- Defining and determining who needs to be involved in encounters
- Sustaining cross-boundary relationships

Burt (2000) highlights how the extent to which a broker is viewed as 'legitimate' by other practitioners affects their ability to influence, facilitate, and generate new boundary interactions. Their liminal existence is predicated on finding means of rendering practice 'relevant'[9] across CoPs' regimes of competence and landscape's knowledgeability (Kubiak, Fenton-O'Creevy, et al., 2015, p. 82).

These understandings of LoPs, CoPs, identities, boundary objects, and brokering provide a frame for conceptualising WCs as instances of 'organizing'. I next turn to RPO which provides a philosophical frame for conceiving of 'integrative process' in established and scaled WCs.

4.1.2 Relational process ontology meets Follett

Follett has inspired many organizational studies; for example, her work is drawn upon in the sensemaking literature. Colville, Brown, and Pie (2012, p. 8) refer to the notion of 'organizing of experience' as never being wholly 'disinterested'. Weick (1995, 2010) himself draws extensively on ideas from Follett's 'Creative Experience', underscoring her conceptions of life as an organizing process and reality being in the 'knowing'. That is, knowledge not as a fixed state but as a continuing activity; using verbs and gerunds to emphasise the 'activeness' of life, "the value of nouns is chiefly for post mortems" (Follett, 2013a, p. 88). However, within the literature on cooperatives and prefiguration, Follett's presence is far less evident. O'Connor (2001) highlights Follett's influence on the writings of Ordway Tead (1891-1961) regarding industrial democracy. Chen (2016) notes the influence of Follett's emphasis on integrating interests on her own concept of 'communification'. That is, "the infusing of actions with meaning and infusing actions with meaning and values that emphasized individual persons' connection with the larger collective" (Chen, 2016, p. 88). Maeckelbergh (2009) acknowledges the influence of Follett's conception of 'power-with' as a means of emphasising "the collective, constructive and horizontal nature" (p. 239) of what Maeckelbergh calls 'prefigurative power'.

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[9] Here I use my concept of 'relevance' introduced later in this chapter and developed through the empirical chapters to follow.

While there seems to be a peripheral awareness of Follett's work, there are also clear points where either her influence or synergies with her work have somehow been missed; such as in Maeckelbergh's (2009) exploration of 'conflictive spaces' (pp. 99-138). As highlighted by Stout and Love (2015a, Chpt. 1), it is possible that her influence has been indirectly obscured by authors due to a lack of prominence and recognition resulting from her being both a woman and something of a radical thinker. This has since been compounded by some of her ideas having since been 'claimed' in absentia. Where Follett's works have more consistently maintained a following is in the field of public administration (for example Bartels, 2014, 2015; Bartels & Turnbull, 2019).

Following the reframing of Follett's work in RPO and Whiteheadian philosophy by Stout and Love (2015a), my sense is that it offers both a philosophical grounding and a substantive, progressive, democratic theory, which together provide an integrated framework for understanding the sustaining of direct democracy in formal organizations, in this case WCs. RPO does not so much change the meaning of Follett's work as offer it a new energy and clarity of purpose, particularly when contextualised in democratic organizing. In it we see a shift away from a focus on pre-determined values and a priori frameworks toward determining processes such as becoming, learning, and, of course, relating and integration. The keystone of this ontology is the recognition of the relationships and interconnections that facilitate the integration of difference through inclusivity and authentic participation in self-governance (Stout & Love, 2015b, p. 464).

Ontologically, the relational process of integrating can be described as "one-becoming-through-many" (Stout & Love, 2015b, p. 464). It adaptively embraces both stable and changing characteristics in the process of 'becoming' through the combination of potentiality, context, and living history. Furthermore, the embodiment and expression of potentiality is not separated but is consistent across all entities and all beings are constituents of the ongoing, dynamic 'whole'. Reflecting this ontology of 'becoming', characterised by the constant (re)defining of identity through co-creation, the psychosocial meaning of relational process involves the varied and spontaneous intersection and interpenetration of individuals within and with their environment. Thus, social bonds are innate yet can be qualitatively ameliorated or diminished and the individual's sense of self (identity) is both self-determining (internal) and contextually responsive (external).

The pragmatist epistemology of relational process holds that ideas become truths when they can be assimilated in a manner that is practical for experience: a structural position that rejects the notion of static foundational truths yet is not purely coherentist. Citing James (1955), Stout and Love (2015b, p. 465) describe 'pragmatic truth' as being based on what best works, fits, and combines every part of the whole. Truths can cease to be so when they lose their usefulness or coherency. Thus, logic, intuition, empirical observation, and social cocreation contribute to the evidence and social agreement necessary to justify truth. The ethical position of 'mutual answerability' embraces both individual agency and contextual determination through the interaction between the individual and the environment. As all beings are held as interconnected, RPO features a shared philosophy of community with an ethic of mutual care. 'Relatedness' and 'relating' are central to this position; in the multidimensional cocreative process, individuals are responsible for determining what is right and wrong both individually and collectively. They are likewise held to answer for these determinations by other individuals and the collective.

The ongoing process of cocreation is held as precluding the possibility of stable representation. Thus, a form of 'social anarchism' that synthesises hierarchy and competition serves as the 'political theory' of integration (Stout & Love, 2015b, p. 466). Furthermore, although ontologically and socially connected, one being cannot speak for another and as such social anarchism relies instead on the connectedness of dynamic and autonomous individuals as the foundation for political organizing. With respect to economic theory, participants are held as being more than simply 'economic actors', as in welfare capitalism or centrally planned economic theory; nor are they entirely independent actors engaged in free exchange or consumerism. Instead, they are "whole economic beings" (Stout & Love, 2015b, p. 467) engaged in the exchange of resources for mutual benefit through a process of continuous cocreation and mutual coordination; this is described as 'cooperative exchange'.

RPO goes hand in hand with a 'collaborative approach' to organizing that promotes participatory democracy as a way of life. It rejects positional authority and instead favours a dynamic, situational approach to practice. This approach fundamentally alters the orientation of organizing toward 'facilitation' and reduced 'permanence'. It ascribes a collective responsibility to all those involved in a given situation to participate in the cocreation and implementation of policy and its associated actions. Drawing again on

pragmatist thinking, in this process of collective problem-solving on the part of the citizenry (or membership), the locus of authority and thus manifestations of legitimate power are determined by the situation (citing Dewey, 1957, 1999; Follett, 1919, 1924, 1998). Stout and Love (2015b, p. 467) highlight Catlaw's (2007, pp. 192–199) set of conditions in "a politics of the subject" which state that:

- Neither unity nor atomism are acceptable, radical difference must be accommodated within dynamic compositions
- 'Becoming' occurs through generative, situational processes
- 'Organizing' is a process that cuts across human activity, it does not entail permanent social roles, it focuses on facilitating integrative process

Stout and Love (2015b) examine what this implies for the 'integrative individual'. They suggest this individual is "a unique expression of a complex, relational, multidimensional source" (p. 468) possessing an identity composed of both stable and ever-changing elements that is simultaneously embedded in and a cocreator of their social context. Their knowledge is pragmatically evaluated, its truth derived from its usefulness and coherency, while their concept of ethics is determined through the 'relating' of subjective and intersubjective determination and subsequent answerability. This integrative individual is not able to be represented or 'spoken for', they actively engage in political participation through 'social anarchism'; organizing and governing themselves based on cooperative exchange. In turn, the 'administered' become 'administers' of their cocreation and situation, drawing on this situational orientation and the functional capacities of themselves and others in determining if and where authority should be impermanently manifest.

4.1.3 Integrative process

Stout and Love (2015a, p. 230) suggest that three "cross-cutting principles" drive Follett's work: integrative process, the situation, and the law of the situation. As "the basic law of life" (Follett, 2003f, p. 40), 'integrative process' is held by Follett as sustaining and guiding all structures and practices. It serves as the foundation for her analysis of the metaphysical, the organizational, and the personal. Central to this process is the concept of 'circular response'. Circular response requires moving beyond the limitations of examining the cause and effect relationships that only describe certain moments in 'the situation' apart from the total process and requires us to account for

the 'evolving situation' (Stout & Love, 2015a, pp. 69–70). Human activity, or practice, is more than a response to a given stimulus; our understanding of practice evolves as we engage in in it and in the setting. In turn, the practice itself evolves and so the circular response continues. Integrating is the sum of the ongoing relating of all parts in what Follett (2003f) describes as "the total situation" (p. 55). The continuous nature of this process precludes the possibility of a permanent point of stasis and we may only experience or capture moments in the process (Follett, 2003f). For Follett, the focus of our interest and inquiries should always be the process rather than the product or outcome.

The second cross-cutting principle is that of 'the situation', which describes the space and time in which the integrative process is occurring. The situation is constituted by all the factors that are 'relating; it is therefore not a static concept but rather dynamic, iterative, and thus ever-evolving. Any given situation is interconnected will all other situations and cumulatively they make up what Follett calls the "total situation" (Follett, 2003f, p. 28). While individuals are passively connected through mutual influence within this 'whole', for collective action to manifest there is a need for conscious integrating. Follett (2003j) captures this engagement with and awareness of the situation in the notion of the "whole-a-making" (p. 180). Individual and collective identities and practice are the result of self-determination and environmental responsiveness to the situation.

The third cross-cutting principle delineated by Stout and Love (2015a, p. 232) is 'the law of the situation'. This underscores the situational responsiveness described previously with respect to the collaborative approach to administration in integrative governance. It manifests in Follett's pragmatic understanding that actions should be directed by and responsive to changes in the 'situation' in which they are contextualised. Through knowing, understanding, and negotiation, individuals and organizations can determine the law of the situation and respond accordingly. One of the most obvious manifestations of the law of the situation is in the determination of where and in whom 'functional authority' (or situational authority) should be temporarily placed in order to best attend to a given situation. Authority is given to the situation. Follett (2003e) posits that "If both sides obey the law of the situation, no person has power over another" (p. 83). By this we can understand that if authority, as a manifestation of power, is ascribed

by the group in response to the law of situation then it remains shared power, or 'power-with', as opposed to imposed power, or 'power-over' (Follett, 2003e, pp. 78–85).

The object of integrating is captured in Follett's concept of the organization as an 'integrative unity' or 'functional whole' (these are used interchangeably with 'integrative whole' or 'functional unity'). Integration is something to be achieved and actively engaged with by individuals; it entails iteratively attending to a number of interconnected processual elements, including a disposition or attitude, a style of relating, a mode of association, and an approach to action (Stout & Love, 2015a, p. 233). Follett (1998) describes the individual and collective's shared disposition as "the will to will the common will" (p. 49). In other words, the determination to make manifest a shared vision; embracing the relational essence of integrating. This disposition enables a cooperative 'style of relating' that in turn facilitates participatory association and interaction; only with genuine participation can effective cooperation be attained.

The co-production of knowledge, shared purpose, and choice of approach are all achieved through this 'participatory cooperation'. However, finding integration entails overcoming barriers such as diversity of identities and differences of interest and opinion. Follett (2003b) draws on the pragmatist perspective to address conflict in the process of integrating; she describes this as 'constructive conflict'. Her concept of conflict requires shedding preconceptions and assumptions of conflict as necessarily good or bad, or akin to warfare; that is, combative and inevitably produces winners and losers. Instead, it is simply "the appearance of difference, difference of opinions of interests. For that is what conflict means—difference" (Follett, 2003b, p. 1). She posits that conflict may result in one of three outcomes: domination, compromise, or integration. While domination of any kind is more obviously counter to the premise of collectivist-democratic organizing, in general but most certainly from a relational process perspective, Follett (2003b, pp. 2–8) argues that compromise too is flawed. Her scalpel cuts on the notion of compromise being synonymous with voluntary sacrifice; even if both parties only partially sacrifice their desire, neither really get what they want and "something is always lost" (Follett, 2003i, p. 201)). From Follett's pragmatist perspective, compromise is too temporary, futile, and fails to address the perpetual fluctuating and inter-weaving of the relational process.

Thus, integration is the only viable and productive method for dealing with difference and conflict. Integration involves synthesising interests instead of losing them through domination or voluntary sacrifice. Through integration, constructive conflict achieves three outcomes: all parties get what they want (although not necessarily what they knew they wanted from the outset), the total situation moves forward (the 'whole-a-making'), and by going through this process additional value is added to the community (Follett, 2003i). This approach entails making the heuristic switch from viewing parties as opponents to cocreators, acknowledging that every 'other' is part of the same 'whole' and therefore any conflict is not with that other but also with oneself; there is no longer a 'them' and 'us' in the process of finding integrative unity. While Follett (2003f) acknowledges that such integrative outcomes may not always be possible, she suggests it is only through engaging in processes with this altered mindset that we might reap what benefits are to be found.

Follett (1998) argues that "Majority rule is democratic when it is approaching not a unanimous but an integrated will" (p. 142). In this she clarifies that even in apparent unanimity there may be hidden domination and that only through a process of integration can true democracy be sustained. Stout and Love (2015a) highlight how Follett redefines a number of key concepts:

> (1) politics is a creative process of integration; (2) democratic values of freedom and equality are relational power-with; (3) the People is a dynamic, relational whole composed through a deeply nesting, broadly inclusive, and networking federalism; (4) representation and leadership are dynamic and determined by the law of the situation; and (5) the state is a convener and facilitator of integrative process. (p. 235)

Through these redefinitions we move closer to the ideal of 'democracy as a way of life' and can think more clearly about its organizational implications.

4.1.4 Implications for organizing

Stout and Love (2015a) summarise the implications of 'integrative process' of organizations as follows:

> Specifically, unity of command and managerial control are redefined as responsive to authority and responsibility that are situation-determined; planning and decision-making are guided by participatory collaboration rather

than managerial direction; functional division of labor becomes an ongoing process of integrative action; and hierarchical organizing style shifts to federalism and non-hierarchical coordination. (p. 236)

Thus, we are now able to envisage the kind of organization that Follettian integrative theory framed in RPO would produce, what its membership might aspire to achieve, and more importantly how they would seek to relate to one another. This picture bears remarkable similarities to both the mode of 'cooperative prefiguration' delineated in Section 2.1 and to the means by which process-oriented approaches suggest democratic organizing may be sustained (see Section 2.3). However, incorporating Follett enables me to contribute an integrated and thoroughly considered conceptual construct through which to explore and analyse collectivist-democratic organizing.

Indeed, non-hierarchical organizing is central to Follett's vision of 'integrative unity'. Structure must not only allow for but actually enable integration across the organization to take place (Follett, 2013b, p. 10). Vertical hierarchy makes integrated coordination difficult, if not impossible, because running up and down the 'ladder of authority' is inefficient. Follett (2013b) believed the answers lay with adopting federated non-hierarchical structures that emphasise the qualitative over the quantitative with respect to organizing and coordinating. In functional unifying, "legitimate authority flows from co-ordination, not co-ordination from authority" (Follett, 2003h, p. 132, 2003j, p. 189). She held that this approach could facilitate the necessary balance between centralisation and decentralisation that would in turn provide sufficient vertical and horizontal authority as to respond to the law of any given situation. In such non-hierarchical federations, the function and authority of each team and/or group would be emergent and thus responsive to the situation; with all participants taking part to some extent in all activities (Stout & Love, 2015a, pp. 163–164). On the foundations provided by this situationally emergent authority, the quality of the interconnectedness of members shifts from being driven by managerial control and reporting to that of 'mutual answerability'.

The label of 'mutual answerability' is used to underscore the difference with conventional performance-driven accountability and responsibility in the context of hierarchical, managerialist, organizing. For Follett (2003h) "authority and responsibility are derived from function, they have little to do with the hierarchy of position" (p. 128). Responsibility is not from the worker to the manager but from the

workers for their function. Furthermore, responsibility extends beyond the delivery of a given function. It extends to understanding how that 'part' fits into the 'whole' and to taking initiative toward considering where changes can be made in order to increase the harmony (effectiveness, efficiency, etc.) of the 'whole-a-making'. One potential problem with this approach is in the variability of responsibility. While a member's responsibility should not go beyond their function and concurrently their authority should not extend beyond their task, Follett (2003f, 2003h) suggested that imbalances in functional responsibility and authority should be smoothed by the shared responsibility of all to the outcomes of the 'whole'. A useful heuristic switch is to draw on the notion of 'power-with' and think of mutual answerability as 'responsibility with' (Stout & Love, 2015a, p. 165).

This understanding of mutual answerability goes hand in hand with the implication that members of the organization need to have in their minds a sense of the 'relatedness' of their functional position and part within the organizational whole. This is captured in my concept of 'relevance'. The switch from the 'particular' to the 'relational' is essential for functional unifying; indeed, "functional relating is the continuing process of self-creating coherence" (Follett, 2003j, p. 186). In order to participate effectively in the integrative process, each member must understand how their work fits into that of every other. Likewise, departments and teams cannot be independent of others or of general policy; all are part of the 'whole'. The influence, and therefore relatedness, between groups and between groups and policy making is ongoing, iterative, and cocreative; it must be understood as the process it is (Follett, 2003a, 2003j). For Follett, control is achieved through participatory coordination, as opposed to managerial direction, by developing a shared mindset of 'cooperation' (Stout & Love, 2015a, p. 171). Cooperation asks of the individual an open-mindedness and willingness toward engaging in and relating within organizing, it asks of the organization an openness and explicitness in exposing itself internally. While participatory coordination can be facilitated, it cannot be orchestrated in a top-down manner (Follett, 2003i).

Leadership is therefore predicated on the coordination of functional unifying and is bound by the policies and rules developed by the collective (Follett, 2003d). While it may have been easier to do away with the label of leadership altogether, Follett instead proposes an ideal type of leadership she labels 'leadership of function', contrasting this with leadership of personality or position. As opposed to being positional, emergent

leadership responds to the situation and abides by the laws of the situation. This type of leadership focuses on "evoking, interacting, integrating, and emerging" (Follett, 2003d, p. 258) in drawing-out the fullest potential from individuals in the organization. Leadership in functional unifying combines awareness of the 'whole' with empowerment of the 'parts' within said whole; leaders "must know how to create a group power rather than to express a personal power. He [sic] must make the team." (Follett, 2003d, pp. 238–239). However, in RPO the relationship between leaders and others is fundamentally altered; the relationship is reciprocal and reflexive. To this end, Follett (2003d) emphasises that, "we should think not only of what the leader does to the group, but also of what the group does to the leader" (p. 238).

Participatory operational and financial planning and decision-making provide essential foundations for effective functional unifying. These activities cannot be the sole purview of 'leaders', akin to an executive function; in order facilitate interweaving of the situations playing out across the organization (total situation), everyone must to some extent understand and contribute to these critical processes. From forming a shared purpose to the position of various functional units, participation is required to sustain the 'whole a-making'. This goes beyond sharing information, opening-up communication, or even consultation.

Follett (2013a) states that "our aim in the so-called democratic organization of industry should be, not to give the workmen a vote on things they know nothing about, but so to organize the plant that the workmen's experience can be added to that of the expert" (p. 20). Pointing directly to social movements and the cooperative movement, Follett underscores that "(t)he central aim of these, the most democratic of movements we have, is to train ourselves, to learn how to use the work of experts, to find our will, to educate our will, to integrate our wills" (p. 5). She warns against 'management' subjecting the will of the 'whole' to the knowledge of experts, for this remains a form of domination. Through participation we should always be aiming to achieve integration. Thus, where expertise is available, the question is how to integrate this into the situation in accordance with its laws and with the synthesis of its parts; this is how the legitimacy of democratic organizing through functional unifying is sustained.

4.1.5 Summary

In this section I adopted a 'toolkit approach' Nicolini (2012, p. 214) that combines practice theory, RPO, and integrative process.

The organization that can be conceptualised from Follett's integrative process closely resembles the prefigurative vision for collectivist-democratic WCs described in Section 2.1 combined with the means of sustaining them explored in Section 2.3. In this conception, boundary objects permit and facilitate the interweaving and legitimisation of authority, which I explored in Section 2.2. The authority that is invested in brokering roles, communities, and across the landscape flows from collaborative coordination, which is emergent and responsive to 'the law of the situation'. The notion of the total situation as the 'whole-a-making' evolving through cycles of 'circular response' speaks to the spiral I used to represent 'the organization' in the model I first introduced in Section 2.3, highlighted in Figure 4.1 with a red rectangle.

Figure 4.1 Sustaining prefigurative cooperation (II)
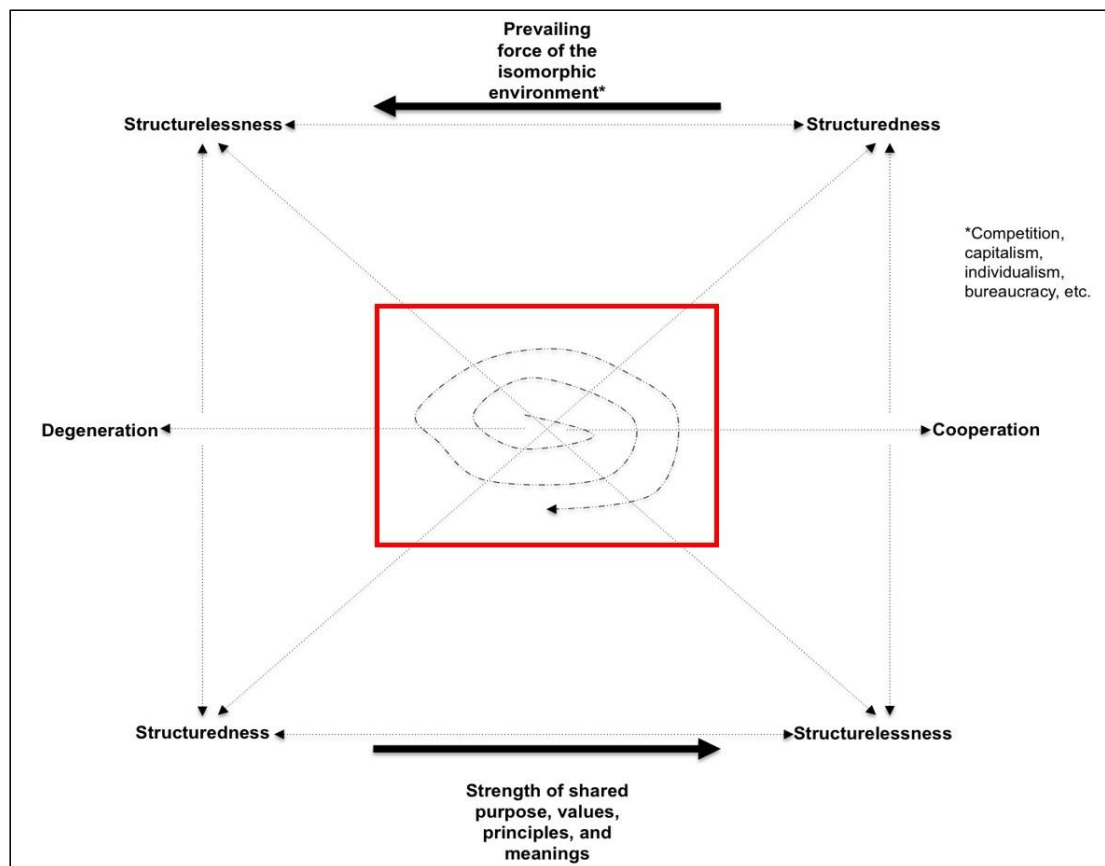
Although all organizations are continuously pulled between the forces of structuredness and structurelessness, WCs are special in that, no matter how structured or structureless

they may be, as long as they remain a WC they are bound to the ultimate autonomy of the individuals comprising the 'whole' through the one-member-one-vote mechanism. The implication of this is that WCs must above all else maintain and attend to the engagement of the individual with the 'whole-a-making'. That is, identification across the LoP. This is problematic for two broad reasons. Firstly, that as WCs age their membership almost inevitably changes; not only in that some members leave and new members join, but also in that the worldviews and practices of existing members shift over time. Secondly, that as WCs grow not only does the membership increase in number, in turn increasing the distance between individuals but also the organization becomes increasingly complex and thus increasingly 'distant' from the individual.

In the following section I continue to build my conceptual frame, introducing and establishing the four key constructs developed through my grounded theory analysis.

4.2 Four grounded theory constructs

In this section I introduce four grounded theory constructs, interweaving them with the conceptual frame introduced in the previous section and begin to illustrate how they are grounded in the empirical data. Through my grounded theory analysis, I constructed two heuristics for exploring and understanding the tensions and strains of democratic organizing: 'creaking' and 'slipping'. With these in hand, I searched means of communicating just 'what' was 'creaking' or 'slipping'. In something of a back-to-front approach, the notion of there being an aspirational 'Goldilocks zone' emerged and developed ahead of my locating and constructing the concept of 'relevance'. 'Relevance' is conceived as the emergent property that becomes strained or detracted from yet can potentially be attended to. The 'Goldilocks zone' captures the sense of a point of impossible prefiguration around which healthy collectivist-democratic organizing can be conceived as being in perpetual spiralific orbit.

I first turn to 'relevance' and the 'Goldilocks zone' before turning to 'creaking' and 'slipping'. I have sought to keep this section concise as all four constructs are further developed in Section 4.3.

4.2.1 Relevance and the Goldilocks zone

I conceive of the 'Goldilocks zone' as an impossible point of perfect prefigurative cooperation between healthy structuredness and structurelessness. It references the tale

of Goldilocks and the three bears in which the eponymous protagonist enters the home of three bears and proceeds to taste their porridges of different temperatures, ultimately deciding she prefers the porridge that is neither too hot nor too cold but 'just the right temperature'. Here, I replace the relative temperature of porridge with the relative structuration of organizing. The inspiration for using the 'Goldilocks zone' to refer to this position of impossible perfection came 'in vivo' from my interview with WCM04, a member of WC2 with a particularly keen interest in the restructuring of the cooperative:

> There's no reason why we wouldn't retain member-directorship for all members and that's certainly what this initial proposal is going to say... everyone retains that and we just look to push decision-making into those smaller groupings and to keep only the things we need to bring to everybody... at full-member decision-making level... I'm not quite sure what those things would be yet... we don't want it to be too broad; we don't want it to be too narrow... I think there's got to be some perfect Goldilocks zone that we have to find… (WCM04 - WC2)

In this part of our conversation WCM04 was articulating the struggle to devolve decision-making whilst retaining collectivist-democratic authority over the overall cooperative. As the heuristics of 'creaking' and 'slipping' developed and I began to cut through the wider experiential narratives across my case cooperatives, I realised how the idea of there being this impossible point of perfection, as captured in the notion of the 'Goldilocks zone', provided me with the missing piece.

The 'Goldilocks zone' connects the ongoing contradictions between more-or-less 'cooperative' 'structuredness' or 'structurelessness' within the frame of relational-process practice theory. In turn, it provides the springboard to articulate the essence of this point of perfection, which I captured with the concept of 'relevance'. I conceive of 'relevance' as capturing and communicating more than simply a sense of 'connectedness'. It is a sense of meaning or meaningfulness that encompasses the three modes of identification: engagement, alignment, and imagination (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, pp. 13–21).

I argue that, consciously or unconsciously, members are in a constant struggle to sustain the 'relevance' of the individual to the organization and of the organization to the individual. Although one could argue that everything within an organization or system

is in some however miniscule way 'relevant' to everything else, what I am seeking to speak to here is the notion that the 'sense of relevance' experienced by 'parts' of the 'whole' is the essence of what is being sustained. 'Relevance' is the emergent property from members, communities, structures, and practices across the LoP being engaged and aligned. In turn, it provides the resource for members to be able to imagine the possibilities of organizing and thus further develop their 'sense of relevance'. It can also be useful to perform a heuristic switch and consider the extent to which members experience a 'sense of irrelevance'; personally, toward another 'part', or toward the 'whole'.

4.2.2 Creaking and slipping

'Creaking' describes a sense of tension or strain on the WC as a 'whole', on a particular structure or system, in the minds and behaviours of individuals, or even the physical environment. We could imagine an old plumbing system or a wooden ship, that respectively 'creak' to keep water in or keep water out, with water being a useful metaphor for all that is either within or outside of the organizational landscape. As one WC member aptly put it:

> We'd hit a real sort of… not a rocky period as such… but a real sort of structure creaking phase because we had taken on so many people… (WCM04 - WC2)

'Creaking' is ongoing, it is an inherent, ever-present feature of the wider practice of sustaining worker cooperation. It describes the sound of change, the sound of people, practices, and boundary objects shifting. Looking back to Figure 4.1, 'creaking' captures and communicates the movement of the organizational spiral. The notion of 'creaking' calls for the ongoing attention of members in order to sustain organizing in response to the perpetually evolving internal and external environments.

'Slipping' describes a sense or observation that, as a result of tensions and strains on the organization and its constituents, a practice or boundary object has or is starting to become lesser, different, or even no longer a feature of the day-to-day organizational reality. It is crucial not to think of 'slipping' as the movement of a practice or boundary object towards being more 'cooperative'; it necessarily involves a reduction in the quality of 'cooperation' and therefore is indicative of 'degeneration'. However, this is not to say there is one true sacrosanct notion of what is 'cooperative'; instead I suggest there are positions that are more-or-less 'cooperative' (integrative) or 'uncooperative'

(disintegrative). When something is 'slipping', we are moving away from being a functional whole or integrative unity. WCM25 described their experience as follows, illustrating how the 'creaking' pressures on the organization are causing their responsive ability to 'slip':

> The plan has since been discarded because it was getting to be about 18 pages long and I kept adding things and other things kept slipping down so I've decided to take the pressure off myself to a certain extent for the first year or so... (WCM25 - WC3)

Thus, we might describe a practice or boundary object as 'slipping' away from a more qualitatively 'cooperative' position or towards a more qualitatively 'degenerative' position, for want of a better word. Returning to Figure 4.1, 'slipping' enables us to describe situations where:

- Something relatively structured shifts from being beneficially structured, perhaps providing valuable certainty, to detrimentally structured, perhaps becoming overly restrictive or oppressive

- Something relatively structured shifts from being beneficially structured to detrimentally structureless, perhaps becoming too ad hoc or collapsing in on itself

- Something relatively structureless shifts from being beneficially structureless to detrimentally structureless, perhaps becoming too chaotic or losing its form (ceases to exist)

- Something relatively structureless shifts from being beneficially structureless to detrimentally structured, perhaps becoming framed in a way that loses its utility to cooperation

It is worthwhile noting that these examples lack a sense of the 'total situation' when presented in isolation from the 'whole'. The 'total situation' in which a given practice or boundary object 'slips' from the landscape may well suggest that overall, the WC is moving towards a healthier quality of cooperation. Therefore, an argument might be made that for the time being some 'part' that would otherwise be considered beneficial to cooperation might fall by the wayside. For example, as will be explored later in this chapter, a WC might move to a larger premises in order to relieve a strained working environment but as a result increase the distance between departments; creating a

further 'slipping' toward departmental disconnectivity (degenerative structurelessness) that then needs to be addressed.

'Creaking' and 'slipping' are intrinsically interconnected. 'Creaking' may result in 'slipping', 'slipping' may result in further 'creaking', 'creaking' may be indicative of 'slipping' taking place or having taken place, and 'slipping' may be indicative of 'creaking' having taken place. However, while it is possible for there to be 'creaking' without 'slipping', it is not possible for there to have been 'slipping' without some kind of 'creaking' preceding it. 'Slipping' is inherently 'degenerative' but 'creaking' is not necessarily so. In other words, 'slipping' implies a more fundamental issue with the quality of cooperative practice. Although 'creaking' may be indicative of the presence of 'uncooperative' practices and boundary objects within the community or landscape, it may also simply be indicative of an organization aging and/or growing.

'Creaking' and 'slipping' may manifest in a broader or narrower sense. A narrower instance of 'creaking' might be the feeling amongst members that weekly organizational (LoP) meetings are taking up too much time (creaking brokering opportunity). A narrower instance of 'slipping' might be indicated by reports of teams having fallen into the habit of cutting short their weekly team-level (CoP) meeting and sometimes missing it altogether (slipping brokering opportunity) because they feel they are already spending too much time in organization-level weekly meetings. This example can be developed upon through considering how the 'slipping' quality of specific CoP meetings can create tensions between departments due to a lack of mutual understanding, thus creating further 'creaking' across the landscape. Members are continuously navigating organizational terrain that features both common and more specific pitfalls, temptations, and hazards.

More extensive instances of 'creaking' and 'slipping' are characterised by multiple instances of both occurring across several points in the organizational landscape. For example, if we combine the issue with weekly meetings and mutual understanding with the 'creaking' of an aging technological system, 'slipping' monitoring and discipline procedures due to 'creaking' member availability, as well as 'creaking' decision-making practices due to slow progress in updating processes to work with more members. Each of these instances of 'creaking' or 'slipping' may become mutually reinforcing; compounding the pressure on the WC and making it appear increasingly difficult to address an overall sense of 'creaking' and 'slipping' away from what might be broadly

considered 'prefigurative cooperative practice'. What constitutes a 'creak' or a 'slip' may at times be difficult to distinguish. An example of this was offered by WCM02, a reasonably long-standing member of WC2 with experience of the role of Chairperson.

> 'Fluid' isn't the right word... because you need the stability, but we've got some people in forum that have been going for years, and years, and years, and they just go because that's what they do. They go, and they're good, and whatever, but there's probably not the connection back to their team. So, then some teams are really well informed of what goes in the forum, because every team should, at the beginning of their meeting, have forum feedback from their rep about what's going on. There shouldn't be any surprises because they would have hopefully read their forum minutes, but it's just to, kind of, cement it and get that initial, 'Does anyone want to take anything back?' which is not happening at the moment. It's become a bit disconnected, I think, from the rest of the business and that what's we're trying to do, bring it more in-line and make people feel a bit more involved, and make the communication more two-way that it currently is. (WCM02 - WC2)

WCM02 described how the length of tenure of some members in coordination roles (brokers) had resulted in a 'slipping' of cooperative practice in terms of information no longer being effectively transferred through these lines of communication from the central hub to the various teams. In turn, this resulted in a sense of 'creaking' connectivity in the cooperative.

Individuals or small groups often become responsible for identifying 'creaks' and 'slips, determining their significance and extent, and communicating these to the wider membership. This has the potential to, for example, result in imbalances in the workloads of members, create problematic information asymmetries, or produce organizational structures or boundary objects that have not been consented to. This process can either be highly intentional, focused and forward-looking, or unplanned and reactive. The former bears risks of additional structuredness due to increased 'need' for coordination and control. The latter bears risks of structurelessness due to a lack of coordination and control resulting in poor quality outputs and outcomes. The ability of members to successfully engage in responding to 'creaking' or 'slipping' may be contingent on either their knowledge and experience or availability. This creates

challenges in terms of the potential for creating knowledge or participation hierarchies that can become oligarchic if unattended.

When solutions are proposed, a further issue emerges with regards to the ability of established and scaled WCs to collectively reach a new accord that changes the prevailing worldview. This can potentially lead to an erosion of shared meaning and understanding of the nature and purpose of the WC.

4.2.3 Summary

In this section I have introduced the four heuristic constructs from my grounded theory analysis and provided an initial overview into their usefulness towards an understanding of how members experience the tensions and strains of sustaining established and scaled WCs. In doing so, I provide a preliminary answer to my overarching research question:

 – How do members of worker cooperatives that have aged, scaled, and are still growing experience the tensions involved with sustaining organizational democracy?

I conceptualise WCs as perpetually 'creaking' as time passes, members interact, and both the organization and its environment inevitably change. This 'creaking' is a neutral force, neither inherently 'bad' but also not 'good' for the quality of cooperative practice. However, 'creaking' requires the ongoing attention of members. Where 'creaking' is left unattended or overwhelms members, there is a risk of 'slipping'. 'Slipping' is conceived as an inherently detrimental force. It captures how behaviours, practices, and boundary objects can move from being qualitatively more cooperative to qualitatively less cooperative or uncooperative. An important point to emphasise here is that this is not to say there is a sacrosanct 'single truth' as to what is or is not cooperative; it is more qualitatively nuanced. This links back to the model I reintroduced in Figure 4.1: 'creaking' is the inevitable movement of the organization, which is now understood as the spiralific 'whole-a-making', while 'slipping' describes how practices and boundary objects move from qualitatively more cooperative positions to qualitatively more degenerative positions.

My conceptualisation is extended by the idea of there being a 'Goldilocks zone' of cooperative structuration and practice, an unattainable point of perfection that individual members and collectives might aspire towards. This point is ever out of reach

yet is essential to the sustaining of prefigurative democratic organizing. In answer to the question of just 'what' is 'creaking', 'slipping', and also what is aspired to in the 'Goldilocks zone', I present my construct of 'relevance'.

'Relevance' is a property emerging from processes of identification and interaction through engagement, alignment, and imagination. While all parts of the 'whole' may be inherently 'relevant' to each other, the quality of the 'sense of relevance' experienced by members towards and from various 'parts' of the whole' can be qualitatively ameliorated or detracted from. This can be conveyed in the notion of members feeling a 'sense of irrelevance' either personally or towards another 'part' of the 'whole-a-making'. In this sense, the 'Goldilocks zone' may be conceived as the impossible point where the 'whole-a-making' is perfectly balanced between structuredness and structurelessness in such a way that members experience a 'sense of relevance' across the landscape or 'whole-a-making'.

In the following section, I explore 'creaking' and 'slipping' in more depth thorough the facets of the interpersonal, mental, and physical.

4.3 Spaces of creaking and slipping

In this section I establish and develop the heuristic constructs introduced in Section 4.2 using empirical data. Overall, my grounded theory analysis progressed along four main threads: the individual, cultural, structural, and decision-making 'levels of analysis' that provide my avenues of exploration in Chapters 5-8. However, in the process of developing the constructs of 'creaking' and 'slipping', I initially explored them along the three 'spaces' attended below: interpersonal space, headspace, and physical space. These were and remain useful for establishing an understanding of my constructs, particularly 'creaking' and 'slipping'. Furthermore, they also help set the scene ahead of the four main empirical chapters. I have illustrated my understanding of the relationships between the 'dimensions' of my analysis in Figure 4.2 below.

Figure 4.2 Dimensions of analysis (I)
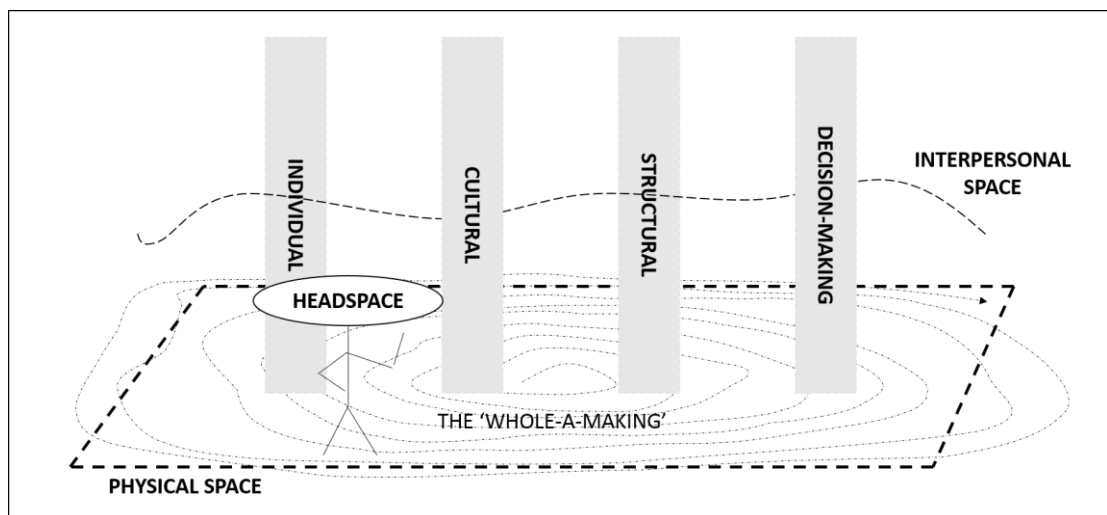
I first turn to the 'interpersonal space' which is the most extensive sub-section. I then turn to 'headspace' in which I explore experiences of mental tension and strain. Finally, I turn to 'physical space' which explores the challenges presented by the physical setting in which cooperation takes places.

4.3.1 Interpersonal space

Interpersonal 'creaking' and 'slipping' concerns the state of connectedness in WCs: between individuals, between the groups comprising the organizational structure, the systems that the organization relies upon to function, and the worldview that intersubjectively binds the organization.

> There was a big intake of probationers the year before whilst I was a casual worker, 2012-13, and in 2014 another load taken on. So we quite rapidly grew our membership and we had a lot of people sort of finding their way and sort of questions around roles and responsibilities and how you sort of make that step from probation and onto formal membership and how you sort of take ownership of the business when a lot of the time what was most needed was sort of hours downstairs rather than more roles being created for office-type functions. (WCM04 - WC2)

Above, WCM04, a long-standing member of WC2 who is directly involved in the cooperative's restructuring efforts, highlights how growth can precipitate disconnectivity. Growth can lead to the 'creaking' availability of space for general involvement and the assumption of specific responsibilities; limitations on members' ability to develop a sense of ownership of the organization; issues sustaining varied working practices (multi-skilling, the sharing of both manual and administrative work; or the development of specialised skills), and increased difficulty in developing members' understanding of the 'whole'.

> I'm probably one of the people who have been here a long time and have a lot of knowledge and understanding of processes, and what's happened in the past. It's quite hard to bring someone in to be able to think of things maybe in the way I can. A fresh set of eyes is great, a different view or different skills, but, yeah, I guess it wouldn't be a new problem for us. We kind of already have that issue a little bit because we have a little bit of rotation in some teams, in the Finance Team especially, which is really good... (WCM05 - WC2)

Although WCs are supposed to be open, accessible, democratic entities wherein all members are equal, WCM05, a long-standing member of WC2 with experience across a range of teams and roles, gave voice to concerns about too readily opening-up the organization to newer, less experienced members. This illuminated one of the critical issues at the heart of cooperation; a kind of chicken-or-egg scenario that asks a) if cooperative practice might 'creak' and 'slip' because of a lack of individual-level openness, or b) if it 'creaks' and 'slips because it opens itself to too great an extent of openness? This paradox speaks to the underlying tension between structuredness and

structurelessness captured in Figure 4.1. We can see how the structuration of the cooperative determines the extent of perceived or actual 'relevance' experienced by members, as well as the potential vulnerability of the organization to excessive openness or structurelessness.

The ties that bind

Both WCM06, a long-standing member at WC2 and WCM36, a long-standing member of WC4R, felt that as their respective cooperatives had aged and grown, what was once a more closely knit social group had become a more diverse mix of groups with relationships both inside and outside of work based on mutual interests and interwoven social lives. Likewise, WCM05 noted that established members at WC2 often had friendships that extended beyond the realms of work and, in common with many organizations, will talk about work at the pub or over lunch. While WCM05 questioned whether you would want to, or could, capture such relations and communications within a formal structure, they acknowledged that such fragmented informal groups can be problematic for WCs.

If not 'creaks' in their own right, informal structures and channels of communication may lead to, or be symptomatic of, 'creaking' in the formalised structure. Moreover, they can lead to 'slipping' towards informal structures as members turn away from or adopt alternative practices to the 'formal system' in order to meet their own needs or indeed what they believe are the needs of the organization.

> I mean people have lunch and communal meals and stuff and people have natural groups of friends that interlock between departments but I'm not sure if every Management Team member always disseminates everything back to their department as much as they should do... so sometimes they might get a bit of a story and it can be like, 'Well, what's going on with that department?' And it becomes a bit... which I found strange because you get that in traditional business... I use the term traditional to describe any business that isn't a co-op... you do get inter-departmental politics... I sort of thought there would be less of that in a co-op because everyone was working for the same... not working for the 'man'... so I thought there would be less of it but it's just the same as anywhere else. (WCM25 - WC3)

In the extract above, WCM25, a new member of WC3, brings together the issues of social groups, disconnected departmental relationships, and the 'creaking' of central coordination structures and the practices of brokers highlighted by WCM02 in Section 4.2. This underscores the interplay between 'creaking' and 'slipping' in demonstrating how 'slipping' or 'slipped' brokering practices contribute to the ongoing 'creaking' of interdepartmental relations. These insights illustrated how vulnerable established and scaled WCs are to disconnectivity, in contrast to WCM25's preconceptions.

Endurance meetings

Below, WCM07, a newer member of WC2, describes the sense of inertia and other difficulties that had been emerging in the meeting and decision-making process of a large team at WC2.

> I personally get very tired in large meetings and warm space. I find it really difficult to not fall asleep and I genuinely am completely falling asleep. Obviously, that comes across as being very rude and disinterested, but it is also agony to try and resist it at times. We'd have these meetings. It would be very frustrating for the chair because it's impossible to chair that many people. A handful of people would speak, the rest of the people would just... because it's so hands on and so visible downstairs. It felt like a lot of people were just looking forward to the opportunity to just sit down for an hour and not have to be doing physical work, rather than how to productively use this time. They're also very costly. Our wage bill is by far our biggest expense as a business, in terms of operating costs. To get 30 people in a room together for an hour is costing us a lot of money. […] They [full member meetings] are arduous, they are an endurance... they are hard to prepare for because you get a big pack of information. They are hard to participate in and to stay focused. I don't really think it works that efficiently, having 70 people in a room. I concede that we have to do it every once in a while... (WCM07 - WC2)

They noted their personal issues with the length and dynamics of such meetings, the challenge of engaging over thirty members simultaneously, and the expense of such a format. WCM07 went on to suggest that growth had made member meetings "arduous" and "an endurance" which is hard to prepare for given the large amounts of information provided. While these meetings need to happen, the system being used until recently

did not work particularly efficiently with seventy people in a room. WCM07 offers us a frank critique of how meetings, along with the information flow necessary to facilitate their effectiveness, can become strained and seemingly unsuitable for the scaled WC, 'creaking' at the points of connection.

Who's doing what?

In a similar vein, the policies and procedures in place or not in place can begin to show strain over time or as the organization scales. On the one hand, the absence of policies and procedures can become problematic. For example, WCM37 highlighted how at WC4W, despite evident 'creaking' due to the lack of a structured policy framework for an issue such as sickness, the process of creating and introducing a new policy where none existed before is often faced with member resistance due to an ingrained affinity with a more structureless, ad hoc approach and a fear of eroding individual autonomy in decision-making. On the other hand, existing frameworks can become ineffective. An example of the need to modify an existing framework is offered at WC2 regarding the need to adapt their rota system.

> We've just changed not necessarily the method but the representation of the method, and how we interact with the rota […] Before that, it had developed over time and it was just to represent the needs to the different teams but also to ensure that everyone had a little bit of this and a little bit of that, and no one had loads of time on one task and none on the other. Whereas now we're trying to move towards a system whereby there are uniform blocks at different times of the day so I'll have morning, lunch and dinner. The idea is that there's more continuity within the tasks. Before, it was quite fragmented because everyone's personal working hours are different and that kind of thing. There was lots of coming and going, and information flow was difficult. We're trying to work towards a system whereby there's a team for the start of the day, and a team for the middle of the day, and a team for the end of the day. There'll maybe be someone within that team that ensures that all the information then gets passed on to the next part of the day. We're trying to facilitate a cultural change for how people interact with staffing. It's a difficult thing. We've got this complex system and then it's complex as it is, and then every week there's holiday. I ensure that the rota is fit for purpose before holiday and then my two colleagues edit it every week based on who's going to be off to ensure that there are no

huge gaps in staffing in different places. That's changed a little bit recently. It used to be done that people would just do it in their heads, whereas now we have, like, a programme that my colleague has made. (WCM09 - WC2)

WCM09 explains the ongoing adaptive process and provides insights as to where or how 'creaking' had begun to manifest. These can be distilled to three points: the increasing complexity of, and fragmentation created by, the existing system, the changing needs of the organization and its members, and a need to move away from the Rota Team doing a lot of the work in their heads. These three 'creaks' are interrelated and yet each contributes to our understanding of how age and scale put strain on the structures that connect members. WCM09's narrative regarding the rota system at WC2 feeds into the following reflections from WCM05 regarding how approaches to responsibility and accountability can 'creak'.

Often things are identified with people, a project or something that's going on will be identified with a person but it's not because people are in multiple teams. It's not always clear exactly which team it falls under. I could give an example of looking at getting a new point of sales system, tills, checkouts, sort of stuff, which I am involved in and my colleague, is involved in. We're both in the IT Team; we're both in the Shop Floor Team as well. I'm not clear whether it's an IT Team or shop floor team project, or where that reporting should go. I think we should report it in both, it's not an issue, but there are probably other situations where things, kind of, fall between some of these because things are identified with individuals. I think it's maybe a bit of a hangover of an older working culture when there were fewer people and X would be, you know, the whatever person, and Y would be the computer person. You didn't really think about teams, so quite a focus on individuals for some roles. I think we're at a transition period where we're probably too big... not to have any individuals, obviously we have individuality, but to have things that are just free-floating responsibility that are assigned to a single individual that exists outside of a team structure or other kind of structure. (WCM05 - WC2)

WCM05's narrative highlights how the influence of previous approaches to structuring work may continue to shape the approach taken by members after they have lost their suitability and thus begin to 'creak', describing this as a kind of 'hangover'. WCM05 suggests that the size of the cooperative requires moving away from a more individually

oriented approach of responsibility and accountability to a team-oriented approach that asks for a clearer, and thus more formalised, frame. Again, we see the underlying tension between 'structuredness' and 'structurelessness', as even this experienced and committed member feels the pull towards increasing structuration and team-orientation and away from the structurelessness that gives more inherent primacy to the autonomous individual.

Passing judgement

Appraisal systems offer further insights into the 'creaking' and 'slipping' of existing structures. Of the WCs studied, WC1, WC2, and WC4R had appraisal systems in place. My understanding of the appraisal system at WC1 is limited due to having only undertaken a single in-depth interview, buttressed by insights from CMA2 and CMA5. However, what was interesting about WC1 is that they used a 'member job description' (MJD) along with more normative job descriptions to assess the 'performance' of members. This provided a framework by which not only the operational facets of a member's but also the 'cooperative' facets of their activities are assessed.

At WC2, the appraisal system was notably 'cooperative' in design. It involved contributions from the membership at large on a rotating basis, these were subsequently processed by the HR Team, presented to the individual in question in a report, and this was then discussed within an interview-like setting in which the individual, an HR Officer, and a member of the Training Team were present. At WC4R, the appraisal system is more representative of normative business entities in that it involved an interview between the HR Officers and the subject member without the open-sourced input from the wider membership seen at WC2.

At both WC2 and WC4R members indicated that the appraisal systems were 'creaking'. At WC2, this was suggested to be the result of a lack of engagement by the wider membership in the process; the HR Team were finding themselves having to prompt members to respond in a timely fashion. At WC4R, the appraisal system was 'creaking' because of the strain it placed on the HR Team in terms of the communicative process between them and the subject member to the extent that the members had decided to seek external assistance in order to resolve this and other HR related issues.

> I think the review fell by the wayside because it was when people didn't really write or didn't like writing a lot, you know? There were fewer and fewer people,

because it was a voluntary thing as well, bothering to do it. Certainly, when I joined, I think I had one review post my probation. This would have been 2001, 2002, which I filled in very copiously. After that, there was nothing. (WCM19 - WC3)

As highlighted in the extract above from WCM19, a long-standing member with experience across a range of departments, at WC3 the appraisal system had 'slipped' from practice. Interestingly, beyond mandatory quarterly reviews during probation, no system of appraisal was present, nor had been present, at WC4W at the time of my research.

Appraisal systems appear to present a challenge for WCs. I would suggest that in the first instance this is because they require a member or number of members to in some way assess the performance and behaviour of another member. While in a conventional business the 'structuredness' of hierarchy provides a framework within which an individual can be assessed by their superiors, in the absence of traditional hierarchy and given the primacy of individual autonomy appraisals raise the awkward question of who has the authority to assess the performance or contributions of others. While WC4W avoids this problem by simply not appraising full members and at WC3 the system has 'slipped' from practice, at the other cooperatives attempts to create and sustain appraisal systems remain fraught with complications, regardless of them being more or less 'cooperative' in their design.

I would argue that, at least in part, the issue rests with how appraisals are conceived and interpreted by members as primarily performance based as opposed to being viewed as providing a touchstone for checking that 'connections' are being made and sustained both by individuals and across the organizational structure. Except for the approach adopted by WC2 regarding the involvement of the Training Team in the process, the potential of appraisals as a means for addressing personal development was also seemingly neglected. Indeed, the underlying issue with appraisals more generally is that members feel disconnected from both their purpose and the process involved. Interestingly, the imminent reinstatement of an appraisal system at WC3 was viewed by WCM19 as a means of addressing some of the 'creaking' and 'slipping' that had resulted from strain on the cooperative; potentially relieving the burden of members having been "working very hard", facing "teething problems", and experiencing feelings of "neglect".

Uncooperative technology

At both WC3 and WC4W there had been recent overhauls of the IT systems central to their operations. The excerpt below from WCM37, a member of WC4W for over a decade, highlights the length of time it took for the members to reach a point where they could move forward with the project. That is, having struggled on with the old system as long as possible, faced difficulties working with external parties, and eventually resorting to building a new system in-house.

> I mean the new system... that was the other massive hurdle for us because up until about 3 years ago we were still working on a system that someone in the office built in about 1994 and it just wasn't coping. We were running all these old 90s Macs because they were the only ones that could run the system so the IT guys were trying to keep these old ancient Macs running and we were still dealing with a lot of paper and stuff and the new system that has kind of revolutionised it. That's kind of more important than moving was having a new system because it was just insane really. Basically, our system used to be built in Excel and over the years we had companies in who would go, 'Look, here we go... this is our system.' But for whatever reason the powers that be... and the IT guys... it never worked out... they ended up just building their own system up here... so we have built our own computer system. (WCM37 – WC4W)

WC3's experience is different but nevertheless shares some curious similarities. Like WC4W, they had functioned for several decades using a bespoke internal system that at the time of its creation was relatively advanced. As WCM19 outlines below, this system was rapidly becoming outmoded and ineffective due to limited data fields, reduced software compatibility, and hardware obsolescence.

> Maybe this is true for all computer systems. Until you're actually doing it, on it, it's never, ever really going to mirror, effectively, the reality that you're going to face. We did have this company coming up and tutoring us, or at least finding out what we needed from it and then showing us what they'd created and stuff like that. It felt very one removed, really. It felt slightly alien, really. When I remember these days... we had a workshop, kind of, room upstairs that different departments would go and sit for a day, looking through it. I just remember thinking, 'It's because it's so data-hungry that there are so many fields to fill in.'

> It felt very cumbersome compared to the system we used in-house. I don't know whether that's because, obviously, we weren't up to speed on it. We'd been working that system for fifteen years, there's a fluency that comes with that. Obviously, we are still trying to get with this current system. Yeah, I guess that there were glitches when it came. (WCM19 - WC3)

WC3's solution was to turn to an external off-the-shelf system that could be modified to their purposes by an external provider. Despite having spoken to another wholesaler that had successfully implemented this system, the interaction between the cooperative and the external provider as well as the process of migrating to the new system presented a number of challenges, including a training mismatch, numerous glitches, and general operational inefficiency. However, the most significant challenge to the introduction of the new system at WC3 was the fluency and familiarity established members had developed with the old system and the friction this generated in the migration process. Such has been the burden of the new system at WC3 that in attempting to address an old 'creak' the membership created a new 'creak'; one which placed so much weight on the organization that a host of other 'creaks' began to emerge; or at least become evident.

These narratives highlight how WCs can find it difficult to develop an effective response due to member resistance. IT systems appear to be particularly prone to this resistance, potentially due to their being centralised yet integrated across and throughout the whole organization and the risk of members feeling threatened by either the complexity or the functionality of the system. Furthermore, the challenges faced with respect to working with external parties suggests a potential dissonance between the way WCs approach technological infrastructure and the way such systems are normally developed and implemented in conventional organizations.

Who are we?

The last facet of 'interpersonal creaking and slipping' I want to highlight here is that of sustaining a shared, intersubjective, understanding of the organizational 'worldview'. This was highlighted early in my project by CMA1 who suggested that the rationale for its importance might change over time but that it nevertheless remained an essential factor in sustaining cooperation. They posited that early on the 'worldview' would enable the members to unite around a clear sense of purpose while later it provided a

source of coherence across a more dispersed membership as well as a means of differentiation, both in terms of competition and prefiguration. In the extract below, WCM39, a reasonably well-established member of WC4W, expresses their understanding of how the 'worldview' becomes strained.

> Well, that [shared vision and strategy] is in a constant state of some level of contention, really. I think that you'll probably find with all of the larger food co-ops for example that as you become a more successful business, you then have this contradiction between your founding principles, the ethical aspects of things and of the ethics that are adherent to a workers co-op, and in terms of sharing responsibility, etc. You'll find that there's maybe a bit of a push and pull, where the business being very successful can tend to drag people towards, 'Let's just be a super successful business.' A natural tension will arise out of those people, it's a legitimate perspective, and other people who would see it as the reason it's a successful business is because of all of its parts, so that its ethical foundations are absolutely crucial, they can't be allowed to drift. This shared responsibility, and willingness to accept other roles, again, has to be carried on because without it, the whole thing, not just the co-op but the business itself, would fall apart. (WCM39 - WC4W)

WCM39 highlights how over time and in lieu of objective commercial success, the founding principles of the cooperative, those that provide a basis for an internal understanding of 'cooperation', can begin to 'creak' and 'slip'. This results in what they describe as a "push and pull" effect between adherence to these core principles and 'slipping' towards a potentially less 'cooperative' shared understanding of accepted organizational practice. It is pertinent to note that a changing 'worldview' does not always imply a 'slipping' away from 'cooperative' practice. For example, how the prevalence of veganism within my case cooperatives is reshaping 'worldviews' in terms of the ethics behind commercial decision-making. Indeed, in WCM39's narrative we are able to more clearly interpret the changing priorities of members as a form of 'slipping'. WCM39's acknowledgement of perceptibly 'uncooperative' perspectives as nevertheless being "legitimate" raises the profound point that just because a WC set out with a certain prefigurative worldview, this is by no means an absolute truth for future combinations of members. Despite their assertions that 'cooperative' practice is the foundation of the commercial success and operability of the organization, if the

'connectedness' of members to this 'worldview' 'creaks' or even 'slips' then it is always possible for them to gradually move away from this and ultimately away from 'cooperation'.

4.3.2 Headspace

The word 'headspace' has several other technical meanings but appeared in the 1970s as a colloquialism for describing a state of mind or mindset related to the extent of mental pressure or clarity of thought at a given time. For the purposes of my analysis, I understand headspace as describing both a state of existence, which may be reinforced or undermined, and as flexible yet finite a resource which may be replenished or depleted. While I had heard this term used previously, during my fieldwork at WC2 I noted the frequent use of the word among members and recorded this observation in my field notes. Indeed, it appears in every interview I have coded from WC2, potentially highlighting a high level of shared understanding of the notion at said cooperative. However, I also found it to have utility for analysis across my case cooperatives. It ties in with 'creaking and slipping connectedness', as well as the notion of having one's proverbial 'nose to the grindstone', which emerged in first my interview with CMA5 and during my fieldwork at WC3. This describes a state of being wherein members are unable to look up from the work immediately before them and thus fail to perceive or respond to 'creaks' and 'slips' within their organizations.

Under pressure

In the extract below WCM36 suggests that the pressures and tensions associated with having become a bigger and busier organization, i.e. 'creaking', have caused members at WC4R to forget to practice cooperative behaviours and thus at times permitted them to 'slip' toward less cooperative assumptions and practices.

> I think you have to sort of remind yourself, 'Hold on a minute, we need to enjoy this as well.' Because if you don't then you know you just become so tense and work is this thing where we have got to get it in there and get it out and sell it and it's just like... hold on, we are a bit more than that... that of course is what we do but we need to be looking at different ways of doing that as well. (WCM36-WC4R)

This tension between doing what they do, in this case retailing, and being what they are, a WC, pivots on members' position of understanding, thinking, and acting which are

bound together in the notion of 'headspace'. WCM36's "hold on, we are a bit more than that" echoed WCM21 who concluded their reflections on over-work and lack of planning at WC3 with the statement, "we are meant to be better than this". This resonates with the idea of 'headspace' as a state or position of thinking wherein sustaining the prefigurative practice of worker cooperation requires aspiring and sustaining a higher quality of interaction. It follows that its 'creaking' might both lead to and be symptomatic of other 'creaks' and 'slips' but might also be an inevitable outcome of existence in a dissonant, institutionally isomorphic, environment.

WCM25 suggests that for WC3 the immediate shared vision, if indeed there is one, is "to become a more strategic, more organized, and maybe not feel like we are fire-fighting every single day". This view is understandable given their experiences of trying to develop a coherent plan for the cooperative, which resulted in them deciding to put it to one side for the time being and focus on the immediate issues at hand, i.e. engage in fire-fighting.

> They get into a cycle where they are struggling and as soon as a worker co-op is struggling financially, especially if its members are having to make sacrifices like do a bit of work for free or work less hours, you get into a cycle where it's just nose to the grindstone, it's trying to basically keep the thing going hand-to-mouth and they don't have the time or the capacity to lift their eyes and say, 'Right, what's the route out of this?' So they tend to keep going round this circle of despair until people start to leave. (CMA5)

The narrative from WC3 brought to my mind the notions of members having their 'nose to the grindstone' and unknowingly entering a 'cycle of despair' shared by CMA5 in the extract above. They describe this as a particularly critical state wherein members have become overly fixated on the economic situation of the cooperative and thus begin to allow key aspects of cooperation to 'slip', increasing the potential for further 'creaks' to emerge and 'slips' to occur.

In the extract below, WCM06 highlights how pressure on headspace can arise from the way working practices are structured.

> Honestly... regarding certain projects we always say, 'One day if we have got a bit of headspace... we will do it' And then it never happens because we have never got that headspace you know so... I think the reason why it's a problem is

because of the way we work... we have all got several tasks to do and also how our rota works... I don't have a day to do certain things... I've got an hour here, an hour there, and maybe if I am lucky a couple of hours there... but like I mean... you're just doing your PhD... just imagine I said to you oh you've got an hour in the morning and maybe an hour in the afternoon and in between you've got to pack some lentils or deal with rude customers... do you know what I mean? You just could not get your head around it... and that is kind of the problem... so if you want to do something you need that headspace but you actually have to have some quietness as well... I mean you have seen our offices... it's like... 'Oh, any space here, there?' So it's not only the headspace it's also actually the office space and that is the main problem... so any projects here... coming out from... like major projects... people have just done either in the own time or just by really saying, 'Look, I have to have some rota'd time here for a long period of time in order to do anything...' So yeah, that's kind of like the unsaid. (WCM06 - WC2)

As noted previously, at WC2 the notion of 'headspace' seems an important feature of the way members communicate their state of mind and state of work to one another; a means of articulating the tension around individual and collective time to get work done. Linking back to WCM09's insights in the previous section, the division of time at WC2 is a source of tension and discomfort. A combination of their approach to multi-skilling and the design of their rota, the fragmented focus and thinking of members across small chunks of time (e.g. 1-4 hours) makes it hard to make progress or feel as though progress is being made. Furthermore, what becomes clear from WCM06's narrative is that justifying why an individual deserves more focused time in the rota can be difficult because it imposes a burden on the rest of the membership.

Thinking operationally and strategically

Mental 'creaking' and 'slipping' is not solely a reserve of cooperatives in particularly challenging situations and needs to be understood as more of a general problem regarding the tension between members as workers and as decision-makers. WCM05 provides a useful crystallisation of this problem in the extract below.

It's a bit of a different thing but the difference between the responsibility of a director and the responsibility of a co-op member. We're all both. It isn't always

clear. I certainly feel like I'm supposed to have an opinion on a huge range of things, many of which I don't really know much about. I think maybe we mistake, like, a large group of people giving something a relatively small amount of attention as being as good as a smaller group of people giving it a larger amount of attention […] The space for strategic thinking, that is very much, I think, something that happens currently outside of the formal meeting structure. (WCM05 – WC2)

WCM05 makes three important contributions to our understanding. Firstly, that 'headspace' is placed under strain by the lack of clarity between responsibilities as a director and as a worker. Secondly, that the sheer range of things an individual member might be expected to form an opinion on, and in doing so attain a working knowledge of, also places a strain on 'headspace'. Thirdly, that it may be a mistake to assume that it is always good to put everything to everyone, suggesting that instead a smaller group of people with the skills and the 'headspace' for a given decision might be better. Below, WCM05 goes on to suggest that 'creaking headspace' pushes more strategic thinking outside of the formal meeting structure, into the informal structures discussed in the previous section.

It appears that across the cooperatives, both those operating with full member-director and elected member-director structures, there is a tendency for this kind of 'higher-level thinking' to 'creak' and then 'slip' from the formal structure. In turn, undermining the legitimacy of the formal structure and thus the manifest authority of the collective. This contributes to the present analysis with respect to the potential for delineating different kinds of 'headspace' and in turn 'creaking headspace' along the lines of something like 'operational headspace' and 'higher level headspace'.

Check yourself

It was clear that the extent of varied work or projects taken on by members across WCs is largely down to the individual to determine, with oversight being generally siloed in the various teams and only HR/Personnel potentially having a sense as to the full breadth of an individual member's workload. However, despite this agency and limited oversight the strain on members remained a recurrent theme. This brings a 'wellbeing' dimension to the notion of 'creaking and slipping headspace'. I believe the notion of 'wellbeing' is particularly relevant to this form of 'creaking' and was noted by

participants across the case WCs as a concern. On the one hand, with regards to the pressures placed on members, but also for its potentially adverse influence on the quality of general cooperative behaviour and economic performance.

> It's so easy to martyr yourself in many different ways in a job like this. I think the key to remaining happy and al tempo here is not to get into a mindset where you think, 'If I don't do this, no one else will'… If you're feeling like that then you need to share it and voice it. Yeah, because you're not going to have a manager step in and say, 'You've been working too hard,' it really does fall onto your shoulders to make that call yourself. (WCM07 – WC2)

Having recognised this issue with 'headspace' and its relation to unrecorded overtime after the departure of a key member, WCM07's response was to start recording their hours more accurately. In the extract above they highlight the ease with which members can 'slip' into a 'headspace' that leads to this kind of self-exploitative behaviour and the importance of members being self-aware of this happening and communicating it to the cooperative; in the absence of a manager nobody else is going to do it for them. It is noteworthy that WCM07 chooses the term "martyr" to describe the way members can 'slip' into these potentially detrimental and self-exploitative working patters. This serves as a reminder that the 'cooperative worldview' comes with ideological undertones bound up in the prefigurative position of these entities.

4.3.3 Physical space

This sub-section explores the 'creaking' of the actual 'physical space' a WC occupies and its membership operates within, along with considerations regarding the geographic area that surrounds it. Though seemingly a more straightforward form of 'creaking', the issues associated with limited 'physical space' emerged in all three of my main case studies (WC2, WC3, and WC4R/W), affirming its importance to the present discussion. While the 'physical space' occupied by a WC cannot in itself 'slip', it is possible for 'creaking physical space' to lead to other kinds of 'slipping'.

Feeling the squeeze

As highlighted by WCM06 in the previous sub-section, limited physical space presents an operational challenge; admittedly, this is somewhat obvious and could clearly be an issue for any other successful, growing business. 'Creaking physical space' appeared to be a more pressing issue for the two customer-facing case studies, WC2 and WC4R,

where members describe the current situation in terms such as "crippling" (WCM02) and "bursting at the seams" (WCM31). At WC2, current levels of demand could support a much larger premises and issues with the car park being full and delivery vehicles not being able to access the building have become commonplace.

> If you looked at our storeroom area around the back there... the amount of goods that come out of that tiny space is incredible... anywhere else would have a much much bigger stock room or area for those goods to be moving in or out... so that gets quite hectic and that's definitely changed over the years and when I first started there was one delivery a week from our wholesaler and now there's deliveries four days a week... so that has changed... those deliveries are much bigger plus all of the other companies we deal with now... that's a busy little storeroom now... so that has changed massively... but that again can put a pressure on the workplace. (WCM36 – WC4R)

As WCM36 describes above, at WC4-R the situation is equally challenging with more and more goods arriving into a space that has almost run out of room to grow. They point to the pressure this kind of situation can place on the workplace and the members; this ties-in with their earlier commentary regarding the difficulty in maintaining 'cooperative practice'.

Localised cooperation

WC2 and WC4-R had both expanded their business premises over the years, as well as having spent time rationalising their existing space and seeking ways of making it more efficient. While WC2 had expanded upwards and outwards, they continued to struggle with space as the area in which they are located has become increasingly crowded and expensive; a process of gentrification that is in part due to the presence of WC2. Although operating in a similarly gentrified location, WC4-R have been able to rent adjacent retail units and consequently increasing the size and quality of the space. As WCM36 explains below, in their opinion this needed to happen because it would have been harder to survive as a smaller business; namely due to consumer demand for wider offering as well as a need to escape the over-crowded, stuffy, and chaotic set-up they once had.

> We needed to do that because if we hadn't have done that I don't think we would have survived to be quite honest... with smaller independent wholefood shops it

is difficult to actually compete... you need the footfall really... and we need space to actually be able to offer products to people and also to the special offers and things like that... the smaller shop was... years ago it was crowded, it was stuffy... you wouldn't want to shop here at one point... you walked in and it was too much going on... you were like... 'Yeah, I'll come back later on'. (WCM36 – WC4R)

A more radical response to 'creaking physical space' is evidenced by the existence of WC4W. Originally part of WC4R, when its ability to meet demand for wholesale services became unsustainable at the inner-city retail location, the cooperative determined to split their operations and establish a secondary business unit at a more suitable location. More recently, WC4R also separated its food preparation kitchen and café from the main shop, opening a second location around the corner. These kinds of decisions are arguably only applicable where a business has developed an operational area for which there is sufficient demand. Indeed, over the past few years WC4R have struggled to sustain the rationale for keeping their second inner-city location open in the face of diminishing profits and increasing operating costs. Making more efficient use of existing space has provided a temporary solution to 'creaking physical space' at WC3 as well as WC2, WC4R. There, members have explored moving the business altogether but have consistently struggled with gaining enough buy-in and confidence from the membership despite awareness of and frustration with the problem of 'creaking physical space'. This raises the question of why WCs seem unable or unwilling to either move to more suitable premises or open additional sites?

WCM37 highlights that this question is asked by members of WCM4W with respect to both their own unit and of WC4R. They suggest that while members often think of moving as a straightforward decision, in practice it presents a real challenge for WCs due to being "almost fixed to your location" by the boundedness of their members and their business models to their locality. Indeed, to open a shop or depot in another nearby location, depending on the type of business, potentially creates problems with regards to extent of autonomy, democratic structure, and internal competition. Unlike any other cooperative I studied, approximately five years ago WC4W moved its operations to a new site. With their old site 'creaking' and one of their two main warehouses falling down, in the face of strong resistance to moving location the membership spent their time debating whether to refurbish or rebuild yet the decision-making process could not

produce a clear outcome. WCM37 reasons this was because neither option was the right decision and that ultimately deciding to move was the best outcome. Though eventually the membership decided to move, this required them to overcome fears as to the potential impact this might have on wages and quarterly dividends.

WCM37 notes that in the absence of a hierarchical structure, in which a CEO could make a decision and workers have to would duly follow or find other work, the cooperative membership was faced with negotiating the vested interests of members who were responding conservatively to what they perceived as a gamble. Indeed, the outcome of this process might not necessarily be considered the 'best business decision' members chose to move to a larger premises on the South Coast as opposed to moving to a big industrial estate nearer to London with purpose-built warehouses; putting their quality of life and general wellbeing above the potentially more lucrative and easier option.

Near and far

An important dimension of 'creaking physical space' is the potential for individuals and departments to become isolated as the business grows, either through on-site expansion or moving to larger premises. This issue contrasts with the challenges to cooperation posed by not having enough space. For example, with their primary office located at the far end of the warehouse, away from the shop floor and the main office space at WC2, WCM07 acknowledges how easy it can be to 'tunnel-vision' their way in and out of work and leave without interacting with anyone; noting that they need to make a conscious effort to avoid 'slipping' into this behaviour. Highlighting the role of the coordinators in ensuring departments and teams stay 'connected', below WCM25 explains how fragmentation between departments at WC3 was exacerbated by them being 'geographically distant' from one another.

> I think communication has been a bit stilted because so many departments are sort of geographically distant from each other... I mean the buyers used to be upstairs... I was upstairs with IT... although I was upstairs with IT although I saw everyone... being HR people were always in and out all day... but they were sort of geographically separated from the rest so that... there was an issue with that. I think it is up to the Management Team to make sure that [interaction] happens. (WCM25 – WC3)

This kind of 'creaking physical space' between departments was also identified as problematic by WCM36 at WC4R. They suggested that unless departments work with each other on a regular basis, there can be increased tendency for members to "start moaning about things", this is particularly true for the relationship between WC4R's two sites; with the Café, according to WCM36, feeling "quite a lot separate" from the Shop. The implication seems to be that meetings alone are not necessarily sufficient for keeping departments feeling part of the whole and therefore prevent 'slipping' in terms of both 'connectedness' and 'headspace'.

> I've been quite keen to just try and... not bring the place together... but it's quite interesting how much effect the size of a building can have on a company, but it has felt there has been, at times, floating islands going off in different directions of different departments. I think, as before when there were thirty-five people, it was a smaller building, there was a lot more mucking in, everyone knew each other and I just think, as companies grow, it's something that we need to keep an eye on and try to remember who we are. (WC3-WCM27)

Having moved to a bigger site five years ago, the main operational issue with 'creaking physical space' has been overcome by WC4W. However, as highlighted by WCM27 above, more space has created a similar tension to that described by WCM25 and WCM36 at their respective cooperatives. WCM27 articulates this 'creaking physical space' somewhat more poetically, using the metaphor of "floating islands" to describe inter-departmental fragmentation. Their conclusion supplies a good point at which to round-off this part of my analysis. Such 'physical creaking' is something to keep an eye on and is interconnected with a need for WCs to "remember who we are". This links back to WCM21 and WCM36's comments in 'creaking headspace' and to my comments regarding 'cooperative worldview' in 'creaking connectedness'.

4.3.4 Summary

In this section I have sought to develop my foundations for understanding how experiences of 'creaking' and 'slipping' manifest in established and scaled WCs. I have explored 'creaking' and 'slipping' across three dimensions of space: interpersonal space, headspace, and physical space.

I firstly raised questions around the extent of individual involvement that is expected by new members, reasonable to existing members, and possible in order to sustain the

organization as a cooperative and a business; as well as regarding the role of formal and informal hierarchies in regulating this involvement. As growth fragments once tight, unitary, structures it becomes increasingly difficult to capture the diverse relationships and structures that continue or emerge. Informal relationships and structures can either undermine or buttress cooperative practice. As the need for structures to scale becomes more critical, the choice between their breakdown or renewal becomes inevitable. Time and scale also atrophy the mechanisms of decision-making and the technological systems that connect members, resulting in a combination of social and operational 'creaking' and 'slipping'.

The 'headspace' of members reflects both internal and external pressures on the prefigurative idea of the WC and the extent to which it is structured or structureless, closed or open. My analysis highlighted how 'creaking headspace' has the potential to cause members to 'slip' into a 'cycle of despair' wherein a 'nose to the grindstone' mindset can prevent members from thinking or acting beyond the immediacy. However, this mindset is not limited to WCs in crisis, there is tendency towards focusing on the work at hand over the coherence of organizing. 'Creaking headspace' can contribute to thinking and even decision-making 'slipping' out from formal structures and into informal structures. 'Headspace' extends to the notion of 'wellbeing' in the sense that individual members, because of their autonomy, are responsible for the quantity and diversity of the work they assume responsibility for. This brings us full circle to the connection I made between 'headspace' and the cooperative as a prefigurative entity, both a business and a substantive cause; one for which members might readily 'martyr' themselves, and their 'headspace'.

The range of options available for responding to 'creaking physical space' are limited. The two major divisions at WC4, first splitting WC4R and WC4W and later moving the kitchen and café down the road, offer some insight into how this can play out and the resultant 'interpersonal creaking' experienced by the cooperative; namely reduced tolerance and solidarity across the divided units which serves to undermine cooperation. Of course, a further alternative is to move location. However, WCs seem bound to their location in a way that conventional business entities might not necessarily be. The case of WC4W suggests that WCs find in hard to make the decision to move. Larger premises can also cause 'creaking' through departments and teams becoming 'geographically distant' from one another and thus beginning to experience 'creaking

connections'. It is interesting to reflect on how both constrained space and too much space can create 'islands' out of departments, teams, and individual members through either friction or distance.

4.4 Chapter summary

In this chapter I introduced the literature that forms my conceptual framework for understanding the sustaining of collectivist-democratic organizing in established and scaled WCs, introduced my four grounded theory constructs, and established how members' experiences can be understood through the heuristics of 'creaking' and 'slipping', illustrating these across three kinds of 'space'. Adopting a 'toolkit approach' (Nicolini, 2012, p. 214) I combined practice theory, RPO, and integrative process into a single conceptual frame. Organizing is contextualised as taking place within and across complex LoPs that are formed of CoPs. RPO provides my philosophical scaffolding. Follett's 'integrative process' frames my conceptualisation of cooperative organizing.

Integrative process is characterised by three cross-cutting principles: the situation, the law of the situation, and integrative process itself. These are held as sustaining and guiding all structures and practices through an ongoing 'circular response' that embraces all the factors that are 'relating' and is best understood as the "whole-a-making" (Follett, 2003j, p. 180). Returning to the processual, paradox-embracing model I first introduced in Chapter 2, I highlighted how the depiction of 'organizing' as a spiral illustrates the iterative nature of the 'whole-a-making' (see Figure 4.1). 'The law of the situation' calls for actions to be directed by and responsive to changes in 'the situation' in which they are contextualised, thus a heuristic switch is made from 'power-over' to 'power-with'. 'Integrative process' requires the active engagement of all members across the landscape and in communities in order to enable the co-production of knowledge, shared purpose, and choice of approach. To this end, integration through 'constructive conflict' is held as the only viable and productive method for dealing with diversity, difference and conflict; rejecting both domination and consensus as delivering undesirable outcomes. The implications of integrative process for organizing are manifest in situationally determined authority, participatory planning and decision-making, the integrative division of labour, and non-hierarchical coordination. Thus, a further heuristic switch is made from 'responsibility-to/over' to 'responsibility-with'.

This conceptualisation interfaces with that of 'prefigurative cooperation' explored in Section 2.1. 'Cooperation' and 'integration' are understood to be essentially synonymous.

I conceptualised the integrative process of sustaining WCs as perpetually 'creaking'. This grounded theory construct captures a neutral force, not inherently 'bad' but also suggestive of a need for attention from members. On the other hand, 'slipping' is held as an inherently disintegrative force. Behaviours, practices, and boundary objects can move to qualitatively more-or-less 'cooperative' state. In my conceptualisation there is no sacrosanct 'single truth' of cooperation. Instead, I conceive of members working towards a prefigurative 'Goldilocks zone' of cooperative prefiguration or 'integrative unity'. However, this is an unattainable point of perfection; it is ever out of reach yet essential to the sustaining of WCs. In seeking an answer to 'what' is 'creaking', 'slipping', and sought after in the 'Goldilocks zone', I propose the construct of 'relevance'. This is conceived as a property emergent from processes of subjective and intersubjective identification across the landscape and within its constituent communities. All parts of the 'whole' are inherently 'relevant' to each other but the quality of the 'sense of relevance' experienced by members towards and from various 'parts' of the whole' may be improved or undermined.

Figure 4.2 illustrated how I view the seven dimensions of my analysis as being interrelated. It depicted the four main pillars of my analysis along with the three forms of 'space' I used in this chapter to empirically establish the grounded theory contracts of 'creaking' and 'slipping'. In the interpersonal space I highlighted the challenges of integrating new members, the emergence of informal hierarchies, the connectedness of teams, the breakdown of communication, the increasing diversity of individuals and relationships, and the inevitable ineffectiveness or obsolescence of unattended systems and infrastructures. With regards to the 'headspace' of members, I highlighted the tendency for a 'noses to the grindstone' mentality, the risk of 'cycles of despair', the pressures of the duality of membership. the challenge of negotiating multiple identities across the landscape, the risk of self-exploitative behaviours, and how pressures on 'headspace' can contribute to a reliance on informal relationships and structures. With regards to physical space I highlighted the potentially deleterious effects of limited physical space on cooperative practice, the apparent difficulty members have in making decisions regarding moving or expanding premises, the risk of disintegration associated

with dividing members across sites, and the integration challenge posed by having members and teams spread out across a large site

In the four empirical chapters to follow I continue to explore and develop my grounded theory constructs of 'creaking', 'slipping', 'relevance', and the 'Goldilocks zone' in the context of WCs. As illustrated in Figure 4.2, my approach to the empirical chapters drew on four levels of organizing: the individual level, the cultural level, the structural level, and the decision-making level. Although the lines separating the individual, cultural, structural, and decision-making levels of analysis are understood to be imperfect and blurred, I argue they remain useful to the extent of providing loose discursive constructs within which to engage in my empirical discussion.

5.0 The cooperative journey

In the preceding chapter I introduced the concept of 'relevance' as the keystone to understanding how members experience the tensions and strains of democratic organizing across time and scale. I also demonstrated how members experience the 'creaking' and 'slipping' of democratic organizing and explained my grounded theory construction of the 'Goldilocks zone' as a heuristic for communicating the impossible object of prefigurative cooperation. This chapter further develops understanding of this 'creaking' and 'slipping' 'relevance' by focusing on the tensions manifesting at the 'individual level' of organizational analysis. It offers the first pillar of my four-part grounded theory analysis in response to the sub-questions.

During my analysis I struggled initially with conceiving 'cooperative practice' as a single, straight path that members and WCs either do or do not follow; a 'higher principle' that could be moved toward as if cooperation were some state of enlightenment that were to be achieved if members and WCs were to hold to the path. Following this line of thinking led me to a religion-esque framing of cooperative practice that at once appeared both fruitful and insufficient for explaining the reality I had observed, and which had been described to me. Performing a heuristic switch, I reconceived 'cooperative practice' as being a multi-faceted, dispersed, embodied, contested, and evolving process in which the WC both is and is not quite what people do. In leading me towards the notions of landscapes of practice (LoPs) and integrative process, this understanding enabled me to reconsider how individuals and WCs engage in ongoing dialogue and the production of boundary objects. On the one hand, to make sense of what it means to be cooperative and how to best work towards this 'sense of relevance' and, on the other hand, to develop the connection and concurrent ownership behaviours necessary to sustain cooperative practice.

In Section 5.1 I turn to the process of 'becoming members' by exploring the demands placed on membership, the recruitment of members, the responsibility of established members to 'make space' for new members, and how some members 'evolve' their roles and responsibilities over time. My key point in this section is the complexity of the identities assumed and behaviours expected from members. I highlight how this emerges with respect to the recruitment, development, and more-or-less holistic involvement of members.

In Section 5.2 I turn to the process of 'organizing work', exploring the tension between more-or-less multi-skilling and specialisation in established and scaled WCs. I attend to the practice of multi-skilling, the pressures and rationales behind specialisation, sustaining shared identities, the balancing of different approaches, and the risks of 'slipping' towards too much specialisation. My key point in this section is the need for established and scaled WCs to find a balance between holistic and specialised working practices in order to maintain a broadly shared identity yet satisfy the demands of complex functions and members' desire to focus their attentions.

In Section 5.3 I turn to the process of 'unlearning and learning', exploring the need for this process resulting from the learned assumptions and behaviours of members in the isomorphic environment, the construction of boundary objects that provide 'points of reference' to members new and old, the active nature of the process and the imperative for combining boundary objects with practice and participation, and the struggle to maintain a sense of mutual responsibility for cooperative practice. My key point in this section is that 'membership' is not simply 'another job'. It requires ongoing individual and collective training, the collective maintenance of educational materials, and as much direct experience of different functions and positions of authority as possible.

5.1 Becoming members

In this section I turn to exploring the tensions and strains associated with selecting and integrating the members along with the journeys these members make through their respective communities and landscapes of cooperative practice.

In 'demands of the job' I consider the duality of the role of member and the challenges this presents for both individuals and WCs. In 'holding out for a cooperator' I turn to WCs efforts to find the right members and issues faced in framing what membership means. In 'making space' I explore on the problems associated with high and low membership turnover; attending to the latter problematic in more depth due to its greater pertinence to the WCs studied. In 'evolving', I draw upon member experiences and insights to illuminate the journeys individuals make through WCs and the challenges encountered within this landscape of practice.

5.1.1 Demands of the job

With regards to sustaining the practice of cooperation, a key issue identified by the CMAs was the lack of internal business capabilities and limited knowledge of the workings of capitalism found in WCs.

> So basically it's a kind of lack of familiarity with capitalism from the other side... workers are familiar with capitalism as workers but they're not familiar with capitalism as employers or as... entrepreneurs... and to some extent worker cooperatives have to be entrepreneurial and they have to be employers... or they have to be responsible for people... most of them will have employees at some point. These are things that we're just not familiar with... that we find it hard to get our heads around [...] So that's a challenge and therefore a limiting factor. (CMA1)

CMA1 suggested that the duality of the role of member as both worker and owner (if not director) sits at the heart of the issue. It demands of the individual both the 'worker skills' required by the daily operations of the business and the 'control skills' traditionally attributed to the owner or manager. Similarly, CMA3 described there being a need for individuals to make a "cognitive leap" in terms of adapting to the language and mentality of the role they assume as members, if they are to be able to fulfil the role effectively.

Considering these deficits, CMA1 suggested WCs tend to perceive two options for acquiring the necessary skills: Firstly, pay for skills externally as outsourced business services; secondly, recruit members who already possess the necessary skills.

There is limited evidence of the first option being adopted for more general business functions. The only instance of this taking place was at WC4R where the membership recently brought in external human resource management support services in order to relieve ongoing strain on their Personnel Team. While apparently necessary, this decision had been viewed as distinctly 'uncooperative' by some members and external observers due to the perceived managerialist stance assumed to be inherent in the worldviews and practices of business service providers. It is also worthwhile bearing in mind that WC1, WC3, and WC4W had experienced issues in working alongside external parties to develop new technology systems, highlighting the potential for discord between WCs and more conventional business entities.

They were recruiting for particular jobs in the co-op and then that wasn't working either because they were becoming too departmentalised [...] They needed particular skills... because as you get higher up... as you get better at your game you need to recruit people with higher skill levels and you have to move away from job rotation... or you think you do. (CMA1)

The second option, recruiting new members based on their existing skills or competencies, was identified by the CMAs as being a common practice for growing cooperatives. As indicated in the above quote from CMA1, the problem with this approach is that it can begin to undermine cooperative practice by forcing WCs away from job rotation and introducing potentially 'uncooperative' members into the milieu. Furthermore, it can precipitate the 'siloing' effect I attend to in more detail in Section 5.2.5 ('Siloing').

We recruit for a specific job, we don't really recruit for the member, and to quote [WC2] in fact... you can train someone to do anything, but you can't train somebody to be cooperative... I don't know how we could make it work, this is the problem... because obviously when we recruit it's because we've got an immediate vacancy... a role to fill and it's in a specific job role within the co-op. We could be really forward planning… so next year we know we will be looking for maybe one person in the warehouse, one person here, one person there... because there's a growth that we're looking to go for... so right now we need to recruit members and have them work in every department... and then these roles open up or they are ready to step into them... so then what you're doing is you've got people moving on but they know the whole co-op. (WCM21 - WC3)

WCM21 offered their view as to how the dearth of cooperative behaviour created by recruiting for specialisation is compounded by a lack of forward planning regarding organizational needs. They suggested that this 'creaking' emerged before financial and operational challenges manifested. WCM21 argued that it could be attributed to a combination of growth in both workload and membership. As a result of this, departments had become unable to spare experienced members and new members were not given the opportunity to pick up experience across several departments. Instead, members, and thus the cooperative, were being limited by a cycle of reactive recruitment based on skills need and department-based specialisation. The argument

here is that members should be able to step into a range of roles and likewise 'know the whole co-op', or at least be able to understand it.

5.1.2 Holding out for a cooperator

CMA4 emphasised the need for new members to appreciate the duality of the member role. This entails new members understanding that they will be expected to play their part in coordination, attend meetings, adequately prepare for meetings, develop opinions, and be willing to engage in additional training in order to meet the needs of the cooperative as it develops. Similarly, CMA1 works with WCs to develop 'membership policies'. They suggested the process of its production can confer further meaning to the notion of being a member, viewing this as being essential to framing the cooperative and its relationship to the world beyond.

> What I am talking to them about is having a really good membership policy that's very clear about what actually is a member and what is the nature of membership, what are the benefits of membership, what are the responsibilities of membership so that they start to... that this core concept of the co-op member starts to have some meaning. It's not just 'people like us'... it's actually a description of a cooperative person that maybe isn't them and doesn't look like them but allows them to sort of frame the membrane around their co-op and its relationships to the outside world and to other people... through cooperative values and principles. (CMA1)

Two points can be drawn from the above.

1. The consensus amongst those working with WCs favours recruitment based on a commitment to shared cooperative values and collaborative processes above the skills and competencies immediately required.

2. For new members and existing members alike, there needs to be a means of understanding everyday practices in relation to underlying values; this requires clarity as to what is means to be a member and of the cooperative's relationship to the world outside.

Before the introduction of the member job description (MJD), mentioned previously in Section 4.3.1 ('Passing judgement'), WC1 had also engaged in recruiting for specific positions that required specific skills in order to resolve its skill deficits. However, members realised that something was missing; the newly recruited members were not

grasping what it really 'meant' to be a member of the cooperative. In other words, as the WC 'slipped' away from a more cooperative approach to recruitment, the 'sense of relevance' felt by the newer members began to deteriorate. WC1 first imposed a 'hard barrier to entry' approach in the form of a minimum of a required financial contribution that could be paid out of wages over an agreed period, but this proved ineffective. Eventually, the members decided to try something different. This 'third way' emerged from a process of trial and error and is now widely referred to as an MJD. At WC1, the process involved "going back to first principles" (CMA1) to essentially create a baseline 'membership role' that served as the primary job description of all members. They got rid of the membership fee, made their training more rigorous and informative, maintained the practice of multi-skilling, continued to recruit for specialist skills, but any specialist role was bolted onto and was secondary to the MJD. CMA2 was directly involved with the development of the MJD and in the below extract explained the development process they went through.

> I just used fairly standard HR principles... the thing I did which turned out to be revolutionary... and I didn't know it at the time was ask, 'Well what are we looking for? Let's all decide what we're looking for in a co-op member, don't think about the day job... if they can drive a truck or a forklift or whatever... what is it that a member does in a worker co-op in addition to doing the daily work? And think about someone that you want to work with? What do they do? How do they behave? What are the things they do as a member that make you think, that's a good member?' And we agreed a member job description, which was not very long but that got agreed by general meeting and then that meant we could go look for people that had some evidence that that's what they did. (CMA2)

Of note are the questions they asked: What does it mean to be a member of the WC? What makes a good member? What constitutes someone existing members would want to work alongside? The MJD introduced a means of formally addressing the duality and liminality of the worker cooperator role by shifting from a 'competency-oriented approach' toward a more 'behaviour-oriented approach'. Though seemingly straightforward and reasonable, CMA2 indicated that at the time this change faced criticism and doubt from the existing membership. However, as CMA2 reports below,

the results spoke for themselves; a radical change in the quality of new members was evidenced in their exhibited behaviours and overall approach to engaging with work.

> So there was still a lot of people putting pressure on like that but it was so successful and we had a very sophisticated selection system which I designed to take out all the personal prejudice as far as possible... and the first batch of new trial members that came out of that process were so much better than anything that had come in before... quite a few of them are still there. Nobody could then argue... before they got in the door, they'd start reorganizing the place and making it run better... and it just went on from there. I think that was the point at which the cooperative changed. So we started to improve the cooperative working of the place so it started to change from being a work group, just a bunch of individuals getting along with each other and only coming together to defend against any sort of change that might threaten their personal interest... to a team of people who are able to work together to say, 'How can we make this place better?' (CMA2)

For WC1, the MJD provided a mechanism for recruiting and monitoring members based on their performance and 'behaviour' as a 'cooperator'. In turn, this enabled a greater 'sense of relevance' to develop amongst the membership and thus enabled greater organizational integration. In the following section I highlight how, at the time of my research, WC1 was potentially 'slipping' away from its commitment to the MJD and its long-standing tradition of multi-skilling.

5.1.3 Making space

CMA3 highlighted how the character or business model of some WCs may be more suited to members who are at a certain stage or in a certain phase of their life and this can cause WCs to experience ongoing or intermittent high rates of membership turnover. A high rate of turnover can have negative implications for the WC's ability to retain and build upon the tacit knowledge and collective experience of their members, potentially resulting in an inability to effectively grow and develop the WC. In contrast, there are WCs where the attractiveness of the working conditions and lifestyle result in high levels of member retention. This brings its own challenges in terms of growth and development by way of stagnation.

> There's growth and then there's longevity... so longevity tends to bring... worker co-ops are very good places to work or they should be... you can find that people don't move on, people just stay because it's nice and they become comfortable and they perhaps don't develop their... they stop developing their skills and aptitudes... and they won't leave. That creates a necessity for growth because if you get into that situation you can't get new blood in unless you grow... so there's a danger of stagnation. (CMA1)

In drawing this distinction between growth and longevity, CMA1 offered an explanation as to how a high degree of member retention and comfort can result in members failing to continue developing their skills and aptitudes. This underscores a nuance in the notion of 'growth'; on the one hand it can refer to growth in the number of members and on the other hand it can refer to the growth of members as individuals, i.e. self-actualisation. In response, WCs can 'slip' into a pattern of hiring to sustain the growing body of increasingly less engaged established members; be this in terms of productivity or participation.

> I think sometimes in some of these bigger co-ops there are members who've been around for a while and have just like carved themselves out a little empire and basically are really opposed to any kind of change because they know they've got a certain amount of power and flexibility and things they can get away with that they wouldn't be able to if the environment changed around them... so they will fight tooth and nail to preserve those privileges... and literally thinking about their own benefit as an individual, not thinking about the benefit of the co-op at all. (CMA4)

Furthermore, as articulated by CMA4 in the extract above, there is a risk of more established members carving out a "little empire" within the cooperative and actively opposing change that endangers their "privileges". This can result in them, or indeed those responding to their actions, developing individualistic, non-integrative, tendencies that ultimately undermine the integrity and sustainability of the WC. In response to this issue, CMA5 advocated for the need to empower new members rather than disempower them, creating psychosocial space in which they can begin to contribute. This involves actively finding ways to give power away to newer, perhaps younger, members in a sustainable and facilitative manner.

So what you don't want to do is have members that are just there for ever and almost sort of disempower the new people... so actually how alive those founders are to that potential is often quite important... so ones where they are trying to give away power but in a way that they are empowering people as well is quite important. (CMA5)

Likewise, creating operational space for new members to occupy is equally important. CMA1 suggested there needs to be a mechanism to enable older members to step away and allow new members to move in. Below, CMA3 offers an example of how this 'making space' can happen using the example of a smaller but nevertheless well-established WC that has been operating for over 30 years.

It is a print business... because of the nature of the market it's in it has been fairly static in the number of people it can employ... it can't grow it's employment and actually some of the workforce are getting old and coming up to retirement and I think members recognised this and within the cooperative some of the older workers consciously reduced their hours and did work elsewhere in other worker co-ops or became consultants, because by reducing their hours they freed up hours in the business to recruit new people because they recognised that actually at some point they would be gone and it would be too hard a shift to shift from them not being there anymore and recruiting a new person. (CMA3)

In this case, the mechanism for 'making space' was a phased exit on the part of older members that frees up resources for the employment of new members. The advantage of this approach is that it avoids a knowledge gap emerging by overlapping the organizational change. However, this required established members to recognise their presence in the cooperative was part of the problem and subsequently to put the needs of the collective above their own.

Established members are not always the problem, they also provide valuable stability and continuity for WCs. CMA2 emphasised that when enthusiastic new members enter an established WC it may be necessary to rein them in until they have gained some understanding of how things work and, more importantly, how everything and everyone in the cooperative is connected. However, while holding newer members back for a time makes sense in terms of keeping the WC stable, as highlighted by CMA1 below,

there eventually comes a time when newer members need to be given the opportunity to make their mark on the cooperative. In this tension we see the balancing of structuredness and structureless emerging in the need for WCs to allow members to render the organization 'relevant' to them, ideally in a way that updates and betters both the business and the quality of organizational democracy.

> Successful transmission of cooperative culture from one generation to another is a crucial thing. If you're talking about co-ops that go 20, 30, 40 years... that then you need to have new people coming in who are able to take what they discover in terms of culture and practice, own it, and bring it up to date. (CMA1)

In this discussion of the practice of 'making space', I have drawn upon the insights of my CMAs to illustrate its two dimensions:

1. A need to make physical space for new members in terms of ensuring the necessary resources and suitable roles are available
2. A need to make psychosocial space for new members to assume an equal role in the cooperative and to take ownership of its future.

Ultimately, WCs need to find means of opening themselves to new members and allowing them to render the organization 'relevant' to them, and to the contemporary context in which the WC operates.

5.1.4 Evolving

> I think probably in all co-ops, but certainly in my experience here, there's so much sort of unwritten rules about how to get involved with things and how to sort of form your pathway through the co-op and it's not always that straightforward... definitely think that when I reflect on that time it was quite difficult to figure out how to navigate those pathways. (WCM04 - WC2)

The above quote from WCM04 highlights how even in a very open and transparent organizational culture, such as that found at WC2, the paths into certain teams, roles, and responsibilities are often opaque, with apparently 'unwritten rules' shaping participation. Indeed, it often comes down to timing, the connections a member makes, and their skills background. Regardless of the presence of formal 'multi-skilling', WCMs indicated that some combination of time, opportunity, and motivation had resulted in the 'evolution' of their competencies, capacities, and organizational identities.

None of my case WCs paid members in relation to the specific jobs they did; where pay scales existed, they were tied directly to length of tenure. As such, members' motivations for evolving their roles were not driven by money. Those that shared their experiences of 'evolving' tended to have been members for more than five years and espoused a combination of there having been an opportunity or an organizational need at the time, desire for self-development, improved understanding of the organization, and the betterment of the WC as key reasons for 'evolving'. However, more critically, individual members may be motivated by a desire to feel needed, the increased sense of security derived from fulfilling a specialised function, the potential power conferred by more broadly understanding the organization, or indeed the authority placed by the membership in whatever kind of functional authority structure their WC features.

> All of that experience made me realise that the thing I really wanted to do at the cooperative was to improve things for the people... I wanted to make a change for the membership, a change for the people and I felt that I could do that the best by taking up a job in our Personnel Team... which is what a normal company would call a HR Team... and so I then applied for the job of being a Strategic Personnel Officer and I have done that job for about five and a half years now... and that's kind of where I've felt I have found my niche and found the place where I could add most to the cooperative... and that's what I'm doing today... it's an unusual employment history. (WCM01 - WC1)

WCM01's journey through WC1 stands out as being particularly circuitous and enlightening [10]. Over the course of their approximately twelve-year membership WCM01 had moved through order Picking, Sales, Quality Control, truck loading, forklift driving, E-commerce, New Business, Buying, Frozen Goods, and Personnel as well as having served on the elected Management Committee (MC). The long-standing practice of multi-skilling at WC1 means they still work in the warehouse, frozen goods, as well their primary Personnel role. One of the more striking features of WCM01's journey is that having taken on a new role they worked toward making the role

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[10] Since my interview with WCM01 is the only one conducted at WC1, it is difficult to determine how similar their fellow members' stories might be.

redundant through the design and implementation of effective systems and structures. This resembles something of a 'cooperative ideal'. It suggests a mode of individual behaviour that challenges our conventional assumptions about self-serving, opportunistic individuals. Furthermore, it is indicative of an organizational culture wherein the individual member is empowered to serve the cooperative and their own interests as they deem most needed or meaningful.

WCM01 suggested that while their journey through the cooperative has been particularly varied, they are by no means alone in having – whether by chance or self-determination – experienced such a breadth of roles and responsibilities and that the practice of multi-skilling is a key contributing factor in enabling this kind of variation and dynamic individual development to take place. While I am not suggesting members are, nor should be, able to move through and around the organization at will, WCM01's journey suggests the potential for a balance to be struck between structuredness and structurelessness that facilitates actualisation for both the organization and the individual.

Having joined WC3 approximately sixteen years ago from a corporate background with relevant skills but in a different sector, WCM21 offered a unique and rather frustrated perspective on their past experiences and the contemporary state of WC3. Below, they describe how their understanding of what a WC was about as well as a personal desire to learn other aspects of the business led them to move through various roles, despite there not being a formal policy of multi-skilling, job sharing, or job rotation.

> I wanted to learn more about other people's jobs within the co-op as well... so I was maybe in Sales for a few years and other jobs came up within the co-op... I was always... in those days there was far more people jumping-in to help other departments... way back then I was going out on runs... I then decided that after a few years in Sales I wanted to try something different... for one, to add to my own set of skills and two, to see how other departments worked and have a better understanding of other people's jobs so I moved into the warehouse at that point and stayed there for a couple of years and again, I moved again... because that was my whole idea about a co-op was understanding other people's roles, sharing... rather than coming in and doing the same job for years and not finding out about what else goes on... and to me it gives you a bit more... there's compassion in there as well and empathy for other people's positions within the

co-op... because I get really annoyed when I hear people grumbling about another department and I thought step into their shoes you know... and this goes on a lot within the co-op but they never see it from the other job's perspective... because they don't know... so that today is a big thing for me within the co-op and many people have been here for many years and they haven't been in another job within the co-op. (WCM21 - WC3)

Above, some of the classic rationales for multi-skilling and for other mechanisms for sharing jobs, experiences, and understandings in WCs are highlighted. Namely, these concerned how the development of a shared understanding of the system and responsibilities of others can build important reserves of compassion and empathy that can help to strengthen the organization. This narrative contributes to the present discussion in highlighting the centrality of autonomous determination in creating the opportunities for evolving through cooperation and experiencing different areas and pathways within a WC.

The importance of individual motivation to the successful navigation of the practice of cooperation might otherwise be lost in attributing stagnation and uncooperative practice to visionary or instrumental objects in the landscape. However, WCM21 warned that even members with cross-departmental experience can be prone to developing less than compassionate or empathetic attitudes toward members of other departments; their point being that unless members are regularly experiencing the reality of the 'other' they remain vulnerable to developing an overly indulgent sense of 'we', through the deleterious influence of departmental siloing. Furthermore, along with stagnation in the dynamism of general work responsibilities caused by specialisation at WC3, WCM21 pointed to ossification in the movement of members through the elected management roles in each department. Though these roles provide coordination as opposed to governance, what is relevant to my present discussion is the insight that members are not able to 'evolve' their capacities due to the same persons occupying these roles year after year. While this may be due to those members being the most experienced, and therefore arguably the most appropriate, this willingness to accede to knowledge hierarchy is viewed by WCM21 as failing to sustain organizational democracy.

WCM34's journey also speaks to this problematic. At WC4R a kind of informal multi-skilling exists. Over twenty years at the cooperative WCM34's role has 'evolved' from being a member of the Shop Floor Team to encompass a range of additional duties that

are recognised on the rota. While they are still expected to spend two of their four and a half working days on the shop floor carrying out the same duties that have been expected of them since they became a member, WCM34's current roles also included taking care of some of the Finance function, administrating internal networks, and serving as the elected treasurer. This presents a different kind of 'evolution' to that narrated by WCM01 and WCM21, both of whom had taken on and let go of various roles during their membership. Instead, WCM34's narrative indicates a kind of 'accumulation' of roles and responsibilities without any kind of clarity as to how, or indeed whether, these might be dispersed more evenly amongst the membership. For example, the elected position of treasurer had gone unchallenged for five years and WCM34 was the only WC4R member on the MC of WC4, in contrast to five members from WC4W. While I sensed no malevolence or hunger for power, this kind of accumulation of responsibility and knowledge highlights how easily member participation can 'slip' and the quality of organizational democracy become increasingly fragile.

In cooperatives that do not practice multi-skilling, journeys seem to be more linear; members stay in their 'home department', potentially assume some additional responsibilities within said department, or assume positions in the wider cooperative; be this of their own volition or at the behest of others. One example of this is the journey of WCM37 at WC4W who since joining the cooperative has remained in their original department, was elected to be a member of the MC for a time, and has been a member of the elected HR Team for the past eight years. They view both roles as being supplementary to their primary work collating orders.

> I think it comes from people's abilities... like the new system... two members coordinated that because that's in their skillset... I mean I look at it and it's just gobbledygook to me... but I can look at a rota of the day's work and kind of know how many people you need to do that and who can do what because that's kind of what I can do... that's how my brain works... yeah... that's it... I think people are very... you've kind of got one type of brain or you haven't... it's kind of how your brain works and it's just kind of it works from people... we have a guy who does maintenance who's overseeing all the roof because he's good at that... so yeah but I mean... you kind of need people to sort of steer it a little bit... that's why I really like the Management Committee [...] people got the

wrong end of the stick... and kind of really thought of it as this power hat... if you look at it like that yeah you're going to fall on your sword pretty quickly... if you want to be going down that route... you should always be taking on roles begrudgingly and always be begrudging about it to a degree because it's kind of... you don't want to lose yourself up your own arse because is wouldn't work here. I'm always pushing people to go for the Management Committee... because for instance this year the Shop have only put one person forward and you talk about future growth it's kind of like... we need to work with the shop and if we are moving forward we need their expertise and we need our expertise and it's kind of like... getting everyone involved in that and seeing how it is. (WCM37 - WC4W)

In the above quote, WCM37 asserts that the assumption of responsibility is and should be guided by what members are individually able and willing to contribute to sustaining the cooperative. Furthermore, they suggest there is a need to have members who do steer and coordinate the cooperative and, echoing CMA1's argument for the need to empower others, that part of this involves encouraging members to go for elected positions such as the MC and gain experience of what that responsibility is like. Echoing WCM21, they argue this is key to undermining misunderstandings about the nature and purpose of such structures that inevitably run the risk of becoming something the membership views as separate or detached from themselves.

5.1.5 Summary

Members of WCs are expected not only to be good workers but also to act as owners and directors, it involves a dual identity that spans the constituent communities in the landscape. Furthermore, members often have limited familiarity with this latter set of competencies due to a lack of education and experience in the external environment. Buying-in external skills is highly problematic due to divergent foundational understandings of organizing. Addressing functional needs through competency-based recruitment is more common but can result in a misalignment between the new members and established cooperative practice. The 'member job description' is an instrumental boundary object that crystallises the meaning of membership and provides a point of reference for both the 'behaviour-based' recruitment of members and for holding existing members to account. It also serves as a visionary boundary object in

that it provides a prefigurative benchmark; a 'Goldilocks zone' of cooperative practice. The WCs studied are exposed to the challenges of high member retention. Retention is suggested to increase the risk of stagnation as well as create problems for the integration of newer members by reducing their ability to develop a 'sense of relevance'. New members need to be given opportunities to assume different positions, be empowered by established members, and be permitted to make their mark on the organization, in order to render practice 'relevant'.

This 'making space' involves creating not only the physical space for new members to 'engage' but also opening psychosocial space for them to realise the potential of membership through 'alignment' and 'imagination'. Empowering members to be able to serve both the interests of the WC and their own, through development of their skills and responsibilities can lead to long-term benefits. However, the paths to different kinds of work and new skills can be unclear. 'Evolving' is a process of taking on new responsibilities but also of letting go of others. Regardless of the presence of multi-skilling, without established members 'letting go' of responsibilities, the WC can 'slip' towards an 'irrelevance' of cooperative practice. Individual characteristics and capabilities play a crucial role in the kind of positions and responsibilities members assume. However, there is a need to push against this sentiment. Engagement with a range of different functions and positions of authority is vital. The problem with informal systems is that they can easily 'slip' if unattended. 'Evolving' through CoPs does not necessarily capture the benefits of multi-skilling; members do not regularly experience the reality of the 'other' and can easily lose that understanding, empathy, and 'sense of relevance'.

5.2 Organizing work

While I believe it is possible to offer a general demarcation of what is more-or-less 'cooperative practice', the structures and interactions through which this is manifested and experienced are by no means standardised or absolute. Instead, I found that there was wide variation across different cooperatives even and between different members of the same WC. In this section, I explore the two broad categories of the approach to 'organizing work' in WCs: 'multi-skilling' and 'specialisation'. I first introduce the practice of multi-skilling before exploring how this sits in contention with the perceived need for specialisation. This discussion is based on the idiom 'jack of all trades, master

of none', the meaning of which suggests an individual is able to do many things but none of them very well, and the notion of 'mastery' as indicating some kind of specialism. Thus, 'jacks' refers to the pathway of 'multi-skilling', while 'masters' refers to a more specialised approach to working practices and collective organization. I subsequently turn to consider the importance of the identity of 'worker' to the notion of membership, how the pathways through organizing found in WCs almost always combine or blur the lines between what might strictly be considered 'multi-skilling' or 'specialisation', and finally insights regarding the potentially harmful results of over-specialisation (i.e., 'siloing') on the quality of cooperative practice.

5.2.1 Jacks of all trades

The relationship between WCs and the practice of 'multi-skilling' ('multi-disciplining' or 'multi-tasking') that is considered a staple feature of worker cooperation is a difficult one. It involves members working across several different departments and roles simultaneously and the maintenance of multiple identities across the LoP. Although the practice differs in design across WCs, it is held to be 'more cooperative' in terms of sustaining the sense of multi-directional 'relevance' proposed in the previous chapter. However, where present, it appears to invariably be in some degree of contention with an almost gravity-like pull towards specialisation. This pressure manifests in the 'creaking' and 'slipping' of working practices. Furthermore, while multi-skilling may be inherently more suited to sustaining a holistic or organizational-level 'sense of relevance', specialisation arguably provides for a more immediate 'sense of relevance' in terms of individuals feeling meaningfully connected to their day-to-day work, team, department, and output.

What formalised multi-skilling looks like when implemented in a cooperative is perhaps best understood by starting from the point of recruitment. WC1 offers a good example of multi-skilling in an established and scaled WC. There, members are recruited first and foremost according to a member job description (MJD). This codified, explicit, instrumental boundary object outlines the desirable characteristics and behaviours of a worker-member; an ideal blueprint of a 'cooperator' contextualised to the given WC. The MJD not only serves to guide recruitment but also provides a measure to which probationary members, and indeed members in general, can be held. Drawing on my interviews with WCM01 and CMA2, at WC1, probationary members

spend their first months assigned to a manual task, either picking or delivering orders, and during this period are held to account using key performance indicators (KPIs) to prove accuracy and productivity. Following this, their workload is diversified across two or three 'home departments'. This is their introduction to the system, culture, and practice of multi-skilling. A balance is encouraged between manual work and office work for trial members to prove their range of competencies. Once they are voted-in as 'full members' they are expected to continue engaging in a balanced mix of work but are also able to move to different departments and pick up skills as long as this fits with the needs and priorities of the cooperative.

> I think certainly for new members it's a really valuable thing that they get to learn about different aspects of the business and then when they are making decisions at general meetings they can understand the ramifications that a decision might mean for various aspects of the business... I always say as well that it kind of gives people a more cooperative attitude because often in a normal job you might make problems for somebody else down the line... whereas here you might be the person that you're passing a bad job onto so you can make problems for yourself... and also the person who you've passed the bad job onto will come and tell you about it... and say, "Why did you do this?"... It would be very unusual in a normal business for a Picker on the warehouse floor to come up and moan at somebody in the Sales Team for doing something incorrectly with a customer's order... because that's the nature of hierarchy... because usually they are the lowest of the low in a normal business... so there's kind of that positive aspect of multi-skilling... it gives people a good understanding... it helps them appreciate that different nature of the business and grow cooperation. (WCM01 - WC1)

In the extract above, WCM01 identifies the key benefit of multi-skilling, that of developing a more holistic understanding of the organization that in turn improves their ability to both make decisions and understand the associated implications. Furthermore, WCM01 suggested multi-skilling has something of an equalising or levelling effect in terms of members learning how to hold others to account and be held to account by their fellow members. Indeed, from the perspective of someone with functional authority, WCM01 viewed multi-skilling as reducing the barriers between

concentrations of authority and the wider body of members, keeping members feeling integrated, and mitigating the risk of specialised or authoritative 'ivory towers'.

5.2.2 In search of masters

However, WC1's relationship with multi-skilling is not without its tensions and challenges. This is particularly evident with regards to the recruitment practices described in this section (and previously in Section 5.1). In the following extract, WCM01 explains how a change was recently made to allow more specialist recruitment.

> Recently we have changed our recruitment practices very very slightly to allow us to recruit for more specific roles and we have just... literally last week... taken on two new trial members to work on the Design Team... we already have an internal Design Team who do lots of web work, who create all of our publications, who design all of our product packaging... so they are a very highly skilled team and most of the time we manage to train people up with those skills or we were lucky enough that we recruited people to a generalist job description who had those skills and wanted to use them at the co-op... but for a number of years our coordinator of that team has desperately tried to get more resources for that team and she's tried every single option and we couldn't get the resource that way so we then decided to recruit externally for design skills but the way we did that... we didn't just go out looking for designers, we went out looking for people who had design skills but also membership qualities too... so throughout their interview process they were assessed on their design skills but they were also assessed against the member job description and against those kind of member qualities as well... so a lot of people think that that process was very successful and were keen for us to do more specific rounds of recruitment rather than generalist rounds of recruitment because it seemed like it went sort of well... but we would still... certainly for the medium term we will always be looking at that member job description and always recruiting to that member job description... as well as anything else that we might be recruiting for. (WCM01 - WC1)

The new members hired through this new approach did not start their probationary period working in the warehouse, did not experience the gradual development into formal multi-skilling, and were not expected or required to engage in multi-skilling.

Instead, following an induction they immediately assumed specialised roles. Thus, in this instance, it appears organizational need has taken precedence over commitment to the practice of multi-skilling. This is a clear instance of 'slipping' resulting from sustained 'creaking' as a result of pressure from operational needs and from those coordinating more specialist teams. However, the struggle described by WCM01 highlights how challenging it is for WCs practising multi-skilling to recruit for skilled roles because of the preferences of said specialists towards their specialisms and corresponding salaries. In turn, this highlights how the dominance of specialist working practices in the external environment serves as a driver of isomorphism, and thus of degeneration. National Government promotes specialisation, the education system focuses on specialisation, other businesses operate using specialisation, thus the workforce is specialism-oriented; creating a problem for organizations that expect multi-skilling. Furthermore, WCM01's indication that the membership has assumed a broadly favourable view of the decision to loosen the rules binding members to multi-skilling suggested a Pandora's box may have been opened toward a more specialist approach to recruitment and selection, one that threatens the practice of multi-skilling and that may be difficult to turn back from.

There are other concerns associated with the practice of multi-skilling at WC1 that might contribute to its 'creaking' and 'slipping'. WCM01 describes multi-skilling as a "double-edged sword" that can lead to issues around consistency and efficiency; such as handovers between members inevitably leading to some things falling through the cracks and some work not being done the best way possible. They argue that a WC may become overly skewed toward multi-skilling and that there is a need to find a balance, a 'Goldilocks zone'. This speaks to the underlying tensions between structuredness and structurelessness. While I view multi-skilling as being more 'structureless' than specialisation, it can evidently become a limiting and even oppressive 'structure' in terms of responding to organizational needs and the individual agency afforded to members.

5.2.3 The 'worker' identity

Formal multi-skilling was also practised at WC2. There, members are normally engaged in two or three different teams and often sit on one or more of the numerous working groups. Their complex rota system has members allocated to these various

teams and responsibilities in multiple blocks throughout a given day. WCM04 indicated that as the cooperative has grown, and teams have developed their operations the pull towards specialisation is something that has had to be resisted and remains a concern. However, despite a resistance to wholesale specialisation, there are nevertheless members who would prefer to focus on one given functional area. Furthermore, WC2 does have certain specialised roles that are occupied by members who have received additional training, often to a high level and at expense to the cooperative. Personnel and Finance are two of the more obvious areas where members have undergone training, accreditation, and gained professional qualifications. Although WCM04 asserts below that these roles and departments are not viewed as a "closed shop" and vacancies do come up, such specialisation and investment inevitably creates a situation wherein these roles are less accessible, of particular importance to the functioning of the WC, and thus present the potential for a knowledge hierarchy to emerge.

> The thing with our specialisation is we do have people trained up in certain very specialist skills where we wouldn't arbitrarily move them around for the sake of it and then give them that same level of training... like for example Personnel and employment law and all the stuff that comes with that... Finance, all the accountancy training that people do for that... but it's not a closed shop... there will be vacancies from time to time for other people to get involved and some of the other more specialised tasks like the veg buying... that is on rotation... so people do it in quite sort of full-on blocks and then they will come off it for a few months and then they'll be back into it... I don't doubt at all that there are definitely some members who would be very happy if they were fully rota'd in the kitchen, fully rota'd on veg, fully rota'd on whatever it is that is their thing... because there is undeniably a level of stress with chopping and changing tasks through the day and just having the headspace to be up to speed with all the different areas of the business... but I do think that we are quite fortunate to have the system that we have had all these years for creating a reasonably cohesive, collective co-op... I mean I know lots of other co-ops, but I'd find it very weird being in a co-op where you did have an entire strata of sort-of management/admin type people and then workers separate... I feel like everybody being a worker is fundamental to what we do here. (WCM04 - WC2)

Although WCM04 acknowledges that multi-skilling carries costs in terms of time, stress, and headspace and is therefore challenging for members, they ultimately view it as being an integral part of having enabled the development of a cohesive, collectivist WC. Crucially, they suggest that the levelling effect of multi-skilling with respect to all members identifying as 'workers' is a fundamental factor in sustaining the organization and in its ongoing success. Later in our interview, WCM04 commented that they and other members have wondered how WCs practising specialisation manage to sustain the flow of information, effective scrutiny, and member interest in the wider cooperative. Nevertheless, echoing WCM01, they acknowledge that at some point a compromise may be struck, such as the simplification of the rota system highlighted in my discussion of 'creaking interpersonal space' in Chapter 4.

5.2.4 Neither multi-skilling nor specialisation

In some WCs there exists what may be better described as 'informal multi-skilling', wherein members potentially wear several 'hats' and are rota'd across these responsibilities. However, firstly, this is not a rule of membership and, secondly, members have one primary department or role with which they are associated. For example, at WC4R members are specialised in a particular department as well as trained to be able to carry out a variety of general tasks on the shop floor: such as operating tills, taking deliveries, dealing with customers, and covering the phone yet may also be cross-trained in other departments to mitigate the risk of labour shortages and increase flexibility. This inter-departmental flexibility is viewed as being critical to the functioning of the business, but it does have its limits, some departments require specialist training that is not feasible through normal cross-training. Furthermore, functions such as Finance, IT, and Personnel (by election) along with department-specific responsibilities such as 'Buying' are divided among members, all of who retain a role in their primary department. However, positions of responsibility being held by established members remains an issue, with no clear mechanism or means of bringing newer members into these more specialised functional roles.

> It's more kind of checking everything is kind of rolling and ticking by. We are kind of very bare bones... so it's only part time, I still collate three days a week mainly... probably averaging a 40 hour week say... but most of that time is still taken up with the day-to-day of putting down... because you cut back to what

you actually need to be doing because there's a lot of worker self-management here and there should be... people just kind of get on with it and because it's a nice place to work you don't have to deal with that many grievances... so it's kind of a traditional HR [human resources] role but it's kind of skinned back to the bare bones... obviously we deal with wellbeing, sicknesses, that sort of thing... there's not too much analysis or data... I mean we get approached by lots of HR external companies looking at... we've got all this software that we can do this data to make you more efficient and to be honest I think a lot of that is bullshit, it's just kind of... it's just new spiel, it's just creating new businesses... as long as everyone is happy and you are, people are working for their own good, then you don't need a lot of that analysis or kind of... obviously anyone is welcome to go and do training and stuff like that if they want to do it but we don't, we don't do team building because it's kind of... people are generally happy here. (WCM37 - WC4W)

WC4W presented something of a challenge to the assumption that multi-skilling is 'more cooperative' than specialisation. WC4W practises specialisation with very limited movement across departments. These departments have no supervisor or manager and an ethos of self-management is both espoused and seemingly practised. As with WC4R, WC4W's Personnel function is the responsibility of a small group of elected members who carry out the function alongside their principle departmental responsibilities. The Personnel Team is described by WCM37 in the above extract as being "skinned back to bare bones" of dealing with rotas, wages, wellbeing, sickness, and what few disciplinaries there are. They also serve a line management function in order to keep the place running but their primary focus is on keeping everyone happy and working for their own good, they do not do team building and they do not engage with analytics. The system is built to limit complexity, limit problems, limit the HR function, increase worker self-management and this is enabled by specialisation. There is an attractiveness to this approach in terms of the extent of individual autonomy enabled within a framework of collectivism and I struggle to rationalise why this so-called "anarcho-syndicalist" (WCM37) approach might be 'less cooperative' than the structurally engrained multi-skilling practised at WC1 or WC2. However, WC3 offers insights as to why such an approach may be more vulnerable to 'creaking' and 'slipping' in times of crisis.

5.2.5 Siloing

Specialisation in WCs has the potential to create a siloing effect, by which I mean departments and teams may become increasingly insular, distant, and less integrated. With a similar approach to specialisation to that found at WC4W, an even more structureless approach to delivering business functions such as Personnel, and a similar lack of collective training, WC3 offers an example of a cooperative that is struggling with the deleterious effects of specialisation on cooperative practice.

> I think, yeah, there could be more of a global understanding. I'm not entirely sure how that would work though. The thing is, the only reason I would think that, or anyone would think that, is because they feel like their department is not getting understood [...] There's maybe mistrust within communications. Sometimes one department might feel a grievance and maybe state it but not have it heard properly, which then will turn into a bigger grievance, and then you have more gravity for that within that department. It can become a grudge. I don't know how you nip that in the bud. I get the impression maybe that these things are echoes of things that have happened before with different situations, but the personal allegiances still remain from previous things, I don't know. (WCM20 - WC3)

In the extract above WCM20, a relatively new member of WC3, shares their perceptions of how miscommunications and misunderstandings between departments happen and also how these seem to be compounded by historical disagreements between these groups. At WC3, the majority of established members have remained in the same department and same role for many years, while newer members who have joined in the past four to five years have not been afforded the time for rotation during their inductions due to a perceived need to focus on getting on with the work at hand; compounding the siloing effect of specialisation. This inter-departmental fragmentation has become increasingly evident in the wake of a series of challenges that have placed historically unusual levels of financial strain on the organization. In considering how WC3 might be able to regain some of that flexibility and improve the quality of their cooperation, WCM21 suggests the cooperative needs to address the recruitment process in order to break the reactive pattern of hiring for specific skills and lack of holistic induction training. Below, WCM25, offers commentary on the possibility of introducing multi-skilling.

Yeah, we would have to break the place down and go from the beginning... I mean certainly people like... I wouldn't be here... I've done some time in manufacturing and I've done some picking in the Warehouse when I have pitched in and helped but I have no interest in... I'm happy with three days a week... I have no interest in like driving a truck one day a week or being a warehouser... but I am happy to help... so I am all for the multi-skilling so that people can for instance one day a month or whatever you work in a different department... I think that would be really beneficial... and everyone can choose like one other department or two if they want so that they can... because obviously multi-skilling in every area... and I don't know how other co-ops do it... it's tricky... I mean, how do you... without sounding... condescending... how do I multi-skill someone to do the IT job? If they don't have any IT ability... I could multi-skill someone to do HR to certain degree but without experience, how do I? (WCM25 - WC3)

WCM25's proposed intervention might be achievable but falls short of dealing with ongoing issues amongst established members and entrenched interdepartmental mistrust. A proposed solution to this would be to encourage existing members to engage with a limited rotation programme. However, the feeling is that such an intervention would require overcoming the resistance of members to spending time in unfamiliar departments and away from departments that 'need' their productivity as well as a general unwillingness to absorb the associated costs.

5.2.6 Summary

Multi-skilling conjures the image of the collective chipping in together to make light work of the task through solidaristic cooperation. It promotes the development of holistic organizational understandings which improves decision-making through appreciation of the implications or ramifications of decisions. In contrast, specialisation involves members being assigned to a singular department and function. It is a simpler, clearer and more economically efficient system of working. Multi-skilling is suggested to have valuable 'levelling' and 'solidaristic' effects that help normalise accountability and confer a shared 'worker' identity. However, it is a 'double-edged sword' that bears challenges around efficiency, consistency, and the 'headspace' members have available to consider and pay attention across various roles as well as their responsibilities as

owners and directors. In practice, multi-skilling is quite variable, almost never absolute, and challenging for established and expanded WCs.

Specialisation can be both popular and successful because it gives primacy to the autonomy of the individual over any collective benefit from multi-skilling or other integrative activities. WC4W highlights that putting individual member wellbeing and satisfaction first, the cooperative appears to achieve a kind of synergistic 'sense of relevance'. However, such unintegrated organizing can contribute 'siloing' and inflexibility that hamper responsiveness to internal and external challenges. Specialisation makes it more difficult to sustain the flow of information, oversight and scrutiny, and the 'sense of relevance' across the 'whole-a-making'. Pressure on more holistic practice emerges from the external environment as well as internal pressures for efficiency and, more problematically, from the membership. Though multi-skilling may be difficult to sustain, it is far more difficult to go back to or introduce from the ground up in an established and scaled organizing.

The tension between multi-skilling and specialisation centres on the deeper issue of member participation and 'sense of relevance'. The most meaningful potential benefits of multi-skilling are found in its intangible yet seemingly agreed ability to improve the quality of organizational democracy through sustaining multiple points of identification across the LoP. This is not a short-term objective and is difficult to 'balance' in the face of immediate costs and tangible inefficiencies. Multi-skilling should be viewed as something of an aspirational practice as well as a functional approach to organizing, part of the 'Goldilocks zone' to be moved towards but never quite fully achieved or realised. It says 'we are trying to be equal and share in all manner of toil' while also providing meaningful benefits in terms of organizational integration, particularly as WCs grow beyond the scale at which members can potentially know all other members on a social or day-to-day basis.

5.3 Unlearning and learning

In this section I turn my attention to the dissonance between cooperative practice and the realities of the external environment, exploring how WCs engage members in the practice of 'unlearning and learning'; the process of letting go of old and taking on new assumptions, behaviours, and practices. In 'The hierarchical hangover', I begin by highlighting the need for WCs to help members overcome the conventional

assumptions, behaviours, and practices of the external environment. In 'Points of reference', I explore the means by which WCs seek to facilitate this 'unlearning and learning', including material boundary objects, structured introductory experiences, and ongoing support and training. Finally, in 'Acclimatisation' and 'Sharing the load' I focus on the problems WCs encounter in engendering and sustaining a sense of responsibility for the wider cooperative.

5.3.1 The hierarchical hangover

The practice of 'unlearning and learning' is essential for breaking down the assumptions and behaviours socialised and reinforced by the external isomorphic environment, replacing these assumptions and behaviours with those essential to the practice of cooperation. Dealing with this 'hierarchical hangover' is neither straightforward nor ever 'complete'; the practice of 'unlearning and learning' requires a multifaceted and ongoing effort on the part of WCs. CMA3 suggests that although WCs might struggle with the activities and functions of 'running a business' in the conventional sense, they make up for this is in the quality of the relationships between members. It is through these high-quality relationships and interrelationships that CMA3 saw WCs overcoming their processual, functional, and structural challenges. The importance of the quality of the relationships between members furthers the need for both finding the 'right kind of member' but also for enabling members both new and old to improve the quality of their cooperative practice.

> We're in a constant reality where everything that surrounds us is telling us all the time that individualism is natural to human beings and competition is natural and dog-eat-dog is natural and we are never told... and I'm not saying that's not true but I think what is also true is that human beings are cooperators and children aren't taught to do it at school, nobody talks about it, there's nothing about... there's very little about co-ops in business schools for example. (CMA4)

In the extract above, CMA4 explains the need for a combination of structures and approaches to effectively sustain cooperative practice. They expand on this in articulating how the assumptions carried with new members into WCs include everything from ontological notions of how the world works to the means by which decisions are made, notions of power, and understandings of individual responsibility; summarising this later in the interview as "mental geography". Below, CMA1 expands

on CMA4's contribution, illuminating the paradox faced by members with respect to cooperation requiring of them in many ways the opposite of the behaviours learned in the wider environment; that is to leap from a competitive worldview to a relational worldview. Taking this in hand, it becomes more understandable that even those individuals inclined toward the notion or ideal of 'cooperation' might still face a significant journey in terms of the 'unlearning and learning' necessary to develop healthy cooperative practice.

> Lack of communication skills and trust... because people are brought up not to trust other people not to be confident, not to be honest... because actually that doesn't pay in the dog eat dog world... but it's the only thing that works in the worker co-op... so it's the extent to which people have to unlearn competitive... mind-sets and predispositions and natural, normal states... and move into a different normal state which is where you're building and assuming trust... that you're building and assuming equality... that you're building and assuming honesty and openness... these are very difficult things and they have to be learnt... and that's another limiting factor. (CMA1)

While acknowledging that it involves 'quite a cultural shift', CMA2 suggested this process is not necessarily as complicated as people may think, and that it is about empowering members to either develop critical comprehensions of conventional business practices or giving member permission to not 'go there in the first place'. If conventional practice is not challenged or avoided, it is more likely that members will take approaches that are detrimental to cooperation or learn new approaches that are qualitatively uncooperative.

5.3.2 Points of reference

One of the more straightforward means of guiding members toward cooperative practice is through the creation of instrumental boundary objects in the form of codified materials, both regarding cooperation more generally and the specific WC. However, established WCs can overlook the importance of developing and maintaining such materials in order to render them useful to members.

At WC4R, the membership had recently decided, after attending a Cooperatives UK training event, to create a handbook for members in order to address the gaps between the knowledge of more established members and newer members. WCM36 noted that

part of the reason such materials were overlooked was because of a collective assumption on the part of established members that this information was already known. That is, at some point in time someone must have been told about the way things are or perhaps could have gathered such information. This assumption of a kind of 'cooperative osmosis' leaves new members in a position where they either figure it out by themselves or ask questions of more experienced members, assuming they have the confidence and the opportunity to do so. It is clearly problematic that the onus for illuminating the cooperative might be put on the new member as opposed to being something established members are responsible for proactively provisioning to probationary or new 'full' members. Below, WCM34 articulates the struggle at WC4R to find a balance between a structure that is sufficiently structureless as to promote the autonomy and self-determination valued by the cooperative while still being sufficiently structured as to support members.

> We do not want to be a kind of intrusive employer and be very prescriptive about everything... we want people to feel like it's a welcoming place to work and that they can have a say and so on... if you don't take actual steps to make that happen then you get some people who respond really well to that... put in that environment and thrive, they are confident people, and they are able to get on in all manner of ways and you get a really good successful member... but obviously that's not the case for everyone... there's all different kinds of people and personalities that come and so I think the challenge is to kind of have that loose enough structure that people appreciate working within but tight enough for people to... to properly be looking after people and supporting people at work... so that is definitely... it's a hard thing to achieve and we have... we are always struggling with that really... I think a lot of it is training... and if you can get best quality training into new staff as quickly as possible... I think we have... we are much more focused on that now... and I think we are seeing the benefits of that and you end up with newer people being able to access the information and access... be able to involve themselves in different parts of the co-op better than in the not-so-recent past but it's hard. (WCM34 - WC4R)

This commentary infers that the WC is in the process of learning from lessons of the past and is therefore trying to find an approach that achieves their desired outcomes without allowing themselves to become overly prescriptive. Here we again see the

challenge presented by individual differences to the development of a cooperative organizational culture. The MJD is another instrumental boundary object that can play a role in facilitating unlearning and learning, both in the immediacy of probation and as a point of reference for membership in general. Instead of providing individual job descriptions, WC2 combined the MJD with team-level 'charters' which outline the collective roles and responsibilities, as well as delineate specific roles within a given team structure. These charters also clarify the chain of accountability, both within the team and in relation to the cooperative. In combination with the practice of multi-skilling, this approach serves to mitigate the tendency for individuals to 'draw a box' around their specific role and begin to regard responsibilities outside of that 'box' as not being their concern.

WCM37 suggested that part of the challenge with developing and implementing codified materials is getting the membership to the point where they understand that policies and procedures facilitate rather than constrain individual autonomy. In the commentary below they highlight the need to reduce the 'greyness' and 'nail things down', be this with regards to working conditions, contracts, or any other aspect of general policy. They argued this improves the quality of the working environment by increasing the amount of certainty, particularly for new members.

> As HR it's really important to just kind of nail things down... like, yeah what do we want to do with sickness? What do we want to do with this? And policies... because people thought policies was like this real kind of like top-down structure and it's actually not... it's more democratic because you are all deciding what we do as opposed to HR which used to be really grey and it's just like well, what did we used to do with this? Oh... what seems fair? And then you can't help but bring in your own bias... because you might not like someone... but you kind of go, well they want this... what do they get? So we have kind of really nailed it and it's a lot more structured... and also, when people start... because it used to be just really really chaotic when you used to start... you didn't have a clue what was going on... and just being able to give people bits of paper and say look, this is the working conditions, this is your contract, this is... etcetera etcetera... which obviously just make it a better place to work because you know where you are rather than like... you just used to turn up and be bumbling around going, 'Christ, what should I do? Who should I ask?' (WCM37 - WC4W)

This returns us to the underlying tension between structurelessness and structuredness, highlighting how the notion of the 'tyranny of structurelessness' (Freeman, 1970) might ring more true in established and scaled WCs than one might assume. Interestingly, WCM37 viewed resistance to this form of structural development as coming from a libertarian, laissez-faire element of members who interpret cooperatives as being about "being your own boss", while the more structured approach serves to enable a more anarcho-syndicalist culture that acknowledges that each member has every other members as their 'boss' so-to-speak; speaking to Follett's notions of 'power with' and 'responsibility with'.

5.3.3 Acclimatisation

CMA4 argued that while explicit boundary objects can help to guide members through their cooperative journeys, they are by themselves insufficient for engendering and sustaining cooperative practice. In order to acclimatise probationary members, most WCs put them through some kind of 'structured experience' of practice-based learning.

Earlier in this chapter I described the WC1's approach to introducing members to the practice of multi-skilling. At WC2, the probationary programme incorporated a similarly extensive range of information and training with the aim of preparing individuals for the role of both worker and owner. This included training 'on the job' across the various teams as well as sessions on commercial strategy, the Personnel function, and basic Finance. Probationary members also attend workshops on workplace behaviour (e.g. 'banter' does not really exist) and their responsibilities as an employer. Further to this, members are tasked with three projects: a visit to a supermarket (i.e. competitor research), a pricing project (e.g. understanding margins), and a visit to a supplier (i.e. understanding supply chains). Within this programme it is possible to identify learning activities dealing with both operational and coordination components of membership as well as a clear intention toward engendering a holistic overview in order to enhance members 'sense of relevance' and facilitate cooperative practice. WC2's probationary training programme adds value to my present discussion in its focus on the duality of membership, evidenced by the willingness to devote resources to the development of members ability to engage in directorial responsibilities through finance and strategy training.

Formal multi-skilling was not practised at WC4R, yet a system of basic cross-departmental training did exist. WCM34 explained that this training is intended to ensure members are not overly specialised to their primary team and are able to be flexible with regards to filling-in for other teams when needed. In contrast to that found at WC2, the training at WC4R served the immediate operational needs of the cooperative and encourages an amount of holistic awareness but did not explicitly engage new members in 'cooperative practice'.

WCs also provide more dynamic 'in practice' support to members. The form this takes, where support comes from, and the extent to which this extends beyond probation varies across cooperatives. At WC1, the Personnel Team handled the probationary process as well as any ongoing training or member development. The same was true for WC3, where the Personnel function has recently been restructured from a shared role to a single specialist role. Again, the same applied at WC4R, where the Personnel function had recently taken on support from an external provider to deal with ongoing issues and advise on redesigning the function. WC4W and WC2 offered slightly different features that are worthwhile giving further attention to.

At WC4W, the Personnel function coordinated the membership process but they also had a mentoring system that involves of probationary members being assigned two mentors who guide them through the process, serve as points-of-contact for questions and/or concerns, and are involved in the new member's appraisals. Below, WCM36 recalls their experience of a similar mentoring system at WC4R.

> Yeah, someone sort of looked after me, made sure I was ok, and pointed out things... just for a while until you find your feet... I kind of feel in some ways these days you get your sort of basic training and after that... you can ask people about specific duties or anything like that... I think we are quite open in that way but I think to have a connection to one particular person you feel you can talk to about things would be better... I think we should go back to that in some ways because you can easily get lost. (WCM36 - WC4R)

Their view was that this mechanism for guiding probationary members through the process should be reinstated due to its ability to overcome some of the key issues experienced by new members, namely the lack of an identifiable point-of-contact within their immediate working environment and the potential for new members to

become "lost". Likewise, the rate at which new members are expected to 'hit the ground running' called for a more immediate, tighter, feedback loop in order to facilitate their stepping into and up to such a busy operation. WCM36 noted that in the absence of a formal mentoring system the onus of information discovery or practice correction was placed on the probationary or new member, highlighting how older members can sometimes unfairly cast judgement without reflecting on whether they carry some responsibility toward their less experienced colleagues. This raises an interesting question regarding the extent of responsibility established members feel towards newer members; whether simply as workers or as something more meaningful and 'relevant'. Indeed, regardless of who has a formal responsibility for guiding new members, there are grounds for viewing the development of members as an inherently collective effort.

At WC2, the Personnel Team lead on most membership concerns, but a committee handles membership selection and a Training department exists to deliver individual and collective education. WC2 was the only case cooperative that holds a regular fortnightly training session open to the entire membership in order to enhance cooperative practice and share information. For example, I observed a training session on pensions that involved a presentation and Q&A from a professional advisor. Below, WCM04 outlines some training in response to the need to ensure that members can effectively engage with one another as the cooperative grows.

> We have done quite a lot of other stuff over the years, so we have had people in doing stuff around positive communication, listening skills, some stuff around the difference between feelings and thoughts... so it's all kind of there in our culture but I think it's more implicit and not explicitly recognised... so I'm hopeful that there might be a cultural shift that we can bring about... even if it's on a small scale... around communication and speaking to each other... we don't have flaming rows all the time and I think we are quite well behaved as far as co-ops go... but there's always room for improvement [...] It's always much easier in theory than it is in practice... nobody likes to hear negative things... NVC [non-violent communication] is all about how to have those conversations more... value-neutrally I suppose... it's to try and take out the emotional response from that as much as possible and to make sure that discussions are productive and well received than being too critical. (WCM04 - WC2)

WC2 had put substantial resources into working with the membership to improve communicative practices. Although WCM04 did not believe non-violent communication (NVC) would be fully adopted, it was clear from the above extract that they saw potential for this training to help members better communicate around frustrating or critical issues by removing some of the 'the emotional response' and emphasising the need for productive conversations. By investing in ongoing mutual support, reflection and dialogue, WC2 had more consistently well-developed capacities for sustaining cooperative practice and the organization as a whole; reducing the pressures of 'creaking' and potentially preventing practices from 'slipping'. A small but important example of this was in the common language members could draw on to discuss issues such as 'headspace' and 'consent'.

5.3.4 Sharing the load

Even those WCs with membership policies and MJDs struggle with their shared understanding of what membership meant in practice, the varied responsibilities that come with the role, and what they can reasonably expect of one another. This issue is intrinsically connected to the practice of 'unlearning and learning' as it encompasses the how desirable or undesirable understandings, behaviours, and assumptions are negotiated by members. Central to this problematic is the assumption that WCs are supposed to represent a better way of working; a prefigurative approach to human economic activity that improves the quality of life of participants. In theory, placing wellbeing higher on the scale of priorities than conventional business entities, which are perceived as exploitative and driven above all else by profit. However, the reality of cooperative working is far from perfect.

> People, I think, need to take more responsibility for the basic tasks in here... if everyone was a little bit more cooperative we wouldn't even have to hire a cleaner... not that I would want to do anyone out of a job but it could have been done between all of us on a rota system... there's not that much cleaning between forty-odd people. (WCM25 - WC3)

Above, WCM25 expresses their frustrations regarding member engagement with general tasks around WC3. They suggested that members could more actively engage in taking on responsibilities, looking after the business, and doing some of the very basic chores that are otherwise neglected. Their choice of phrasing, "if everyone was a

little bit more cooperative", is evocative of the notion of members 'taking ownership' and the premise that members can become detached from the conception of the cooperative as a collective endeavour, instead viewing it as something 'other'. Contributing to this narrative of 'creaking' and 'slipping' member attitudes and behaviour, WCM36 suggests below that members of WC4R seem to forget they own the business and that it is not some entity they should so easily behave begrudgingly toward, nor one they do not have it within their power to change.

> Co-ops are amazing... that's why I'm still here... but they can be the most frustrating bloody things in the world... I think some people do want to be managed and some people don't understand that this is a worker's cooperative so it's owned and run by us... in some ways we are in an unusual position... it is our business... and some people will gripe about, 'Oh this that and the other...' Well, you are part of the business so why not think about changing it? (WCM36 - WC4R)

WCM36 felt it would be good for the membership of WC4R if they collectively reflected upon and reviewed their work practices and the way members interact with one another. This was suggested to be particularly true with regards to their general attitude towards meetings, which represent the only forum in which all members simultaneously engage. While meetings are a central part of cooperation, WCM36 indicated there seems to be an attitude that they are something of an inconvenience and an afterthought. Interestingly, this need for renewing members' attitudes toward their role as 'members' was directed at more established members. Interesting in that is underscores the notion that over time members may be prone to losing their initial interest in or passion for cooperative practice, 'slipping' towards feeling it is something of a burden, one they would prefer to shirk if at all possible.

At WC2, where members multi-skilled across at least two teams, within a given team members may be 'active' to a greater or lesser extent. WCM04 explained that although a member might regularly work in a team and thus attend team meetings, they may not be actively involved with managing that area of the business. Therefore, not fully engaging in discussions, taking on additional tasks, assuming roles, or broadening their responsibilities. This goes part-way to explaining an observation I made in my fieldnotes that seemed out of place at WC2. During a meeting in which several different tasks and responsibilities needed to be distributed there was an obvious reluctance, even

reticence, from members to put themselves forth for certain tasks whilst they were clearly willing to take-on others. In our conversation afterwards, WCM04 suggested there may be a much simpler and 'mundane' reason for this varied response, the rota system. Members are generally aware of what tasks will or will not be allocated time in the rota and base their decisions on this in balance with their existing workload. Only when a particular responsibility has become sufficiently operationally critical or 'big' will it potentially begin to be allocated hours in the rota meaning that the 'system' does not recognise or account for a potentially significant amount of the 'work' that keeps the cooperative functioning. The implication of this being that many of the tasks and responsibilities members take on in the teams they work in require them to either make time during breaks and quiet periods or take their work home with them.

Through my interviews and observations, I came to understand this was quite common across WCs. For these extra-curricular activities, cooperatives often rely on the goodwill and motivation of the individual member or group to carry them forward. At first, this struck me as being indicative of an over-stretched organization where the workers have turned to self-exploitation and the business has come to rely on 'sweat equity'. However, upon reflection I began to balance this with the understanding that at WC2, for example, there existed a culture where part of members' ownership behaviour involved taking on tasks that may not fit within their remunerated hours. Nevertheless, it was clear from WCM04's response and from my conversations with other members that this is seen as a problem, not least because such additional work cannot be 'expected' of all members and some members will inevitably be more or less willing or able to take work on in this way; a kind of mutual exploitation.

At WC3, there continued to be a need for members to 'wear different hats' in terms of taking on secondary or additional responsibilities beyond the immediate remit of the fixed roles most members currently occupy. However, it seemed to fall on the same relatively small group of people to step-up – both internally and externally. This is an outcome of the combination of specialisation and a lack of cultural expectancy on members to contribute to the wellbeing of the cooperative, beyond the specific job one is 'employed' to do. This has proved particularly problematic for finding members to support department managers and to attend external events as representatives of the cooperative. In light of this 'slipping' of cooperative practice with respect to general responsibilities, I feel it is worthwhile returning to WCM21 and WCM37's assertions

regarding the current approach to departmental management at WC. Management roles were supposed to be elected annually by the respective team members. However, in most teams the role of manager had gone unchallenged and unchanged for several years. WCM21's feeling was that a limit should be placed on 'terms' and the role should be actively rotated, even made a compulsory part of membership.

> I think it should be rotated far more, it should be part of when somebody comes into the co-op... it should be that part of that role is that at some point you will be on the Management Team and we should be... because some people just don't... I think it should be shared for a number of different reasons... shared for somebody's own personal growth, shared for just having a fresh set of eyes on things... shared for not having the same people having the same burden for years... or the same amount of voice... so I've always said I think it should be rotated and I don't know... maybe this isn't very cooperative but it should be compulsory. (WCM21 - WC3)

Though it may seem extreme and is certainly driven by WCM21's underlying frustrations with the state of affairs at WC3, I feel there is something of value in their proposal: the notion that members of a WC should not simply be able to assume a position of authority but that they might be expected, required even, to do so.

5.3.5 Summary

Initially, 'unlearning and learning involves overcoming the 'hierarchical hangover' that is the conventional 'mental geography' socialised and reinforced by the environment. However, the process of 'unlearning and learning' is neither linear nor finite and requires ongoing attention and investment. The creation of instrumental boundary objects can support learning. These must be rendered meaningful and 'relevant' to members and require ongoing maintenance if they are to remain effective. In their absence or inadequacy, the onus for muddling their way through or asking questions falls to the individual, requiring an amount of confidence that can limit the accessibility of the WC to different personalities. Boundary objects may focus on individuals, teams, or the whole cooperative. However, WCs must be alert to the risk of over-structuring. Where a suitable balance is struck, resources enable members to more readily interface with the cooperative and render it 'relevant'. Boundary objects only take us so far. Members need to be 'acclimatised' into cooperative practice. Probationary training and mentoring

programmes can effectively provide this for new members. There is a need for a balance between the emphasis placed on the 'worker' and 'owner' dimensions of membership. An exemplary approach at WC2 features a programme of ongoing collective training and education. However, like appraisal systems (see Section 4.3.1, 'Passing judgement'), training practices and mentoring programmes were under pressure across the case cooperatives; highlighting that even practices perceived as being valuable are vulnerable to the pressures of the immediacy.

Established and scaled WCs struggle with sustaining a consistent shared understanding of membership responsibilities and expectations in practice. Cooperatives are supposed to offer a better way of working, yet there were tensions around how the workload is shared, where responsibilities fall, and the extent to which members might to take work home with them. In each case there was an identifiable group of members who were more engaged than others. While this may be necessary, if not inevitable, it is doubtlessly unhealthy for the long-term sustainability of the WCs due to the potential for exploitation of these members or the rise of an oligarchy based on knowledge, experience, involvement, and availability. Underlying the notion of 'sharing the load' is the need for members to 'take ownership', as opposed to 'slipping' toward a state of detachment. In this detached state members begin to forget to take ownership, begrudge the cooperative, and fail to use the power they possess to change the organization for the better. It is suggested that many of the issues explored in this section, as well as in the previous sections with regards to how to engage members in cooperative practice, might at least in part be resolved through members experiencing the nature of authority in collectivist-democratic organizing and thus potentially developing more of an appreciation of the cooperative as more an 'association of workers' than an entity 'other' to themselves.

5.4 Chapter summary

In this chapter I have explored the tensions and strains that manifest in and around the journeys of individuals through WCs. Specifically, I examined tensions and strains in the processes of 'becoming members', 'organizing work', 'unlearning and learning'. What emerges from this analysis is that within the continuous struggle to sustain the integration of individuals through a 'sense of relevance', there is a tension between the

idea of the autonomous individual engaging in a collective project and the idea of the cooperative as a collective entity.

The duality of the 'worker-member' identity is a key focal point for this struggle. As a result of their working practices and equality of remuneration, WCs find it difficult to acquire or develop the necessary skills base to deliver higher-level business functions and specialist operations. Recruiting individuals based solely, or primarily, on the fit between their skills and the operational needs of the cooperative increases the risk of dissonance between members and the practice of cooperation. Member job descriptions and membership policies serve as a means of grounding recruitment in cooperative practice and redressing the balance of the duality. However, it remains unclear how successful these tools are in enabling recruitment to meet operational needs; recent adjustments to WC1's recruitment policy suggests there are still issues to be resolved.

The potential for tension between established and newer members presents a further focal point for the struggle identified here. Three conditions emerge as being necessary for newer members to develop the fullest 'sense of relevance' possible. Firstly, physical space must be created for new members, whether this entails established members leaving the WC or stepping away from certain roles to allow others to try their hand. Secondly, psychosocial space must be created by established members giving newer members room to render the cooperative meaningful and 'relevant' to them; this will be explored further when I turn my attention to the cultural level in Chapter 6. Thirdly, established members need to take an active interest in empowering newer members to be able to occupy the physical space available and effectively engage in rendering the psychosocial space 'relevant'. While some members will 'evolve' themselves regardless of the presence of multi-skilling or specialisation, the former appears to enable more dynamic individual self-actualisation. To be sustainable and useful to the cooperative, this 'evolving' must involve a process of taking on and letting go of positions and responsibilities. Where accumulation of positions and responsibilities occurs, cooperative practice cannot be sustained because other members will either resent this behaviour or, more likely, become increasingly detached and lose their 'sense of relevance'.

The structuration of working practices was another key focal point of individual-level tensions. Most prominently is the struggle between the idealised 'multi-skilling' approach and that of 'specialisation', which fits with conventional organizational

wisdom in terms of operational efficiency and competitive effectiveness. Exploration of these working practices revealed that high levels of multi-skilling produced tensions with respect to the fragmentation of 'headspace' and thus ability of individuals to focus on their work. Furthermore, in combination with the relatively equal levels of remuneration found across these WCs, multi-skilling resulted in difficulties acquiring and/or developing the skills and capabilities needed by expanded and scaled businesses. On the other hand, specialisation created integration problems in terms of the reduced 'relevance' of between members, departments, and across the whole of the organization.

Furthermore, more specialised approaches pose difficulties in terms of positions of functional authority (see discussion of situationally determined and responsive authority in sections 4.1.3 and 4.1.4); these are either 'additional' roles that members take on alongside their specialised role or are specialised roles in themselves. In the absence of multi-skilling, these positions can 'creak' and 'slip' into further detachment from the wider membership, resulting in the emergence of formal hierarchy and the loss of legitimacy; that is to say, oligarchy. One of the key strengths of more multi-skilling-oriented approaches is that positions of functional authority are integrated into the wider operational milieu, enabling the WC to sustain a more consistent 'worker identity' throughout the membership. However, the empirical evidence explored in this thesis indicates an ongoing pressure toward specialisation as WCs age and scale due to loss of internally developed skills and increasing complexity. Yet, the overwhelming weight of experiential evidence presented herein suggests a need for WCs to lean closer to the practices of multi-skilling, job-rotation, and overlapping experience.

The practice of 'unlearning and learning' is a crucial part of, if not the, solution to sustaining cooperative practice in the face of this struggle to balance individual autonomy and the needs of the collective. However, the practice itself is a focal point for the very struggle it addresses. For example, the creation of boundary objects that guide and support members as well as facilitate a collective 'sense of relevance' to be articulated can be viewed as inherently mistrusting, undemocratic, and oppressive toward individual autonomy. Nevertheless, the acclimatisation of members into the practice of cooperation remains as critical to sustaining cooperation as the process of decompression is to a deep-sea diver. The external environment is not cooperative, the assumptions, behaviours, practices, and institutions of society at large do not fit with cooperative practice without modification. Induction training, probationary mentoring,

regular appraisals, and mutual support can all contribute to the successful acclimatisation of new members. Indeed, WCs engage these methods with varying degrees of success and commitment. However, where WCs appear to fall short is in addressing the need to engage existing members in ongoing training that continuously challenges and facilitates reflection on working practices.

In this chapter I have elucidated where tensions emerged at the individual level of organizing. In doing so I have offered insights into both the fragility and strength of cooperative membership and the practices and processes that can help members to move closer to the 'Goldilocks zone' and create the 'sense of relevance' necessary to sustain cooperative practice. I highlighted how multiple identities across the LoP can serve to facilitate integrative process in the 'total situation' but create more immediate issues with the 'sense of relevance' experienced by members with respect to 'the situation' of their day-to-day work. Feeding into this is the friction between the 'conventional' practice and cooperative practice and the challenge this creates for recruitment and maintaining member engagement, alignment, and imagination. Concurrently, it is possible to see how 'unlearning and learning' is vital to not only integrating new members but also sustaining integration over time. Central to WCs' success and survival is negotiating the balance between structuring participating, working, and learning to support cooperation with the need to acknowledge and respect the autonomy and agency of members. That is, as free and equal democratic participants in the 'whole-a-making'.

The empirical analysis explored in this Chapter develop the four heuristic constructs I introduced in Chapter 4 in the following ways. For 'relevance', my analysis at the individual level of organizing highlights a need for finding and sustaining individual meaning within the context of the collective project. Likewise, it suggests that this requires both the individual to actively engage with organizing and for the collective to actively seek ways to increase the meaning of the individual to organizing. A key contribution is that of the unifying 'worker identity' noted at WC4, which highlights how identities were and could be more or less fragmented, siloed, or integrated across my case WCs. My analysis around 'unlearning and learning' explains how 'relevance' is a quality that could be attended as well as the means, methods, and boundary objects available to WCs and individual members. The powerful, seemingly inevitable, pull of specialisation is an important example of 'creaking' and 'slipping'. These heuristics are

also furthered by the distance revealed between the conventional and the cooperative as well as insights into the ease with which divisions and acrimonious relations can develop even amongst seasoned cooperators. Lastly the individual level of organizing contributes to the notion of the 'Goldilocks zone' in terms of there being an ideal of integrated 'cooperative' working, the pragmatic balancing of various dimensions of specialisation and multi-skilling in 'real-world' cooperation, and the tension between the prioritisation of structurelessness and structuredness experienced and desired by individuals and the collective with respect to assumptions, expectations, and behaviours.

In the following chapter I turn to the cultural level of organizational analysis trough exploration of the practice of 'keeping it together'.

6.0 Keeping it together

The preceding chapter offered the first pillar of my four-part grounded theory analysis regarding my three sub-questions by developing the concept of 'relevance' introduced in Chapter 4, integrating the heuristics of 'creaking' and 'slipping' into its analysis of tensions and strains in working practices, the meaning of membership, and processes of learning and sustaining the practice of cooperation. In this chapter I offer the second pillar through exploration of the cultural level of analysis. 'Keeping it together' entails ongoing 'reviewing and renewing' of the needs and aspirations of members that compose the overarching 'purpose' of the cooperative and 'turning outwards' to engage with the wider landscape of cooperative practice. Furthermore, it requires balancing the beneficial 'sense of uniqueness' subjectively and intersubjectively held by members, with the tendency toward a 'sense of exceptionalism' arising from the prefigurative differentiation of the organization. In turn, this necessitates an active awareness on the part of members, new and old, regarding the inherency of 'creaking' and the potential for 'slipping' of the coherency of the collective 'worldview'.

In Section 6.1 I first turn to the purposive nature of WCs, exploring this through how they initially come together, tensions around being prefigurative as opposed to conventional, and the practices of 'reviewing and renewing' and 'turning outwards'. My key point in this section focuses on the need to (re)negotiate the binding purpose of WCs through intentionally looking both inwards and outwards in the process of rendering practice 'relevant'.

In Section 6.2 I consider the perceptions and realities of WCs as very distinct and different organizations, not only from conventional businesses but also from each other, asking whether they are special, how special they are, and reflecting on the pitfalls of feeling too special. My key point in this section is on the important role played by a 'sense of uniqueness' in sustaining cooperation and the dangers of 'slipping' towards a 'sense of exceptionalism' that precipitates internal degeneration and isolationism.

In Section 6.3 the third section, I attend to members' experience of cultural change, exploring this through the influence of 'success', feelings about members coming and going, the power of established members, and how change can be responded to more positively. My key point in this section is the need for acknowledging and integrating

the increasing diversity of 'legitimate perspectives' and positions that emerge over time and scale, be this regarding operations, strategy, or the treatment of different members.

6.1 Purposive prefiguration

In this section I explore the centrality of 'purpose' in WCs and how this sense of a reason for being becomes strained over time and scale. Its four sub-sections draw heavily on extracts from my interviews with cooperative movement actors (CMAs) in which they consider the reasons WCs form ('Coming together'); how this reasoning can lose its 'relevance' to members ('Why can't we just be normal); and how this can potentially be attended to ('Reviewing and renewing' and 'Turning outwards'). Emphasised in this exploration is the importance of ongoing negotiation and the ability of members to engage in what Follett (2003b) calls 'constructive conflict'. The underlying tension between structuredness and structurelessness is once again manifested in the relative openness of WCs and members to challenging their own existence and finding new means of rendering themselves 'relevant' to one another and to the landscape beyond.

6.1.1 Coming together

WCs are purposive organizations; they are created to address or redress a set of needs and aspirations shared or identified by those involved. These shared needs and aspirations bring together and bind autonomous individuals into a collective entity. Thus, they form the nucleus of the cooperative's purpose, reason for being, and overall 'worldview'. Although the needs, aspirations, and purpose of a WC may never be fully codified (i.e. rendered explicit), they are the core visionary boundary objects through which members derive solidarity, meaning, and their 'sense of relevance'.

> There's this wonderful phrase in the kind of top level definition of any co-op which is, 'people coming together to meet their common social, cultural, and economic needs and aspirations'... worker co-ops very often will be a group of people who meet each other... who come together in a particular situation or a particular locality... [Design Co-op] came out of an industrial dispute in a printing business, [Tech Co-op] came out of somebody in Manchester who got hold of the idea and enthused all of his friends who were feeling a bit miserable and persuaded them that the thing to do would be for him to train them up as coders and for them to come together and start a business together... and [Film

> Co-op] is two people who met at film school, went out into the industry, agreed it was totally shit and that they needed to do things differently. (CMA1)

CMA1's commentary above highlights two valuable understandings. Firstly, that WCs tend to manifest around a particular conflict, dispute, or dissatisfaction with extant social, cultural, and economic factors, suggesting there is an inherently oppositional, reactionary, or defensive dynamic in their formation. Historically, cooperatives have emerged when dissatisfaction with the status quo converged with a belief that an alternative was possible, be this to solve some problem, gain additional freedoms, or attain distance from certain forms of organization, typically based on self-empowerment and a desire to be different and do differently. Secondly, that their 'coming together' occurs in a particular situation or locality, highlighting a boundedness to the people, place, and time in which this 'coming together' occurs. Thus, WCs are created by a particular group of autonomous individuals, faced with a particular set of shared needs or aspirations, seeking to collectively address or redress these at a particular moment and with a particular prefigurative vision as to how 'things should be'. In that place, at that time, it is much easier for the individuals involved to feel meaningfully connected to the novel collective project upon which they are embarking; they understand its 'relevance' to them and feel 'relevant' to it.

WCs are often established to address a combination of social, cultural, and economic needs and aspirations. However, the lines between these needs and aspirations are often unclear or intertwined, creating immediate potential for confusion regarding the purpose of the organization and therefore the meanings individuals perceive or attach to it. This potential for confusion is indicative of the risk of divergent interpretations and emergent conflicts. WCs tend to be primarily focused toward economic and sometimes cultural needs and aspirations, while other forms of cooperative organizations may be primarily driven by and are more suited to addressing social needs and aspirations (e.g. community cooperatives). This is not to say that WCs might not be formed around aspirations toward social benefit, but it does highlight the function of the WC model as being primarily directed toward the economic engagement of individuals:

> What I would say is that where you've got a really clearly defined economic and cultural shared need that is kind of readily identifiable and easier to pin down and also easier to organize around because if it's an economic need you're

saying, 'Well, we need this and we need it next year or we need it now... we need to create some decent jobs for ourselves or we need to do this'. When it's coming out of the idea that we need to change certain things about society and actually having looked into I think the way to do it would be for there to be more cooperatives, it's harder to pin down and it's not immediately amenable to a solution... a proposal... certainly a business plan... but it's still very important and very motivating for people. (CMA1)

Furthermore, as identified by CMA1 above, economic needs and aspirations are generally "easier to pin down" and therefore easier to communicate than social or cultural needs and aspirations, which are also less "immediately amenable to a solution". Nevertheless, CMA1 suggests that more abstract, value-laden, needs and aspirations are often important motivators for members and decision-making in WCs. These findings suggested that understanding the extent of the boundedness of WCs requires asking three questions:

- Are WCs bound to a particular group of individuals?
- Are WCs bound to a particular formulation of needs and aspirations?
- Are WCs bound to a particular place and time?

The answers depend on whether WCs are conceived as being 'fixed' or 'bound' by their initial negotiation, or as being manifestations of an ongoing negotiation. It may be possible to imagine a cooperative being established to address a given problem, solving this problem, and subsequently dissolving but in this study I am interested in the potential to sustain these organizations and, as such, the answer must be that WCs are not bound to a particular group of individuals, a particular set of needs and aspirations, nor a particular place and time. While all of these factors will shape their development, collectivist-democratic cooperative organizing requires that WCs exist in a perpetual state of ongoing negotiation and contestation; and thus, active engagement with the inevitability of 'creaking' is a necessity of prefigurative cooperative practice.

6.1.2 Why can't we just be normal?

The main reason why co-ops fail and the issue with co-ops is conflict... it's conflict mostly coming from a different worldview or not being clear on the worldview of what the co-op's for, where it's going, and so... when conflict

happens it's because they never really dealt with that underlying, 'Why are we here?' sort of problem. (CMA3)

Above, CMA3 articulates a sentiment shared by the CMAs interviewed: that the undoing of many cooperatives lays in their inability to engage in the negotiation of their 'worldview'. The needs, aspirations, and purpose that drove the founding members may have served as a source of strength. However, if this reason for being goes unattended, becomes fragmented, or remains unarticulated and thus lacking in clarity, it can become a flashpoint for (drawing on the ideas of Follett) 'slipping' towards a mode of degenerative conflict or "controversial sides" as opposed to cooperative negotiation or "integrative sides" (Follett, 2003c, p. 52). Paradoxically, WCs are particularly vulnerable to such degenerative conflict because of the inherent power individual members possess in either driving or preventing change through their dual role as both worker and owner.

So it [the 'worldview'] could be as simple as 'we are an organic, vegetarian, business' and there are other moral and ethical things that people are very very clear about and actually if people join the cooperative who don't share exactly the same set of values for whatever reason... that can cause conflict in worker co-ops in particular because people... those sorts of people have very strong views on things and some of those things are unsaid in that sense... so I've come across that quite a lot with co-ops where they are perfectly legitimate reasons for conflict because people just have very different worldviews on whatever issue... which again you might not necessarily have in a normal business situation because people don't talk about their values so much in a normal business let's say. (CMA3)

Values and ethics play a central role in WCs. The nature of the business model demands more input and understanding from each member than would be expected of an employee or even a manager in a conventional business. This includes the range of topics members are expected to form an opinion about and the extent to which they are able to express and exercise their personal value and ethics frameworks in decision-making. Differing or divergent worldviews are a fact of life. As CMA3 highlights above, the awareness of difference and the potential for conflict are heightened because, in WCs, these values are more present in discourse and members are more able to act upon or assert their personal beliefs. Tying in with my discussion in Chapter 5, CMA3

identified issues around the selection and integration of new members into WCs as a key source of increasing divergence within WC membership. These issues will be returned to in this chapter. CMA3 also noted the propensity for members to avoid direct conflict, leaving problems "unsaid" and without resolution, thus offsetting immediate tensions at the cost of longer-term cohesion. This speaks to the notion that cooperative practice requires members to be able to have differing values, talk about these values, and find means of resolution to conflicts.

> I think if you don't address those issues then over time the cooperative culture... which perhaps was well set up by the founder-members will be diluted, undermined, and in the end... in the worst case people will end up thinking, 'Well what is all this? What's all this about? Why can't we just be a normal company?' (CMA4)

As posited by CMA4 above, failure to adequately engage members in cooperative practice and, more importantly, in its ongoing negotiation, can result in members questioning the very nature of the cooperative itself.

6.1.3 Reviewing and renewing

The challenge of sustaining a cooperative worldview over time, 'keeping it together', may be partially addressed by way of attending to boundary objects.

> From a structure point of view, the ones that survive and carry on as worker cooperatives are the ones which from the start or over time were very clear about being commonly owned and that concept which came out of the 70s of you can't really sell the business if it's successful and really the people who are running the business are really guardians for the previous and the future employees or workers in the co-op [...] So co-ops where it's actually been baked into the rules of the co-op that you just can't sell the business... because the chances of somebody over time coming along and saying, 'Hey guys, why don't we sell up?' increases... so the reason why some co-ops survive as co-ops is because they just can't sell the business, it's just not part of what they are allowed to do and therefore they stay as worker co-ops... that's a really practical way. (CMA3)

As illustrated above, CMA3 argued that those WCs that have survived and sustained have been able to do so because they have combined visionary boundary objects in the form of a shared commitment to cooperative practice, manifest in member behaviour

as guardians or stewards of the cooperative for future members, with the construction of instrumental boundary objects to "bake" protective measures into the structure of the WC that remove the option to simply sell-up and walk away. However, even in the presence of such a commitment to cooperative practice (visionary boundary objects), as well as mitigating structures (instrumental boundary objects), there remains a need for WCs to engage in ongoing negotiation in order to sustain the sense of 'relevance' experienced by members, both new and old.

In this practice of 'reviewing and renewing' there is an inherent tension between structuredness and structurelessness, both in the literal sense of how structured the cooperative should be and in how open to change it should be. On the one hand, we can appreciate a need for clarity and consistency of purpose and identity. On the other hand, there is a need to be adaptive, responsive entities that are inclusive and changeable. In the following excerpt, CMA1 considers how the myth, or espoused identity, evolves as the membership changes and questions are asked of certain values:

> Successful co-ops redesign themselves and redesign their processes to strengthen their cooperative identity and culture. [...] It's difficult to generalise about [how the founding myth evolves] but I mean it will change because new members coming in over a period of time will be coming from a different economic situation... so I would say that [Design Co-op's] kind of ideological roots in the New Left, which were quite strong when I joined, are now weak... because the New Left doesn't exist anymore... the New Left being a particular thing of the 70s... obviously the people who started the co-op, who had been working together already in this situation where they found themselves in dispute, all left a long time ago... and new people came in... who came from different situations... who came from situations where they were just people working in the industry who needed a job and this looked ok and then they arrived... some people would see it as dilution but it isn't... it's just you've got a different composition of members... so therefore what you continually have to do is you've got to continually redefine what we're about, so you have to go through periodic kind of brainstorms or away days or strategic thinking days where you go right back to basics and values and go 'Well, we say that our values are this but actually are they our values or do we want to reinterpret those values? Or do we want to interpret them in a particular way? Or do we want to

emphasise certain things?' So you have to keep going back to what creates the unity. Now in a place like [Design Co-op] which is commercial design and print it still has that kind of... it's still a movement press... but that's because there are people in [Design Co-op] who are part of those movements... and there are some people in [Design Co-op] who aren't part of those movements. But the operational values and the things about equality... wage equality... one-to-one wage ratios... non-hierarchical management decision-making, honesty and openness, access to information... are axiomatic for everybody whatever background they come from and that becomes part of the... you may now say, 'Actually, what's axiomatic in our values are these things.' Which don't directly reference any particular political movement or whatever. (CMA1)

Critical to the present exploration is the emphasis CMA1 placed on the practice of continually redefining what the organization is "about" and reflecting on espoused versus actual values. Central to this are the notions of collective interpretation and searching for "what creates the unity". In the example provided we can see how the founding context has become obsolete: the WC is still politically engaged but less aligned with a particular political movement and concerned with a more general set of values which bind the membership together in organizing. We can also begin to appreciate from this narrative how this developmental process might be quite particular to a given WC. Below, CMA1 suggests that WC1 provides a contrasting narrative wherein the cooperative may have grown significantly but appears to have changed very little in terms of its purpose and core values over forty-plus years. Instead, CMA1 viewed the evolution of WC1 as being more evident in their method of negotiation, describing this as being "from first principles", a reference to the core cooperative principles (ICA, 2019):

WC1 has always had the thing that it was part of the wholefoods movement, it was part of the ecology movement and it still is... but it still has to... it probably doesn't need to do that quite as much... because it's more obvious what it's about and what it's kind of external purpose is... but it probably still has to reground and it has to adjust and whatever... But it has changed remarkably little in 40-years even though it's grown from very small to really quite big... they probably had to evolve... and they have had to evolve different ways of tackling things... so for instance they... and all co-ops go through crises so I would say that

successful negotiation of crises from first principles is one way that they evolved. (CMA1)

There are two important questions I believe to be crucial to the survival and sustainability of WCs, questions that require continual reflection:

1. Who are we?
2. How do we interact with one another?

The second of these questions marks the line at which the abstract notions of identity and purpose are manifest into not only a further shared understanding but also a method or mode of behaviour; thus, the abstract becomes concrete, tangible, and observable. In the following extract, WCM32 offers us the story of how their department at WC4R was able to overcome some of the difficulties and tensions I have been exploring by opening-up to an external counsellor:

> The [team] hasn't necessarily got on very well and we're going through... I keep calling it 'family counselling' but it's more like... not a work mediation, but it's like we've got a counsellor that's working with us at the moment to make it more functional as a [team]. This was thrown out to the wider co-op, 'cause it's very dysfunctional downstairs and people didn't want to take it because it was going to potentially affect their bonus. Whereas actually what's it done for the [team] is it's just vastly improved our quality of life [...] We took it on because we all felt that, 'Actually, yes, it was a very high-octane situation.' It has been very difficult. It's funny, we've got a very good balance of workers at the moment. When I came here, it was just men. Really, people would scrabble for top dog and you were, like, 'What?' When I went on my first Co-op Weekend and people talked about hidden hierarchies, I was, like, 'Oh my god,' it was a real eye-opener.

> But now we've got this guy coming in and he basically just sits with us as a group, and we try and find a common goal, and we have found that. It's been really good. This common goal, on the first day of this counselling that we'd organized, was that we'd looked at what we want as a [team]. 'We want to be happy, organic, healthy, cooperative.' We threw all these buzzwords out and now it's sort of, like, a contract. We've created a contract between each other to have a collective vision, whereas in the past it's been a lot of individuals just

trying to get on. Yeah, what it's created is the new dynamic where everybody is locked into it. What this counsellor has done is just open us up to potential possibilities, and looked at the things that don't work, and the things that do work, and the vision for the future of it working. Whereas we've never really had that, we've never had a lot of space to discuss.

What he's given us are actually tools to work out how we can actually be more creative. If you've got certain targets to hit each day, sometimes ideas and creativity go out of the window because you've just got to bang this thing out. We have done, in the past, NVC [non-violent communication] training, but just that alone. Yeah, it's good to understand how to speak to each other, but actually having a better overview of how to be and not just say, it's a whole way of being rather than just a particular element, you know? We were doing it every two weeks. It's gone to every four weeks and then we're going to self-manage it. We've had even our own meetings without him. Within that time, we do workshops. (WCM32 - WC4R)

Several valuable insights emerge in the above extract. Firstly, that acknowledgment of the problem and the decision to take on external assistance came from within: it was not imposed. Secondly, the counselling started with re-examining who (identity and relating) and what (purpose) they wanted to be as an organizational unit. Thirdly, based on this vision the group were able to begin to look more effectively at what was and was not working and to begin finding solutions that fitted with their renewed sense of a shared understanding. Fourthly, members were given the space and empowered with the necessary tools to engage in productive negotiation in order to enable them to collectively produce and sustain their shared sense of 'relevance'. Fifthly, what is very clear from this narrative is the importance of the process of returning to basics, echoing CMA1's notion of "negotiation from first principles", and moving forward with a holistic approach to rebuilding the shared understandings necessary for 'keeping it together'.

Of further interest is the resistance that emerged amongst the wider membership of WC4R when a proposal to expand the programme to the whole organization was put forward. Two explanations were suggested for this resistance: first, that members feared it would impact on their autonomy and potentially require them to change their behaviours and practices; second, that it would be sufficiently expensive as to reduce

the bonus received by members. These reasons appear to fit with an established understanding of members being protective of their autonomy and the notion that members can 'slip' into highly uncooperative modes of behaviour when facing perceived or actual threats to their financial remuneration. While it appears WCs may be able to trundle on without pausing for reflection, my understanding is that engaging in 'reviewing and renewing' is essential to sustaining WCs and their cooperative practice in the long-term.

6.1.4 Turning outwards

WCM32's narrative highlighted the potential value to be found in WCs looking beyond their own boundaries for ideas and assistance. This was evident both in the value derived from both their attendance at the 'Worker Co-op Weekend', where they developed their understanding of hidden hierarchies, and in their working with an external facilitator in renewing the department's ability to negotiate and cohere.

> I think successful co-ops reach a point where they realise that actually that isn't enough and they deliberately turn outwards and reconnect with the movement. They realise that yes, if you comply or you look like the first, second, third, and fourth cooperative principles which is that yes you are an open and voluntary association of people, yes you are democratic, yes you are autonomous, yes you abide by the cooperative principles around capital and limited return on capital... if you do those things then you are a co-op... but to be part of the movement you need to be into principles five, six, and seven... which is the cooperative principle of education... the cooperative principle of education is actually the principle of human development... the principle that cooperatives work with other cooperatives, that they network with other cooperatives, and that they connect and support the communities in which they trade and operate... so successful co-ops turn out because those are the outward-facing principles and they reconnect, learn from other cooperatives, and they recharge their... they re-found their myth... or they modify their myth... they become capable of moving beyond the founding myth... and that also works on the internal level [...] because that impacts on how the co-op develops new members and develops its existing members and their consciousness, their skills, their capacities... so I

think that's a mark of... that's what a co-op with longevity, that is successful, will do. (CMA1)

Above, the importance of the practice of 'turning outwards' is emphasised by CMA1, who asserts that successful WCs will recognise a need to engage with the wider cooperative movement. Part of their reasoning for this is that being a cooperative is not only about the first four internally-facing cooperative principles (Voluntary and Open Membership, Democratic Member Control, Member Economic Participation, and Autonomy and Independence), but also about the three more externally-facing principles (Education, Training and Information; Cooperation among Cooperatives; and Concern for Community). These latter principles are framed as both intrinsic to what it means to be a cooperative and as offering a means by which WCs might be able to recharge, re-found, modify, or move beyond their founding myth, enabling them to evolve and adapt in order to remain relevant and be successful: in other words 'come together' and 'keep it together'.

I think that the co-ops that transmit culture most effectively are also those co-ops that are part of a wider movement... I think it's incredibly difficult to do it in one business... because it appears bizarre... for people who come from different walks of life into a worker co-op it's like a shock... it's like a culture shock... nobody's ever told them anything about this... but if they don't know that this is actually part of something bigger it will always remain slightly weird to them... and they will always find that they are kind of probably defending it... and on the back-foot themselves about it... but if they get the opportunity to go out and realise that actually this is part of something not just in their co-op but also in their region and in their country and in the world... and understand the context and history of it... that's quite an important component... it's kind of 'cooperative pedagogy' but not in a kind of force-feeding way but just as I say giving people the tools to find this stuff out... because I think that smart people when they get hold of the tools to learn this stuff will realise that it's very valuable and will start to own it. (CMA1)

'Turning outwards' to engage with the wider movement is suggested by CMA1 as offering a means of overcoming the potential sense of isolation prefigurativism can elicit and of making cooperation feel less "weird" by providing opportunities for members to feel part of something bigger and develop tools to improve both their

cooperation and business practices. This underscores how crucial learning is to the survival and success of WCs, not simply in terms of business skills but in terms of what it means to be a member as well as the skills involved in the practice of cooperation.

'Turning outwards' does not necessarily require members to go outside the organization but can instead involve engaging cooperative development practitioners. CMA4 explained that in their work with WCs, encouraging members to 'turn outwards' to explore the cooperative movement and the wider narrative of cooperation can be particularly beneficial for new members as part of their induction. 'Design Co-op' is one example of a WC that includes external cooperative training as a mandatory component of member induction. Drawing on their experience in facilitating inter-cooperative engagement, CMA3 offers an insight into what happens when WCs do 'turn outwards':

> So whether it's through the formal training Co-ops UK or other people put on, the Worker Co-op Weekend, or local networking events... for me personally one of the things I really enjoy is when we're at a local networking event, people are having a beer, and they're talking business... they're talking about, 'Oh how do you deal with this problem?' and actually that best practice sharing and that learning about how to run your worker co-op is really passed on from one generation to another, from one worker cooperative to another, through that sort of word-of-mouth process and personally I find it really interesting to see that happening in reality... that sharing of knowledge because actually there's no book on worker co-ops... whereas in some sectors you do a qualification... if you're an accountant or a whatever, you go to university, you do your qualification, you know how to do that job... whereas in a worker co-op there isn't that... there isn't that formal education... so the education in being a worker co-op is much much more informal. (CMA3)

CMA3 emphasised the importance of informal learning practices. While formal training and other events provide a frame for this to occur, where CMA3 saw the boon of 'turning outwards' is in the conversations that happen in and around this frame. This is where the practice of cooperation can be "passed on from one generation to another", positioning the WC movement as a multi-generational community of practice. The notion that cooperative practice is not something you can 'learn from a book' or attain

a qualification in speaks to the idea of it being something ongoing, continuously evolving, alive, and thus learned through (sharing of) direct experience.

6.1.5 Summary

The centrality of 'purpose' to the creation and continued existence of WCs as prefigurative collectivist-democratic organizations is not to be underestimated. This 'reason for being' serves as the nucleus of their worldview. It gives shape to the organization and directs its internal activities and external engagements, conferring 'relevance' to both its existence and the participation of members as autonomous individuals in the co-creation of the collective. The impetus for the formation of WCs is often grounded in some form of resistance or opposition to an aspect of conventional organizing, typically composed of combinations of social, cultural, and economic needs and aspirations. In their formation, WCs are 'bound' to a particular place, time, and group of individuals motivated by a particular purpose. This interweaving of shared and individual needs and aspirations is messy, imperfect, and the potential for multiple of divergent interpretations is present from the outset. For a sense of 'relevance' to be sustained this boundedness must be continuously contested and (re)negotiated by participants in the 'whole a-making'. This is a state of continuous 'creaking', the quality of which is situationally determined (see my discussion of 'the law of the situation' in Section 4.1.3).

Conflict regarding the 'worldview' of WCs, which is constructed around their purpose, is identified as a key reason for ongoing issues and failure. This is fuelled by the strength of the values held by members but also by the poor selection and integration of new members, which results in divergences and degeneration. While visionary and instrumental boundary objects can be used to protect the organization and cooperative practice to an extent, these too can become outdated and 'irrelevant'. Thus, there is an ongoing need for the practice of 'reviewing and renewing'. This is not straightforward as it requires balancing the structuration of the 'worldview' and its overarching purpose in a way that is neither too open and changeable nor too closed and prescriptive. The process involves asking hard-to-answer questions regarding what the organization is about, what creates unity, who the members are as a 'whole', and how they want to interact with one another. This entails 'negotiating from first principles' (a return to the basics of cooperation) as well as providing the necessary space and tools (e.g.

facilitation or communication training) for members to engage. Across all my interviews and cases I have not found one instance where resistance to this process was not indicative of a 'slipping' of cooperative practice.

In combination with the practice of 'reviewing and renewing', there is a need for WCs to 'turn outwards', to engage with other WCs and the wider cooperative movement. This is important because it counters the propensity for insularity, provides opportunities to better understand the history and nature of cooperation, and, most critically, provides a further space for the sharing and development of cooperative practice. While WCs might view themselves as singularly unique prefigurative initiatives, the reality is that they have evolved from a rich history of collective organizing and are only part of the overall development of cooperative practice that has taken and is taking place.

6.2 Uniqueness and exceptionalism

In the previous section I noted the boundedness of WCs to the place, time, people, and purpose they are created in, by and for. Their ongoing negotiation does not necessarily alter their boundedness to these factors, but simply that their manifestation evolves over time as the factors change. The contrasting examples of 'Design Co-op' and WC1 highlighted the potential for difference across WCs. Unlike more conventional businesses, WCs are particularly exposed to the particularities of the autonomous individuals that participate in their ongoing co-creation, and so, as with the genetic coding of human beings, it can be argued that no two cooperatives can ever be 'the same'. This difference provides the springboard for the present section, which questions what ends this 'sense of uniqueness' might serve ('Are we special?'), just how unique WCs are ('How special are we?'), and what the implications of this may be (There's nobody like us')?

6.2.1 Are we special?

> I think it [a sense of uniqueness] is a strength in as much as to have that, particularly if you're small, you're isolated, you're on your own, you're up against it... then having that kind of very strong identity is a kind of bulwark against that. It maintains moral, it supports people's engagement. (CMA1)

I use the phrase 'sense of uniqueness' to capture the feeling or belief amongst WC members of WCs that their organization is somehow special, different from others, and

thus in some ways unique. As prefigurative organizations, WCs face challenges that would normally not be present or as significant in more conventional organizing, WCs exist in a state of tension with their environment. In the extract above, CMA1 suggested that this 'sense of uniqueness' serves as an important visionary boundary object in sustaining the cohesion of WCs through their foundation and early years. However, CMA1 went on to suggest that beyond this embryonic phase the 'sense of uniqueness' experienced by members essentially serves as the keystone of their 'brand personality'; their point of differentiation as a business competing in the capitalist marketplace:

> I think beyond the initial founding phase and the initial growth and glory phase what they need to do is work on their brand... because brand personality... which is a term that would be anathema to a lot of people because it's the language of capitalism and marketing... is just a way of describing an organization's personality and character and how that is communicated [...] I would say it's important for any business that is in a competitive marketplace to be able to express some kind of competitive advantage... because it's capitalism... therefore it needs to nurture and articulate and think about what that actually is... and that is often to do with 'The way we do things is this and it's different from the way other people do things'... or something... I would say it's inevitable at the early stage and necessary at the later stage but it's a different process. (CMA1)

CMA1's argument was that WCs need to put work, firstly into thinking about this differentiation, and then articulating it, both internally and externally. CMA1's assertion was that the utility of a WC's 'sense of uniqueness' evolves over time as the organization develops. Thus, the notions of a WC's culture, founding myth, identity, and brand are conflated with the need for attaining and sustaining competitive advantage. CMA1 noted that engaging with cooperators in these terms may be difficult because this is perceived as the language of capitalism. This ties in with the issues raised in the previous chapter regarding the tendency for members to lack experience of capitalism and for their prefigurative values to conflict with the economic practices the organization necessarily engages in. The suggestion that sustaining this 'sense of uniqueness' is essential for enabling WCs to develop their 'brand identity' and position of competitive differentiation that enable them to compete in the market is supported by WCM37's experience at WC4W. In the extract below from our conversation about

potential threats and challenges, WCM37 shared their sense that the cooperative's strengths lay in focusing on what potential competitors do not offer, the things that make the WC unique:

> Some people are a bit like, 'Oh no, we need to be more regimented.' and we're like, 'No, we need to keep the thing that we are good at that other people don't offer.' So the automated thing doesn't bother us... also, we've got companies we buy off who bleep everything and should be 100% and we still get mistakes... yeah... obviously there's things like Amazon... I was speaking to another member and they were at a talk at the last Worker Co-op Weekend and they were saying Amazon technically could turn round tomorrow and go, 'We're going to start doing wholesale' and put everyone out of business... but what they can't do is they are never going to be a friendly face... and people are never going to be, 'Oh, I like dealing with that person' and 'That person can do this for me...' So, we've really got to hold on... that's the thing... holding on to 'that thing' and not losing what you are. (WCM37 - WC4W)

What is presented above is in essence a straightforward argument in favour of service differentiation, which is of limited value to my exploration. However, the notion of "holding on to 'that thing' and not losing what you are" resonates with the existence of a shared meaning. One that WCs must actively work to sustain throughout their practice in order to prevent it from 'slipping'. Below, WCM34 adds to this understanding in their description of a struggle at WC4R to hold on to a clear comprehension and articulation of the values the cooperative stands for, despite having the sense that there are values present and that their customers are aware of these, if only in an abstract sense:

> There are values no doubt and we carry them out and people come to us and spend their money with us because they wish to support our organization as well as to buy the things we sell... they want to come in... we have got a really large and loyal customer base... but there is an absence of what it is precisely... or even not so precisely those values are... and not only what they are but how or what the wider public perceive them to be... so I think it's definitely part of the work we are doing and perhaps edging towards getting something like that in place because it is lacking. (WCM34 - WC4W)

WCM34's contribution highlights how a cooperative's 'sense of uniqueness' may be largely abstract, a loose set of ideas that require time and effort to comprehend in a more concrete sense. Buttressing this analysis, at WC3 both WCM19 and WCM25 spoke of a need for members to make more of an effort to celebrate and be ambassadorial about the cooperative, while at the same time highlighting the fluidity in members' understanding of what the cooperative is and what it is about. Likewise, in articulating their sense of what makes working at WC3 'something special', WCM10 underscored the importance of autonomy, self-motivation, and working for the collective good. However, echoing the experiences of WCM34 at WC4W, WCM10 also indicates that this 'sense of uniqueness' is difficult to "label" and is not something that is clearly articulated within and among members of WC3.

Below, WCM07 offers their understanding of this 'sense of uniqueness' at WC2. They suggested that the cooperative is akin to a cult in terms of its formation and purpose, having been driven in formation by a charismatic leader and the members sharing a "pious belief" in this purpose as well as how values shape both decision-making and practice.

> It has all the trappings of a cult. There's a pious belief in what we're doing, a slight sense of martyring ourselves. Yeah, I mean, the cult-like leader, the father figure has now left, but I'd say in its place has come this, I don't know, Mother Earth, or this idea of supporting something which feels more, like, natural and sustainable, and fair, and we are guided by those principles before we are guided by the profitability. It's a bit like how a charity functions. We obviously need to drive profits in order to sustain wages, or help wages grow, or still continue this, but it's not the initial, single-most important thing for a lot of decisions that we make. I don't mean it in a bad way. It's a cult I'm happy to be a part of, but it doesn't follow normal organizational rules. In previous jobs, I've really enjoyed ways of being devious, or rebelling against my employer, even just the thing of taking a sick day when I wasn't sick. Everyone does that every now and then. I don't do it here and not because I don't think about it, but it's shifted in my mind, now, what it means to turn up to work, and to be present here, and working a shift. That's because I feel ownership over this place that I have never felt anywhere else, or never felt towards a place of work before. That's where I

think the potential of it is. You know, I say, 'I want one of these in every town.' I think it offers a new mode of working for people. (WCM07 - WC2)

WCM07 expanded on their suggested implications of shared values for collective practice to reflect on how it has changed their own behaviour in terms of the way they relate to the organization and their work. They shared their sense that the purpose of WC2 is so "vital and important" that they had recently turned down an offer of a similar role paying double the salary at another business. Furthermore, they indicated that the change in the way they relate to work has been so profound they feel almost evangelical about spreading the cooperative mode of working and organizing. For WCM07, a key driver for being in a WC is in their offering of greater meaning in kinds of work, or labour, that have, through industrialisation and neo-liberalism, become characterised by isolating methods of working, a breakdown of worker involvement, and a reduced sense of ownership over the work people are engaged in. This exemplifies the powerful effect of the 'sense of uniqueness' described by CMA1 and suggests to me that while its core function may expand to serve as a means of competitive differentiation, its function as a "bulwark" for prefigurative cohesion does not reduce over time – unless, of course, it begins to 'slip' and lose its 'relevance' to members.

6.2.2 How special are we?

The key question to ask of this powerful visionary boundary object is just how grounded in reality it is? While CMA1 advocates for its importance throughout the development of WCs, they also suggest that most variation across cooperatives is primarily cultural as opposed to structural:

> First of all I don't think it [the extent of variation between worker co-ops] is to do with the lack of legal structures, because actually worker co-ops do all tend to use the same legal structures […] it's more to do with how they evolve the actual way they operate internally... the actual nuts and bolts... the actual way they do their democratic decision making that will be different, and that will look and feel different... although I think I may I've overstated how... maybe they tend to insist that they do it their way but actually if you were to get under the hood of a few worker co-ops you'd find that they have actually got a lot in common in terms of the way they do things. So they maybe tend to cling to this idea that they're special a bit more than they need to. (CMA1)

Above, CMA1 posits that WCs have similar legal structures and articles of association and that variation tends to be most evident in the mechanics of the co-op; the way decisions are made, and day-to-day functions are carried out. They indicated that these differences are over-emphasised and that "under the hood" they are likely to have more in common. CMA1 also raised the question of whether worker co-ops 'cling' to the idea they are special, an issue I return to later in this chapter.

Despite this suggested commonality, CMA2 argued that the distinctive cultures across WCs are such that it is difficult for members to move from one to another. They contrasted three cooperatives with similar skill requirements but distinctive cultures. While it is difficult to evidence this assertion, it is worth noting that none of the members I interviewed had worked at other WCs. CMA2's assertion emphasises just how bounded the practice of cooperation may be. Indeed, while, to an extent, CMA1's claims regarding the questionable extent of differentiation appear to hold true, contributions from WCMs did highlight key differences between cooperatives. This was particularly evident in the brief instances where members of WC4R and WC4W were willing to make comparisons with their sister cooperative. In the extract below from WCM27, a structural similarity is noted yet this is vastly outweighed by their sense of how different the two entities are in terms of: the kind of members they take on, the character of the organization ("a very different beast"), the working environment, the wage and bonus structure, as well as the challenges and opportunities they face.

> They have different problems and different issues at the shop. They employ, to a large extent, a slightly different kind of person. It's different at the shop, a very different beast. They are a sister organization really. [...] It's a different environment. It's a shop environment, it's a very close [working environment] and I think they have different issues. They don't have the same wage as us but I think they have a similar structure. It's not the same wage; they don't get paid the same amount of money as we do. They also have a bonus-related thing. [...] They're different. It's quite odd. People often struggle to grasp how we can be one company but very, very separate. That's just the way it's evolved, you know? We were them and we've evolved out of that. We've become very, very far removed on a day-to-day basis. (WCM27 - WC4W)

It is particularly noteworthy how WCM27 described WC4W as having "evolved" out of WC4R yet having become "very far removed" in the nearly thirty years since this

separation occurred. This suggests that WCs might actually become more unique and differentiated over time. While they more strongly espouse a 'sense of uniqueness' during their formative years, as was suggested by CMA1, over time this uniqueness might simultaneously become more entrenched and likewise more difficult to clearly articulate.

> It was fascinating and interesting and it kind of reinforced for me and for pretty much all of us a sense that we have managed to achieve something quite unique in the co-op world... to get to this size and still maintain this commitment to a flat structure and not wanting Management Committees or sort of formal role hierarchies... we really wanted to try and keep that emphasis on where we started nearly twenty-two years ago... but we also wanted to evolve and adapt so that we can add to the membership without seeing these creaks get worse and definitely not losing people to frustrations with structure... the structure needs to work for us rather than us working for the structure and I think sometimes that is a little difficulty or tension... a bit like the rota system... you know sometimes you feel so much work goes into rota-ing and covering because we are a multi-discipline [multi-skilling] co-op... and it's a huge amount of work for the people who do that... there's a sense of sort of being beholden to it... (WCM04 - WC2)

Above, WCM04 shares their experience of undertaking an exploration of other WCs as part of WC2's internal structure review. These reinforced the notion that a 'sense of uniqueness' may be more evident in the cultural and structural reality of WCs than CMA1 indicated. WCM04 explained their own findings suggested WC2 had in fact achieved "something quite unique in the co-op world" with respect to scaling the organization whilst maintaining their commitments to a flat structure, the absence of formal hierarchy, and multi-skilling, along with the cultural implications of these organizational features. However, WCM04's reflections also highlight the constraining influence of being "beholden" to certain facets or features of structure and culture.

6.2.3 There's nobody like us

In this section I have explored how a 'sense of uniqueness' can confer different kinds of strength to WCs as well as questioned the actual extent of this uniqueness. However, the constraining influence highlighted by WCM04 feeds into my consideration of the

potential issues created by this powerful, and often abstract, visionary boundary object. CMA1 suggested that this 'sense of uniqueness' can be problematic in that is has the potential to limit the scope of members' thinking, reduce their ability to respond to change, and hinder the development of the cooperative. To their mind, the strength of the cooperative principles is that they are not carved in stone but are instead a set of profound, adaptable, and general guidelines that together provide a framework for cooperative organization. CMA1 argued that to take the cooperative principles or indeed a 'sense of uniqueness' as an "ontological truth" poses a risk to worker cooperation, pointing to the non-fixed notion of 'democracy' and the diverse range of approaches possible within the scope of democratic decision-making.

CMA4 contributed the very notion of being a 'worker cooperative' to this list of potentially restrictive boundary objects. Indeed, this was supported by commentary from CMA3 who pointed to the limited participation of many organizations that could be classified as 'worker cooperatives' in the national cooperative movement, be this due to cost, political disagreement, or a resistance to identification. None of my participants expressed difficulty accepting the "worker cooperative badge" (CMA3) nor that the notion of being a 'worker cooperative' was viewed as being inherently limiting. As illustrated by the earlier extract from WCM04 and the quote from WCM24 below, there were insights suggesting that values, principles, policies, and, more generally, what constitutes members' shared understanding of the cooperative could potentially have limiting, restrictive, or problematic influences:

> Do you know how many times I've been told, when I've raised issues about what this co-op are doing and what that co-op are doing, not in a negative way saying, 'What they're doing is really good,' constantly, 'Yeah, but they've got a different model to us'? Obviously, I'm constantly going back to, 'Yeah, a model that works.' (WCM24 - WC3)

WCM24 expressed their frustrations with trying to bring what they view as successful practices from other similar cooperatives into WC3. They indicate that a common response from their fellow members is to suggest that differences in the 'model' of the cooperative mean that such practices do not fit. However, it was apparent from my interview with WCM24 that this internal notion of 'model' remains abstract and unclear making it difficult to interact with, be this to change it or indeed sustain it.

These insights capture a 'sense of exceptionalism', which I argue is a manifestation of 'slipping' away from a healthy 'sense of uniqueness' toward something less healthy and potentially detrimental. Therefore, although the 'sense of uniqueness' shared within a WC may confer unity, strength, and survivability to a WC, this can have the effect of amplifying a sense of exceptionalism or exaggerating a feeling of isolation among the membership that can only be exacerbated by not engaging with the movement and seeking to better understand what cooperation is about.

Differences in members' interpretations of the factors constituting the cooperative's 'worldview' and, more specifically, what renders it unique, meaningful, and therefore 'relevant' to them, are made more problematic by this unhealthy 'sense of exceptionalism'. Even at WC2, arguably the most progressive of my case studies, members develop attachments to 'accepted truths'. This echoes CMA1's commentary regarding a 'sense of uniqueness' becoming regarded as a kind of 'ontological truth' and the issue of stagnant "axiomatic truths". With regards to this phenomenon, WCM03 provided two useful heuristic devices; firstly, the notion of particular boundary objects being treated as "sacred cows" and, secondly, the notion that members might become particularly "wedded" to aspects of the organization.

> We blindly follow certain rules, organic being one. If, suddenly, the organic market collapsed and we couldn't get organic produce we wouldn't be selling any produce, from our point of view, from fruit and veg. To an extent, there are no animal products. Strictly-vegan is another. There's sugar. You must have come across the fact that we don't sell sugar. It's arbitrary... completely arbitrary... granulated, processed, cane sugar we don't sell. If I want to get annoyed and really easily wind myself up, which I don't ever really want to do, but I can... I get annoyed about the fact that we don't sell white pasta. I love pasta. I eat it all the time. It pisses me off that I have to go to another shop to buy my pasta, because I do not want to eat brown pasta. We sell white flour to make white pasta and we sell white bread, but there's a completely, and I keep returning to this word, arbitrary line drawn somewhere. It's a decision made by the Buying Team, I'm not a part of them. For longevity and just general peace, I accept it's one of the nuances of working for what is, essentially, a cult-like organization rather than a corporate one. (WCM07 - WC2)

Developing on this, in the extract above WCM07 expresses their understanding of and frustrations with one such "sacred cow", a long-standing policy preventing the stocking of products manufactured with certain types of ingredients. This policy, along with others such as selling only organic and vegan products, is part of what makes the cooperative 'unique', yet it is clear that its position as an "ontological truth" is contentious yet extremely difficult to address because of the nature of the democratic process. The seemingly arbitrary nature of the ingredient policy and its application is a key driver of WCM07's frustrations, highlighting the potential difficulties presented by abstract or unclear policies in preventing members from being able to 'access', understand, or challenge them; thereby undermining the possibility of rendering them meaningful.

6.2.4 Summary

This section established that a 'sense of uniqueness' can be both a source of strength and a source of tension. It has also highlighted the need for a balance to be struck between the extent to which shared understanding is concrete (clear, coherent, and accessible) or abstract (fluid, loose, and changeable), with members both old and new struggling to negotiate the extent to which individuals and the collective, as a temporally bound manifestation of the cooperative, have ownership of and control over the 'sense of uniqueness'. This need for balance fits with the heuristic of striving towards a 'Goldilocks zone' of 'relevance', in this case between a 'sense of uniqueness' and a culture that is open to finding points of integration with other interpretations of cooperative practice and organizational democracy at large. A failure to attend to this integrative practice results in 'slipping' toward the darker side of differentiation, a 'sense of exceptionalism' that can afflict even the most progressive of WCs.

My findings support the premise that a 'sense of uniqueness' both confers an important competitive advantage, following the notion of competitive differentiation, and serves as a linchpin for enacting and negotiating the purpose of the WC as it manifests the 'worldview' of the organization. While practitioners may be aware that a 'sense of uniqueness' exists, members struggle to maintain a clear and coherent shared understanding of what it is. Thus, despite recognising a need to sustain their 'sense of uniqueness', its fluidity and the diversity of opinion among members can prevent this co-creating from happening. Understanding WCs as being somewhat cult-like, based

on almost pious beliefs, guided by often-abstract values, and having a transformational influence on individual behaviour fits with the understanding of prefigurative cooperation established in Section 2.1. I suggest WCs offer a 'different kind of meaning' to members; one that is juxtaposed to the industrialised, neo-liberal 'reality' and predicated on the principles of autonomy, self-motivation, and freely working for the collective good.

In terms of how different WCs may or may not be, there is some confirmatory evidence regarding their argument that core structures are similar. Yet there is also evidence pointing to both structural and cultural differentiation across even those WCs that are closely connected. This extends to our understanding of the extent to which cooperatives truly need a 'sense of uniqueness' and what function it may serve throughout their lifetimes. While newly founded WCs might need to espouse their differences, in more established WCs their 'sense of uniqueness' becomes more entrenched and more critical, yet also more difficult to articulate and make concrete because of the number of individuals it is continuously being interpreted by. The argument against substantive homogeneity is furthered by comparative research undertaken at WC2 that appears to have confirmed their 'sense of uniqueness' with regards to having scaled a participatory, non-hierarchical structure combined with a working culture grounded in the principle of multi-skilling.

The deleterious effects of 'slipping' towards a 'sense of exceptionalism' and the issues associated with treating features of the organizational landscape as ontological truths or allowing 'axiomatic truths' to stagnate are evident. For example, at WC3 we heard how the abstract notion of being a 'different model' was used to resist adapting practices and processes from other WCs and how varying interpretations of seemingly shared meanings can engender a resistance to change. Likewise, insights from WC2 reveal a sense of being beholden to features of the structure and worldview, potentially preventing members from being able to render the organization 'relevant'.

6.3 Growing pains

My analysis thus far has been driving towards an understanding of WCs as entities in states of perpetual flux, 'creaking' as collectively enacted environments are challenged by internal and external forces, precipitously 'slipping' as practices shift in prioritisation, focus, and depth of meaning, as well as being pulled between structuredness and

structurelessness, or concreteness and abstraction. In this section, I explore the changes members experience as WCs age and grow. In 'The price of success' I begin by exploring how members feel 'success' changes the culture and practices of cooperation. In 'Just not the same anymore' I move to highlight members' reflections on how their WCs have changed since they first joined. Next, in 'Bulletproof members' I attend to perceptions of the behaviour of more established members. Finally, in 'More similar than that which divides us', I share insights that emphasise the unity and solidarity experienced by members.

6.3.1 The price of success

In Section 4.3.1 (Who are we?), I selected an extract from WCM39 in which they described the tensions between the interests of the cooperative as a commercially successful business and the commitment to the needs, aspirations, and purpose upon which it was founded and around which autonomous individuals seemingly continue to cohere. Their commentary is continued below, in which it can be seen how misunderstandings emerge around discordant values, the role of external assumptions of business success in catalysing internal tensions, and how this may shift the conversation towards a dilution of the cooperative rationale:

> I think it [the ongoing strategy] is in a constant state of flux, and there are some vocal people, in my mind anyway... I would be one of those people, unilaterally described in terms of the ethics, who would feel it was very important that they're maintained, not at whatever cost, but they're very integral to what we do. There have been people who would see me as being some radical and a couple of others have wanted to take the company in a direction that would be disastrous in terms of its success as a business, as a caricature of what I want to do. There can be that misconstruing. In equal parts, some people who are concerned with the ethical direction may well tend to characterise other people as being free market capitalists and bent on profit regardless of ethics. Neither of those extremes are a true portrayal, but it reflects, I suppose, in the heat of debate, or when these issues do arise, that is, the debate that goes on over what our overall strategy is. (WCM39 - WC4W)

WCM39 described WC4W's ongoing strategy as being in a "constant state of flux" and used this as a basis to describe the key groups of voices in the cooperative as well as

how such groups sometimes view each other as misconstrued caricatures, as ethical radicals and free market capitalists driven solely by profit. My sense is that the tension between these contrasting positions of values, ethics, opinions, and attitudes is more nuanced. However, echoing WCM39, in the extract below WCM15 expresses their frustration with the seeming inability of WC3 members to focus on being a successful business and adopt a more pragmatic approach during a time of perceived crisis for the organization. It is worthwhile noting the heatedness of WCM15's narrative compared to that of WCM39, underscoring both different individual approaches to communicating about such issues but also speaking to the strain on WC3 at the time of my research:

> I think if people stop spending money and stop talking about the barriers that are holding us back, like, 'We need to cut staff, we need to do this...' Let's just say, 'Let's be fucking successful,' because it's sitting on our doorstep. People just need to say, 'We want to be successful and make money.' They need to stop worrying about single-use bottles and stuff, stop going on about it. With things like that, make a quick decision, the thing that's best for the company, move on. Don't have big fights about it and debates about it, or don't have debates about buying a toaster. People brought to the AGM... Somebody put a proposal through for buying a £300 fridge. We're bringing in, like £8 million-plus this year or something. We're talking about a £300 fridge, a proposal in this debate and the research that went into this. It's ludicrous. Folk do whatever the fuck they want, like wasting time with fridges. People cannot see that, and they all get involved, and suddenly there are, like, fifty people in the room talking about a fridge for half an hour, pros and cons of getting a fridge. (WCM15 - WC3)

As argued by WCM39, it is particularly important to acknowledge the legitimacy of the rationale underpinning WCM15's commentary. To characterise their opinion as degenerative or detrimental to sustaining the cooperative runs the risk of failing to appreciate the potential for WCs to become overly deliberative, cautious, and concerned with virtue-signalling. Indeed, I argue that it is important to consider the extent to which the tension described by WCM39 is as necessary for sustaining the cooperative as it is for commercial success. By this I suggest that in order to sustain themselves WCs must necessarily exist in a perpetual state of tension between being a successful business and being a healthy cooperative (prefigurative collectivist-democratic entity).

This point was further illustrated by WCM01 who described a prevailing "conservative with a little 'c'" mentality at WC1, by which they meant a mentality that can both steer the organization away from potentially detrimental risks and simultaneously hamper the opportunities available and progress to be made. WCM01's contribution not only illustrates WCM39's narrative regarding the contemporary status quo at WC4W, it also speaks to their concerns for the future. In this excerpt WCM39 describes the "great kerfuffle" produced by a recent marginal shrinkage in the member dividend paid out by WC4W, and in doing so highlights a crucial difference between longer-term members and those who have not experienced such fluctuation in dividend payments:

> It [the member dividend] was marginally smaller recently and there was a great kerfuffle amongst certain people. It definitely creates complacency and it definitely creates too much of a focus really, which longer-term members don't have really, they just don't have it, regardless of their other opinions. They've experienced it before we were so widely successful, when we were moderately successful, and for the longer-term people, when it was just a cooperative that was doing okay, yeah, it definitely has negative effects in certain ways. Moving forward, that is where I could see more significant conflict in the future that might cause problems, because if you have a group of people who are so focused on that aspect of the business, they can try and jealously guard that and become very reluctant to adapt any sort of charitable, ethical measures that they feel might contradict that. From there, with such a high margin for decision-making, if you have a body of people from there, effectively, not just theoretically, in the future, it isn't the case at the moment, potentially, the minority can hold the majority to ransom by blocking a whole load of decisions that were largely favoured by the rest of the co-op. That is a concern going forwards and having talked to some of the larger co-ops, we're not unique in that. It's just about losing sight, losing focus, really. That's why encouraging people to take on other roles and how you do that is really beneficial because it does allow people to see that we are more than just this successful business, because we may not be in three months' time after Brexit and whatever. We'll show just how strong we are in terms of a cooperative, 'Can we take a downturn as well, what sort of cracks does that bring about?' Generally, it's an extremely good atmosphere here, but you never know really how much of that is partly due to the fact that

we're all, in terms of manual work, extraordinarily well-paid. (WCM39 - WC4W)

WCM39 suggested a focus on financial reward creates complacency among the members and is one of the issues that could potentially create problems for the cooperative in the future. Their fear is that members might begin to jealously guard the business's financial success and that this could manifest as a resistance to more ethical, cooperative, measures, noting the potential power of this resistance in relation to decision-making thresholds. WCM39's understanding is that this concern over 'slipping' towards losing sight of the cooperative and ethical existence and purpose of the organization is shared by other established WCs in the UK. WCM39 went on to make three further points, which connect with earlier analysis.

The first was that this future concern is a driver of the need to engage members in different aspects of the cooperatives and encourage them to take on other roles in order to develop a better appreciation of the organization as more than just a successful business, connecting therein with the need for guardianship of the cooperative (Section 6.1.3, 'Reviewing and renewing') but also with the practice of 'sharing the load' (Section 5.3.4). The second was a brief consideration of what it might be like if WC4W were suddenly not so successful, or even struggling, and how this might strain the cooperative, with WC3 providing some insights as to how a similar WC was affected by strain. The third point followed from this but raised a slightly different issue: that of the extent to which the good atmosphere, and potentially the whole approach to cooperative practice at WC4W, is predicated and contingent upon the membership being as well paid as they are. Interestingly, WCM39 was not the only member at WC4W, by far the best-remunerated members across the case cooperatives, to raise questions as to what extent their model's functioning rests upon the harmony produced by decent wages and dividends.

6.3.2 Just not the same anymore

Insights from particularly long-standing members reveal their sense of how much their WCs have changed over time and how this might impact upon the practice of 'keeping it together'. WCM10 had been at WC3 for over twenty years and had worked across several departments during this time. Their sense was that the cooperative had become increasingly "mainstream" as it had grown, with members coming from a much wider

range of backgrounds than previously. Indeed, in times gone by, the majority of the membership came from the local punk community. WCM10 attributed the increasing diversity to the much-improved wages paid by the cooperative, noting that paying and receiving these wages has become one of the primary foci of the membership. Echoing the earlier commentary of WCM39, WCM10 highlights their sense that the emotional response to financial threats has become more heightened:

> The staffing has doubled, and I think with that new influx of staff, maybe the culture has changed a wee bit, possibly. How can I say this? More, maybe, mainstream […] People are coming from all over. I think that is mainly due to possibly the wages being better [...] When I started, I think it was actually less than £3 an hour I used to work in the Post Office and I came from earning, I don't know, £8 an hour to £4 an hour at WC3 […] Now it's £10 an hour is the basic rate [...] I think if people see these things as them not getting a dividend […] I think that's the difference from in the past. People could see that the business needed to do these things, so they were, like, 'Yeah, cool, because I like working here, I don't really care about the money. It's not why I'm working here.' Maybe nowadays you hear a few more grumbles about, 'Well, sales are so high so why are not getting money?' I don't know, I find it quite sad to hear. Yeah, it's not about finance to me. (WCM10 - WC3)

I found it particularly interesting how WCM10 described their sadness in response to the changing attitudes amongst the membership. Though they did not express a sense of personal detachment from the cooperative, it is reasonable to suppose that older members might emotionally struggle with such changes. Indeed, in the extract below WCM06 offers their reflections on the increased rate of member turnover at WC2.

> I think we had like one member a year maximum leaving, sometimes not for two years. This year, we have already had two people leaving and we have got another three on the way. There was someone who has been here a long time, someone who has been here a few years, and then a couple of newer people... we do an exit interview and it's very mixed actually, some people just really don't like it anymore... that's kind of fair to say... it has changed over the years... […] people used to have this... I'm not exaggerating... this massive family feel... and you wouldn't just go and leave your family... you would go through even the tough bits… and because it's so big now and you feel like you are not really

accountable to anyone anymore and you just have your own thing and it's easier to leave... because also before... if you've got fewer people you have got so many responsibilities and you think, 'Oh god, I'm not going to give them up' (WCM06 - WC2)

WCM06 highlighted three reasons ex-members have given for their decision to leave: just not liking it anymore, relocation, and unfulfilled ambitions. However, their sense was that there may be more of a commonality than members are willing, or perhaps able, to express in their exit interviews. They suggest that losing some of "this massive family feel" may be the real reason for increased member turnover. WCM06 believed that members used to be more attached to the cooperative and more committed and accountable to their fellow members as well as feeling needed in a more profound manner due to the variety of responsibilities members used to have a share of. Both this sense of familial relating and desire for 'accountability' speak to my assertion of a 'sense of relevance' as being central to sustaining cooperation over time and scale. According to WCM06, compounding the reduced sense of attachment and feeling of being needed is the availability of a wider range of options in terms of meaningful, interesting, and well-paid employment at other companies; highlighting how changes in the external environment shape the needs and aspirations of members and potential members.

It [increasing member turnover] makes me wonder as well about longevity and the business' size. It was forty-ish when I started. Other people have twenty and stuff like that. There's an understandable level, it becomes more impersonal the larger the organization is. It became a part of my life over a long period of time, it was down to circumstance a little bit. I feel kind of like I've got to temper my expectations with a growing and therefore more anonymous business, or something like that, you know what I mean? It's not going to mean as much to people that have started when it's big. Not necessarily, it's just going to mean something different, you know what I mean? (WCM08 - WC2)

In the extract above, WCM08, who had been a member of WC2 for over ten years (most of their working life), expresses their feeling that what the cooperative means to members has changed over time. They opined that the cooperative might have breached the size at which it is "understandable" to members and that the increasing anonymity of membership is bound to influence what it "means" (the extent to which it is 'relevant')

to members. WCM08 goes as far as to suggest that this sense of lost meaning makes them question the potential longevity of the WC as growth continues and the sense of anonymity ('irrelevance') increases.

6.3.3 Bulletproof members

It would be unfair to set this out as a clear-cut case of new members entering and undermining the 'relevance' of the cooperative; more established members also have the potential to be problematic to shared understanding and meaning. As noted in Chapter 4.3, informal or hidden hierarchies are a problem for established and scaled WCs. In the extract below, WCM32, who had been a member for less than five years, offers insight into how newer members can come to perceive the established membership as somehow "bulletproof" and not held to the same standards as newer members:

> In the co-op, we've got almost, like, two different types of member. We've got a bulletproof member, and they're potentially older members as well, that have been there for a long time, and they're entrenched, and they can say and do almost what they like. Then you've got this other type of member who isn't bulletproof, and if they do say things, and put their head above the parapet, you get a bit of a kick for it. Even recently, I've seen people upset in the main shop, and that's through other members being unkind to them and then us not looking out for them, you know? (WCM32 - WC4R)

Echoing WCM32's sentiments, WCM10's reflections on the behaviour of some of the more established members at WC3 suggested it is possible they have either been there for too long and have become complacent, even annoyed, about the state of the cooperative, or simply just do what they want without any repercussions. WCM16, who was still a probationary member at WC3 at the time of our interview, also highlighted a sense that some members just do what they want and in doing so "piss all over the whole cooperative spirit". However, they see this behaviour as connected to systemic issues such as the lack of member appraisals and a lack of personal development; WCM16 is noteworthy for having recently spent time in most of the departments in the cooperative despite this practice having formally 'slipped' for both new and established members of WC3. Based on this experience, in the extract below they highlight how easily members at WC3 become focused on and/or overwhelmed by their immediate

work and fail to look around or beyond the proverbial grindstone (linking back to CMA5's assertions regarding having 'noses to the grindstone' precipitating 'cycles of despair'). Their suggestion was that members need to think through how they communicate with others, in particular when it comes to more complex ideas that might be better explained by being broken-down and rendered accessible:

> 'Heads down, bums up' is what we used to call it in the retail trade […] Everybody's bogged down in the day-to-day and they don't need to be. They're not being presented with, 'Look, let's break it down to the five key things you have to tackle.' They know it, but nothing really happens with it. There are a lot of things we could do in this business, but I think the way we communicate with each other is a real problem, especially the way that we communicate things like figures. People go, 'What does that mean?' and it's, like, 'You shouldn't be doing that, you should know what that means'. That should be delivered to you in a way that's user-friendly, you know… I'm not dealing with a room full of trained retail professionals, I'm not sitting in a boardroom anymore, that's the reality of the situation, and it's good, and it's exciting, but if I don't have the will to change, it's really difficult to change the culture. (WCM16 - WC3)

This narrative connected with my emergent understanding of the need for members to reflect and enact not only their shared identity and purpose, both of which are tied-up in the notion of a 'sense of uniqueness', but also the way they want to behave with one another as fellow workers, owners, members, and cooperators.

6.3.4 More similar than that which divides us

One could potentially walk away from reading the preceding sub-sections with the distinct impression the case cooperatives were, or are, seriously degenerating. However, this would be a mistake. The extract below is from WCM07, an often highly critical yet clearly deeply committed member of WC2:

> It morphs every time somebody leaves and every time somebody joins. It no longer is exactly the same as it once was, and that's to its tremendous strength as a business, but also you can't fight against it, you know? There's no point holding on to sentimental views of how it used to be, or, 'We did it this way.' I really, ardently believe we can't do that [...] It's naive to think that we're a markedly different bunch of people. We all come from similar backgrounds

with similar values and there's a reason why a lot of us are here. They're mostly political alliances or sympathies with environmental causes. What's the Jo Cox quote, you know? We are that much more similar than that which divides us, or whatever. For the most part, we tend to agree. On the occasions where I haven't agreed, I've found it very interesting that I've had my opinion swayed on several times, where I thought, going into a meeting, 'I think this,' and then I've listened to what other people have had to say and thought, 'Actually, I feel differently.' I think that's a very powerful thing. I think it's a bit like the function of education, that you never want to close your mind so that you think your way is the only way. I've never been offended or upset by a decision made. (WCM07 - WC2)

Their sense was that although values, attitudes, and opinions do shift, change, differ, and collide in the cooperative, ultimately the membership broadly approaches human interaction and organizational practice from a similar direction. In illustrating this point they highlight the general tendency for members to agree and note that in instances of disagreement it is not uncommon for members to come around to seeing things another way. In a similarly positive vein, WCM19 emphasised the need for members at WC3 to not to become complacent about what they have and what the reality of similar kind of work outside of the cooperative is really like. They noted that long standing members can become complacent and how they can start to only see the negatives. Furthermore, they argue to the importance of remembering that the WC is doing "good shit" in terms of even its basic operations.

As explained by WCM39 below, there is awareness among groups of members, both old and new, of a need to find ways to protect the cooperative and "find ways to stop these cracks turning into wider schisms"; speaking to my heuristics of 'creaking' and 'slipping'. They articulate this in terms of "legacy" which speaks to the notions of guardianship and stewardship identified as important for 'keeping it together' in Section 6.1.3:

Legacy' is the word that came up in the discussion I was having with a colleague. We tend to cooperate on a lot of proposals and ideas, and that was the term she used. I was getting very pissed with one in particular charitable initiative that I felt was going nowhere, that I'd been working on for quite a while, and I was feeling like giving it up. She phrased it to me, 'What do you want to be there

when you go? On this co-op, what influence do you want to have had?' Yeah, so I think there is that awareness amongst certain people that we need to stop these cracks turning into wider schisms, and how you do that is another matter. (WCM39 - WC4W)

The notion that members want to be able to pass on a stable cooperative to future members suggests that it is possible for these organizations to sustain even beyond the second and third waves of members that currently form the 'establishment' at all of my case cooperatives.

6.3.5 Summary

In this section, I have continued to build on the understanding of WCs as existing in a more-or-less constant state of contention and flux; here with respect to shared meaning and vision. Regarding the dual nature of WCs, as both prefigurative projects and business entities, it is apparent that just as the business needs the cooperative (and its values) to be successful, so too does the cooperative ultimately need the business to be successful. As such, it is crucial that we acknowledge the legitimacy of views advocating a pragmatic and success-oriented approach in WCs. The health of the cooperative is contingent upon the continued success of the business; and, more importantly, the continuation of the remuneration and rewards generated for members. Likewise, the tendency toward a small-c conservative mentality can be as debilitating as it can be protective.

As WCs grow, so too does their meaning change for members both old and new. It is reasonable to suggest that cooperatives are likely to become increasingly "mainstream" (WCM10) as the diversity of membership increases. However, there is a balance to be maintained in terms of how much this diversity is predicated on the attractiveness of working conditions. Some of the characteristics growing cooperatives might struggle to sustain are the extent to which the organization is 'understandable', members feel needed and acknowledged (not anonymous), and family-like connections are developed; all of which may affect levels of member retention. Established or entrenched members, along with hidden hierarchies, can be problematic – particularly if they result in members being held to different standards or treated particularly differently. While older members may become complacent, annoyed, and/or frustrated with the cooperative, they may also simply be doing what they feel is 'right'. Either

way, this is a source of tension that must be attended. Be they overly focused on or overwhelmed by the grindstone before them, there is clearly a need for members to regularly reflect upon and enact their shared identity and purpose as well as to consider how they interact with one another.

It is possible that, despite the tensions created by ongoing 'creaking' and the 'slipping' of boundary objects and cooperative practices, WCs sustain themselves because, when it comes down to it, the membership are more similar than they are different and do tend to agree, or at least eventually find agreement. Likewise, even at WC3, the most strained of the cooperatives explored, members acknowledged the need to remember just what they have, how special it is, the importance of what they do, and how much worse things could be in the world beyond cooperation. Indeed, it is clear that at least some members view their cooperatives as a legacy to be passed on to future members.

6.4 Chapter summary

In this chapter I explored the tensions and strains that manifest in and around the culture of WCs, articulated here using the more active notion of 'worldview'. Central to this exploration is the overarching practice of 'keeping it together', which references the ongoing character of the process of sustaining worker cooperation and the organizational cohesion of WCs.

WCs are understood as purposive organizations that emerge from the particular common needs and aspirations of a particular group of people at a particular time and in a particular place. These needs and aspirations comprise the purpose of the WC, which is considered the nucleus of the organizational worldview. The worldview is also shaped by the values held by members. In turn, the worldview shapes the cooperative practice found in the organization. However, while the needs, aspirations, purpose, and worldview all contribute to the boundedness of WCs, none are fixed to their initial particularities. In fact, for WCs to survive and sustain their cooperative practice it is crucial that these shared understandings are continuously negotiated and renegotiated in order for their 'relevance' to be maintained.

In this process there is a need to find the 'Goldilocks zone' between structuredness and structurelessness; neither holding on to visionary boundary objects too tightly nor allowing them to degenerate into chaos. Two practices are used to describe the ways in which WCs engage in this negotiation. Firstly, 'reviewing and renewing' by finding

means of having productive conversations that work through points of contention and conflict in an integrative manner. Secondly, 'turning outwards' by actively engaging with other WCs and the wider cooperative movement in order to challenge and develop their cooperative practice as well as reduce the sense of isolation that can be found in prefiguration.

If the 'sense of purpose' sits at the nucleus of the worldview, the 'sense of uniqueness' serves as its cell walls. Considered to be a vital element in sustaining solidarity and cohesion in the early years, the 'sense of uniqueness' felt by members continues to be an essential part of the 'worldview' as WCs age and grow. The 'sense of uniqueness' serves as a point of competitive differentiation as well as a source of solidarity. The extent of actual differences across WCs is questionable; expert interviews suggested that while WCs might have different cultures, the structures underpinning the organizations would be more-or-less the same. While this is true to an extent, the differences between these established and scaled WCs were marked. Nevertheless, there are also clear similarities in terms of the tensions and strain experienced regarding the dark side of this uniqueness, captured in the notion of a 'sense of exceptionalism'. This describes how WCs can 'slip' towards viewing themselves as excessively apart from conventional organizations, or indeed from other WCs and the cooperative movement. Other issues emerging from exceptionalism include viewing certain visionary and instrumental boundary objects as 'ontological truths' or 'sacred cows' that are untouchable and unchangeable. While this 'small-c conservatism' can serve to protect the WC, over time it can also prevent members from being able to render the organization 'relevant', which ultimately undermines the sustainability of cooperative practice.

In the third section of this chapter I highlighted three areas where WCs need to pay close attention to the potential for degeneration. Firstly, the risk of 'slipping' towards an increasingly economic orientation; this is in part due to new members joining the cooperative and either not grasping the nature of cooperative practice or not being effectively inducted by established members. However, it may equally be due to the shifting attitudes of established members who view the rewards of success as rightfully theirs to enjoy. Secondly, over time the landscape changes and the character of the 'relevance' experienced by members changes in turn. Longer-standing members will potentially feel a sense of loss of a 'family feeling' or resent their increasingly less

critical role in the day-to-day functioning of the organization. Thirdly, established members may inadvertently create a situation where their inequitable treatment (e.g. remuneration, accountability, or autonomy) becomes normalised; be this through scaled remuneration or through the uneven application of discipline. However, many members continue to focus on their similarities rather than differences.

This chapter has extended my conceptualisation of 'relevance' through its exploration of the cultural level of WC organization. Again, the underlying tension between structuredness and structurelessness threads throughout the discussion, tying much of it together. The key conclusion from this chapter is that there is no 'one true path' in cooperation and that even the most cooperative of worldviews is bound to the particular set of needs and aspirations belonging to a particular group of people in a particular place, and as such will inevitably lose its relevance as these factors change. Therefore, there is a need to create 'spaces of possibility' (see Section 2.3.3) in which the WC can be reflected upon and reshaped. This 'integrative process' is necessarily ongoing, not a task that can be scheduled in a fixed manner but rather attended to over time through consistent investment in the individuals and the collective that constitute the cooperative.

In this chapter I have illuminated where tensions and strains manifested at the cultural level of organizing. Through this process I have offered insight into the sources of discord in established and scaled WCs as well as identified sources of unity and power as well as practices of looking inwards and outwards.

The empirical analysis explored in this Chapter develops the four heuristic constructs I introduced in Chapter 4 in the following ways. The synthesised analysis presented in Section 6.1 articulates the notion of 'relevance' particularly well with regards to the centrality of a collective purpose formed of shared needs, aspirations, and values as well as the boundedness of these to a given time and place. These findings are important because they point to a structured and rich framework of visionary boundary objects serving to hold WCs together as well as the need to look both inwards and outwards in order to sustain a degree of structurelessness; this being essential for members to be able to refine and redefine the collective to render it actively meaningful; or 'relevant'. 'Creaking' and 'slipping' are furthered by the tension between uniqueness and exceptionalism highlighted in Section 6.2; especially by insights into how easily members can 'slip' towards exceptionalism and how detrimental this can be for WCs.

Further threads contributing to these heuristics include the effects of growth on earlier members with regards to seeing the cooperative change over time as well as the potentially detrimental behaviours and practices of more established members in terms of the integration of newer members. The 'Goldilocks zone' is illustrated by notions of the shifting purposes, needs, aspirations, and values of members along with the need to challenge extant structures in the search for a new aspirational ideal. Likewise, the temptations of what I would argue is a 'false normal' highlights the imperative of having a prefigurative 'point on the horizon' that members can collectively agree upon (to some extent).

In the following chapter I turn to the structural level of organizational analysis, through exploration around the practice of 'consenting to authority'.

7.0 Consenting to authority

Chapters 5 and 6 have offered the first two pillars of my four-part response to my sub-questions by focusing on firstly the individual level of analysis. That is, 'the cooperative journey' of attending to the nature of cooperative membership, the organizing of work, and the practice of 'unlearning and learning'. And secondly, the cultural level of analysis: 'keeping it together' by engaging with the role of purpose and 'sense of exceptionalism', the practices of 'reviewing and renewing' and 'turning outwards'. This chapter forms the third pillar by focusing on the practice of 'consenting to authority': the premise that 'power' should be held collectively by the membership and where it manifests it should be 'authority' that has been 'consented to' by said membership. However, acknowledging the imperfect character of democratic organization and cooperation in practice, I suggest that 'consenting to authority' provides a useful lens through which to explore the tensions, conflicts, and complications present. It calls for members to actively empower and support authority since the cooperative is a manifestation of members' ongoing consent. Thus, maintaining its legitimacy requires regular attendance to its terms and the boundaries of authority, following the 'law of the situation' (Stout & Love, 2015a, p. 232).

The chapter is structured in three sections. In Section 7.1 I consider the relationship between autonomy and authority, exploring this through members' conceptions of their own autonomy, the need to create an agreed structure within and around which members can operate, and how members go about 'finding authority'. My key point in this section is the need to respond to divergences, misunderstandings, and diversity through proactive, considered, and critical approaches to constructing authority in established and scaled WCs.

In Section 7.2 I examine the experiences of members with regards to individual positions of authority. I identify the positions of authority found in my case cooperatives, explore the limitations placed on individual authority, the role of HR/Personnel Officers, the pressures that arise from assuming individual authority, and the potentially problematic behaviour of members towards those in positions of authority. My key point in this section is the importance of addressing the fickle nature of collective power by balancing experience, the burden of diverse and complex

responsibilities, on the one hand, with sufficient autonomy and empowerment, on the other hand.

In Section 7.3 I attend to experiences of the authority placed in groups and rules in established and scaled WCs. I explore this through the expansion of authority held by coordination groups, the issue of devolving power to teams and departments, the complexities encountered in developing or revising policies and procedures, how working groups present opportunities and challenges for WCs, and the emergence of potentially powerful informal hierarchies. My key point in this section is the need for attending to manifestations of both formal and informal authority through transparent, open negotiation that acknowledges both the dangers and benefits of consenting to the situationally determined authority of groups and structures.

7.1 Autonomy and authority

In this section I explore the notion of autonomy in WCs and consider how this is balanced with the need for authority. The section consists of three sub-sections. The first, 'Got no strings', outlines the significance of 'autonomy' to WCs as organizations and to the engagement of individual members and co-creators of these prefigurative projects. The second sub-section, 'Nailing it down', examines how autonomy both serves as the source of power behind authority in WCs while being limited and constrained by the authority it consents to and empowers. In the third section, 'Finding authority', I explore the means by which authority can be fairly created and enforced in WCs. The following sections will expand upon the foundations laid in this section.

7.1.1 Got no strings

The first line of the ICA's definition of a cooperative states that it is an "autonomous association of persons united voluntarily" (ICA, 2015). Autonomy, freedom, and agency are important both for the organization itself and the individuals constituting its membership. As prefigurative entities, the extent and quality of cooperatives' organizational autonomy in relation to the context against which this prefiguration is cast is central to determining the effectiveness and 'relevance' of organizing. An argument can be made that the more a cooperative can be self-sufficient, integrated with other prefigurative organizations (and therefore detached from conventional institutions and supply chains), the more 'successful' the prefigurative mission. Of course, there are

exceptions and counter arguments; such as the potential for prefigurativism to be more effective and 'relevant' when actively engaged in conventional supply chains through their 'power' as buyers and/or suppliers, or through their ability to spread their prefigurative worldview through non-transactional, i.e. relational, engagement. However, my interest does not lie in addressing the question of 'change' coming from without or within. Instead, I want to focus on the importance of autonomy to cooperation in terms of the relational dynamics between individual members and 'the organization'.

This is particularly evident in WCs because of their direct worker ownership, i.e. the absence of the shareholder-esque actors found in consumer and community cooperatives, and the underlying principle of all members sharing the status of 'worker'. During Phase 1 of data collection and analysis, which drew solely on the insights of the CMAs, I focused on the individual behaviour of members from a collectivist frame of thinking, conceiving member behaviour in terms of how it benefits or undermines the cooperative as a collective endeavour. However, what began to emerge by the end of Phase 1 was a sense of the importance of an emancipatory notion of individual autonomy and agency that underlies worker cooperation, manifested in both the functioning of WCs as organizational democracies and as businesses. This is captured in the extract below in which WCM04 explains their sense of a "disconnect" between the individual autonomy of members and the extent to which they are accountable to the collective:

> There's always been... not necessarily tension in a negative sense... but a sort of slight disconnect maybe or lack of clarity around how much people have autonomy to get on with something and how much the whole membership needs to know about and critically engage with what that thing is. (WCM04 - WC2)

WCM04 (WC2) and WCM37 (WC4W) respectively highlighted misconceptions regarding the assumption of an absence of management (coordination and control) and the perception of being their 'own boss'. These are problematic misconceptions that do not reflect the organizational reality of WCs, neither in terms of the necessity of functional authority nor the fundamental accountability of each member to every other member. However, participants acknowledged that constraints on individual autonomy have changed over time as their respective cooperatives have grown. In this process of change emerges the challenge of balancing worker autonomy with the needs of the

collective and the business, which are not necessarily treated as one and the same. WCM19 (WC3) suggested that this potential for friction between the autonomy of the individual and the will of the collective is particularly evident where members have become so familiar with or used to a particular way of working or engaging that these practices have become entrenched.

Individual differences play a key part in this 'push and pull' between the individual and the collective, more so than in conventional business entities because of the centrality of individual autonomy. This variability in terms of member attitudes and behaviours is articulated by WCM02 below, in which they highlight two extremes of member engagement. However, in practice it is likely that members sit somewhere between the two, potentially shifting their level of interest and involvement over time.

> I think we do recognise that some people want to come to work and want to be really busy all the time, and take on more and more, and that's why they are here, and some people are happy to have the same roles and responsibilities year in and year out, and don't want any personal growth. Like, they're not here because they want to better themselves or learn new skills, they're here because they enjoy working in the business, they believe in what we're doing, but that's them. They're at where they want to be. (WCM02 - WC2)

This is different from the issue of the individual suitability of members to particular roles and tasks in terms of interests, ability to commit, available headspace, or pre-existing and natural skills. Acknowledging that some members might want to take on responsibilities and vary their work, while others prefer to focus on their responsibilities and are not necessarily interested in personal development, raises the complexity of different modes and levels of self-actualisation. By this I mean that there is a need to navigate individual differences in terms of what gives the cooperative and the practice of cooperation purpose, meaning, and 'relevance'. This requires sufficient structurelessness as to permit members to escalate their involvement and responsibilities in order to satisfy their personal ambitions and interests while maintaining sufficient structuredness to protect and facilitate the participation of members who feel actualised through simply participating in a non-augmented capacity.

> I think the thing with working in co-ops is you get what you put in and if people feel, kind of, not included, or out of the loop, or don't feel like they know what's

going on then that's very much... it's not, like, a blame thing, but that's the way you've chosen to engage with the business. All our minutes are open, you can attend anything you want to attend, you can be on whatever team, within reason, you want to be in. There's no excuse to feel like you're not part of it. If you want to be part of it then you can be. If you want to turn up to work and do the bare minimum and then go home, well, you're not fulfilling your directorial responsibilities anyway, but that's on you, that's no one forcing you to work that way. Yeah, no, I definitely feel like anything I want to get involved with I can and I know fully what's going on. (WCM02 - WC2)

Above, WCM02 suggests that at WC2 the organizational structure and associated responsibilities are open for members to get involved. Individual differences are accounted for through members' autonomy and agency with regards to determining how engaged they wish to be in their dual existence as both worker and director. Where issues emerge, however, is at the point engagement 'slips' toward, for instance, the neglect of "directorial responsibilities". Here, we see a crossover with the notion of 'sharing the load' explored in Chapter 5.3. Of value to the present inquiry is WCM02's assertion that there was no reason for members to feel disenfranchised from being able to engage and that no-one was forcing members to do anything more than their basic operational functions. Expanding on this, WCM02 later contrasted their experience of the corporate world where a request from a more senior colleague to work on a project would not be refused, with the reality of cooperative working where members have the autonomy to decline or refuse the request. While evidently frustrating, they suggested that in the long term this was for the better.

Difficulties emerge when members avoid assuming responsibility for necessary tasks. WCM02 suggested that at WC2 the problem is less with members' engagement with the "big stuff" such as participating in meetings, sharing opinions, and making decisions but rather the "smaller stuff"; such as team-related tasks. They expressed apprehension ahead of a meeting, accurately predicting "a sea of people avoiding eye contact and looking out the window." This was confirmed by my own observations of the said meeting as well as supported by reflections from WCM04 who was also present. Arguably, this relates more to membership responsibilities, which was the focus of 'sharing the load' in Section 5.3. It does, however, further elucidate the potential drivers for delimiting member autonomy; in this case the need to ensure members take on

essential tasks as opposed to being overly selective or satisficing the minimum requirement.

7.1.2 Nailing it down

WCM37 noted the ongoing need at WC4W to bring members round to accepting the need to forgo some of their sense of autonomy in the course of developing policies and procedures that would not only make the organization legally compliant but also make things clearer (see Section 5.3.2). Their argument was that having a more defined and bounded structure facilitates a qualitatively fairer and more frictionless democracy. In this we see again the continuous balancing act between more-or-less cooperative structurelessness and structuredness. An example of this is the need for clarity around roles and responsibilities. On the one hand, for enabling and delimiting member autonomy. On the other hand, for determining the extent of responsibilities and accountability with regards to members' dual existence workers (in an operational capacity) and members (in an ownership capacity). This was particularly true where all members are directors, as at WC1, WC2, and WC3. However, with regards to acknowledging individual differences and respecting the autonomy of members as 'workers' WCM37 advocated a less structured approach:

> Some people, what they bring... they might not be the best worker but they might be a really nice person to work with... they might actually make you smile everyday...you can have someone who's a brilliant worker but he's an absolute pain in the arse because they are always grumpy... so everyone brings something... and it's kind of... it's so hard to appraise people and go... Well, what do you do? What do you give? I mean we don't really have [job titles]... the only job titles we really have are HR (human resources) and Transport Manager because you need to have that by law... so we don't tend to deal with job titles as such... so even then if you looked at it in a legal framework it's quite difficult to kind of say, 'Well, you're not pulling your weight because of this...' Because we have no title and we don't really have targets to meet... I mean if someone was like really swinging the lead and it was obvious then we would talk to them but yeah... you're never going to get... you can have people slacking off to a degree but we get it done, everyone's happy. (WCM37 - WC4W)

WC4W serves, yet again, as a contrast not only to the approach taken at the other cooperatives but also in their perception of where problems lie and what solutions are available. In this instance, the absence of job descriptions runs contrary to holding individual members to account through the development of systems and mechanisms that provide cooperative simulacra of those implemented by conventional businesses. Below, WCM21 articulates what I suggest is the more common understanding in the cooperatives studied as to the need for delineating roles, clarifying bounds of responsibility, and ensuring accountability:

> I really feel that job descriptions from the outside world need to be brought into this co-op... because I think people have ideas about what a role is and it really... I'm not saying we should be the same as the outside world... but we really need to talk about it... but we don't give time to any of this kind of stuff. People just think it's a load of rubbish... the size we are now and the problems that we are having in terms of... there's such a blame culture... it's massive, it's horrible, it's toxic. (WCM21 - WC3)

It is worth noting that these two cooperatives share cultural and structural similarities, the key difference being that WC3 has recently faced financial strains thus far unheard of at WC4W. WCM21 suggested that while growth necessitates such constraints on individual autonomy, there is also a need to address challenges to intersubjective harmony, which they view as being the result of an absence of defined responsibilities.

> We are looking now to get in a member job description to get some... to get a baseline that we can point to of what is at least acceptable and on from that what are the kind of... you know... engagement with the co-op and how you conduct yourselves at work with your colleagues and customers […] we should be working cooperatively with each other as best we can and largely that is the case but there's kind of nothing... certainly a document or any kind of... or something that we can point to that makes people fully accountable [...] I think in general there have kind of been accountability issues across the co-op […] but if we can agree what goes in it, and how we adhere to it, and how we bring it into practice with everyone wanting to do it and not feeling like it's an opportunity to point out everyone else's bad practice... this kind of... it's a difficult... and perhaps unnerving for some people... but I think for most people they want to see

perhaps a greater level of accountability and this is the way that we are edging towards bringing that in. (WCM34 - WC4R)

Above, WCM34 articulates the rationale for developing a member job description (MJD) at WC4R. As opposed to being directed primarily toward recruitment, as with the MJD discussed in Section 5.1, the driver for developing this collectively agreed delimitation of individual autonomy was the need for a behavioural baseline to which members can be held. Underlying this commentary is the implication of issues concerning member behaviour, engagement, conduct, and general accountability. While the development process might help to achieve a new accord amongst the membership, the purpose of the document is to offer firmer ground on which to navigate and negotiate highly autonomous member behaviour that goes beyond the bounds of situational acceptability. WCM34 noted concerns regarding the potential for members to use the development process as an opportunity to criticise others and also notes the potential for resistance from those that feel threatened by such a document. It is also worth noting that while resistance may not only come from a position of self-interest it may also arise from the principled defence of individual autonomy within the prefigurative project.

In seeking to address the "disconnect" mentioned earlier and in light of the ongoing process of decentralising authority at WC2, WCM04 emphasises below the need to clarify and draw boundaries around member autonomy as well as the aims, domains, and measures by which the authority of different areas of the business is constrained:

> I think Sociocracy will help clarify and draw some boundaries around that [autonomy] and hopefully push a lot more for this distributed power system that we do have in our team autonomy but to give people a much stronger sense of the realm in which they can act with autonomy and I think that again is cultural as much as it is governance. I'm quite excited about that... and we have started some work on that now... really trying to define the aims and domains and the measures for different parts of the business. (WCM04 - WC2)

Of note here is the idea that framing the extent of individual autonomy might be an empowering process, as opposed to an inherently limiting one. WCM04 spoke of wanting to give members a "much stronger sense of the realm in which they can act" and suggested that there was a cultural as well as a structural (governance) element to

this empowerment and 'sense of relevance'. Though they were alluding to the implications of introducing a decentralised Sociocratic model, which necessitates this clarity of scope and accountability across the levels of organizing; this directs us to an important understanding of individual autonomy. That is, incoherent conceptions of 'autonomy' are in themselves limiting to the engagement of the individual in cooperative practice. This exemplifies the juxtaposition between grounding our understandings in a relational ontology, where our inherent social bonds and modes of association are the starting point for autonomy, as opposed to an individual ontology in which the starting point is the assumption of the individual as atomistic.

7.1.3 Finding authority

Power and authority manifest around both explicit structures and implicit relationships based on individual charisma, experience, competence, and/or mutual respect. What distinguishes WCs is the extent to which members must consent to the existence of both formal and informal power and authority as well as their potential to address perceived inequalities or abuses.

> Whether it's actually part of the written down, codified power structure or its the structure that's been built over the years that some were founders, some were competent, some were experienced and therefore they... it's like gravity... they pull in power and authority in the co-op and I think that's absolutely fascinating... people look... and I see it when I go and visit worker co-ops where you know in the worker co-op who's the person who's been there years that the younger people look to even though it's a flat management, consensus decision-making worker co-op. There's always power in a worker co-op it's just how it shows itself... and it's not always a bad thing either I don't think. (CMA3)

Above, CMA3 describes the formations of power in WCs as occurring "like gravity" and suggests that it is possible to observe power at play in the interrelationships of members. However, this is not necessarily a 'bad thing'; it is dependent upon how the power is manifest and how it affects the WC as a trading entity and as an organizational democracy. What is important is that members are conscious of this power, both their own and others, and use this awareness to strengthen the underlying assumption of equality; CMA1 described this as "conscious inequality".

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'Slipping' occurs when 'creaking' concentrations of power are not acknowledged and when effective structures for coordination and support are not provided, i.e. failure to find a balance of structuration. While this would be more-or-less automatic in a more hierarchical conventional organization, in cooperatives it needs to be thought through and consciously attended. In reflecting on the flawed notion of 'everyone deciding everything', CMA4 alluded to the 'tyranny of structurelessness' (Freeman, 1970) as a useful means of understanding how the absence of structure can precipitate more problems with power, regardless of whether the original intention is to undermine concentrations of power. They also identified Tony Benn's 'five questions to power'[11] as a reflective tool for those both in and out of positions of authority. CMA4's sense is that the notions of "everyone deciding everything" and that cooperatives should exist with a total absence of structure are harmfully problematic myths that prevent members from accepting the realities of power and the need for leadership, which in turn enable them to effectively address these realities through cooperative practice.

Thus, there is a need for a structure and there is a need for effective processes and mechanisms for giving and taking away the power inherent in the structure's design; through the practice of 'consenting to authority'. While it may be taken for granted that responsibility and authority are shared amongst members, without a 'boss' to force individuals to overcome interpersonal conflicts and deal with the challenges the cooperative faces, there is a need to 'find' this kind of authority from amongst the membership. CMA3 notes that members are often cautious, even reticent, about taking positions of explicit authority or power. This is possibly due to a cultural aversion to authority, its potentially detrimental effect on relationships with other members, and/or the increased accountability that comes with such roles. CMA2 suggests that in order to find the necessary authority, cooperatives need to reflect on their position and decide how best to approach tasks and challenges:

> Sitting down and saying, 'Are we happy with what's going on? And if we're not, what are we going to do about it and who's going to do it?' We may decide we're

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[11] (1) What power have you got? (2) Where did you get it from? (3) In whose interests do you use it? (4) To whom are you accountable? (5) How do we get rid of you? (Nichols, 2014)

all going to do a little bit of it but that's pretty difficult to organize stuff like that so we're going to say, 'We're not happy with our recruitment and selection. We're not getting the right people in; you seem to know what you're talking about so we're going to give you the authority for the next couple of years to get on with it.' And that's functional authority... and it should be the mainstay of management in most organizations. (CMA2)

CMA3 suggested that sometimes a collective solution is best and sometimes 'functional authority' is best; this terminology is also used by Follett (2003g, p. 158). Similarly, CMA2 argued is that the only kind of individual or group authority that is acceptable in WCs is functional authority; which is where the members have agreed that an individual or group will have the authority to act on their behalf. This requires clear parameters, caveats regarding acceptable behaviour, and a mechanism for accountability. The risk in cooperatives without adequate structures is that an individual or group could begin to use 'charisma authority' to manipulate and bully the wider membership (as highlighted by CMA3). Functional authority is supposed to overcome this by being a highly structured form of individual or group empowerment that is consented to via the collective by the individually autonomous members.

7.1.4 Summary

This section set out to explore autonomy in WCs and how it interplays with the need for, firstly, ensuring member engagement in cooperative practice and, secondly, finding means of rendering authority effective and 'relevant'. Key insights include the challenges associated with navigating individual differences, balancing a respect for individual autonomy and heterogeneous modes of engagement with the demand for fulfilling the operational and coordination needs of the cooperative. Thus, we can appreciate the need for delimiting membership responsibilities and developing mechanisms of accountability while also acknowledging the necessity of both process and application being 'relevant' to the membership, as opposed to being prescriptive. Indeed, this process should be empowering as opposed to disempowering for members; enabling them to better understand their autonomy and thus increasing their sense of agency and/or authority.

Shifting focus from the autonomy of the individual to the practice of 'finding authority', what emerges from my analysis is the need for WCs to acknowledge the inherency of

power in organizing and therefore actively engage in collective reflection and negotiation of the where, who, how, and when of 'consenting to authority'. Highlighted here is the necessity of creating, empowering, and sustaining structures of 'functional authority' in WCs (see discussion in Section 4.1.3 regarding situationally responsive authority), in the absence of which cooperative practice will inevitably degenerate, irrespective of members' best intentions.

7.2 Individuals and authority

Building on my exploration of autonomy and authority in the previous section, in this section I turn to the manifestation of authority in individuals. This section consists of five sub-sections. The first, 'positions of individual authority', provides a brief overview of the positions I encountered and the participants who either had direct experience of these positions or shared insights regarding said positions. The second sub-section, 'authority limited', examines the means by which individual authority is limited. In 'teachers and confidantes' I focus on the particularly challenging role of the Personnel Officer before zooming out again in the fourth sub-section to explore the notion of the 'burden of authority' more generally. Finally, I turn to the difficulties associated with actually 'empowering individuals' in WCs.

7.2.1 Positions of individual authority

Table 7.1 sets out seven different manifestations of individual positions of authority identified across the four WCs included in this study, some involving more 'brokering' than others. For all positions except for 'transport manager' and 'quality control' I interviewed at least one participant with direct experience of the role. As can be seen from the table, there are varying degrees of functional authority across the delineated positions. The roles of Chair and the HR function stand out as particularly interesting because both roles are empowered to limit potential autonomous behaviour of individual members, while the other positions serve to regulate and coordinate member activities. Nevertheless, all these positions place the individual actor apart from the general membership. This is due to their being immediately privy to information and conversations which provide a greater overview, and therefore understanding, of either the totality or a specific area of organizing. Furthermore, to assume any of these roles, members are likely to have already gained experience, specialist knowledge, or social capital for the membership to have 'consented to their authority' in the first place. This

has the potential to reflect, and in turn reinforce, informal power structures. Therefore, the first question to ask is by what mechanism and/or merit do individuals assume a position of functional authority?

Table 7.1 Positions of individual functional authority

Position	Potential responsibilities	Sources*
Chair / Co-chair	- Facilitate general and full member meetings - Bring meetings to order (behaviour) - Facilitate meetings of the Management Team, Committee, or other centralised grouping	WCM02, WCM04, WCM05, WCM13
Secretary	- Facilitate and administer the keeping of minutes from all meetings - Organize meetings	WCM06, WCM26
Treasurer	- Administer the accounts and finances - Work with auditors - Legal signatory	WCM34, (WCM13),
Personnel Officer (HR)	- Recruitment - Appraisal - Discipline - Welfare/wellbeing - Development	WCM01, WCM06, WCM19, WCM25, WCM27, WCM37
Transport manager / Quality Control	- Ensure regulatory compliance (e.g. tachometers, food safety and hygiene)	(WCM19), (WCM21), (WCM25), (WCM37)
Coordinator / Overview / Manager / Team leader / Controller	- Coordinate activities of teams or departments - Sit on central coordinating body - Maintain overview of operations and projects within given area of business	WCM02, WCM04, WCM05, WCM06, WCM13, WCM19, WCM21, (WCM25)
Floor walker / Health and Safety	- Coordinate activities across shop floor - Point of contact for customers	WCM02, WCM06, WCM31, (WCM34)
*(WCMXX) indicates source that offers insights about a given position but may not have had direct experience		

Chairs, Treasurers, and Secretaries are elected by the membership at annual general meetings (AGMs) across all four case cooperatives, albeit by different methods. However, team-based coordinators tended to be nominated and selected by their own teams without direct input from the wider membership. In contrast, the 'floor walker'

and 'health and safety' roles at WC2 and WC4R respectively were determined by those responsible for the rota, based on perceived experience and ability.

The HR/Personnel Officer role is somewhat more variable. At WC4R and WC4W it was an elected position, while at WC1, WC2, and WC3 the individual or group of individuals empowered with this authority were seemingly determined based on a combination of willingness and suitability. At WC4W, the HR role used to be elected each year but, because of the contentious nature of the role, this mechanism was mothballed; members are now elected using a 75% threshold and removed either by their own volition or, in exceptional circumstances, by a vote using the same threshold. Despite variation in the means by which members assume positions of authority, it was apparent that although in theory any individual might potentially be elected or selected, in practice positions of functional authority are by-and-large accessible only to more experienced members. While there are reasons for this, as will be explored in the coming paragraphs, ultimately this suggests established collectivist-democratic WCs are more closed structures than one might anticipate given the cooperative values and principles.

7.2.2 Authority limited

The next question to be asked concerns the duration and extent of an individual's functional authority. Underlining their frustrations with 'creaking' management stagnation and their sense of a need for radically addressing a perceived 'slipping' toward member disengagement, WCM21 suggested that a limit should be placed on the number of 'terms' a Team Manager can be elected at WC3. Furthermore, they argued that assuming positions of authority should be a compulsory requirement of membership, reflecting assertions from both CMA2 and CMA1 that good leadership practice in WCs should be about empowering members. WCM21's sentiments were echoed by WCM02 with respect to the 'slipping' practices of Team Coordinators at WC2[12]. However, contrasting views are present.

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[12] First noted in Section 4.2 regarding my delineation of 'creaking' and 'slipping'.

WCM05 warned of the risks of being too open and emphasised the need for care to be taken in distributing authority[13]. This view spoke to a more conservative approach to functional authority that forced me to reflect on my own perceptions of the balance between WCs as prefigurative organizational experiments and as real-world businesses to which members have entrusted their livelihoods.

> We have a policy... so any coordinator of that level and any officer... so someone in my position... their job has to be re-advertised every three years... to try and put a limit on that but it's one of those catch-22 situations where somebody has been doing the job for three years... if they then want to go for it again they are very much likely to be the best candidate for the job because they have had all of that knowledge and experience... and I've been thinking a lot about this and I think that does make informal power... and I think in a co-op knowledge and experience is power in a way that is even more so than in a normal business because you can... when you know how everything works and you know who goes to... who is responsible for some things... and you can make decisions about some things... and you know who to go to with issues... then you can get a lot more done than if you don't have that knowledge... but for me I think rather than... I think limiting terms has its own problems in terms of HR processes and fairness and all the rest of it. (WCM01 - WC1)

In the extract above WCM01 describes the policy at WC1 of re-advertising certain positions of functional authority every three years as presenting a "catch-22" that pits the openness of the structural hierarchy (i.e. fairness for the wider membership) against selecting the best person for the job, which tends to be the one with years of experience and working knowledge (i.e. another kind of fairness for both the individual in question and the organization). However, difficulties arise when the person in the role is not the best person for the job. To what extent might knowledge, experience, and occupying a role for longer than some members can remember, result in an individual continuing to be selected after their suitability for the role, or the quality their cooperative practice, has begun to 'slip'? Indeed, insights from WC2 and WC3 suggested that, despite the

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[13] First noted in Section 4.3 'Interpersonal space: The more the merrier'

presence of mechanisms for the routine reselection of those in coordinating roles, individuals continue to be selected despite their suitability and/or practice having 'slipped'.

> We have been here for a long time and have done HR for a long time and the other two have actually now been here for quite a few years as well so the lack of turnover in the HR Team I think gives us a bit more confidence and strength for other people as well in the co-op. They know that we are here and we can be trusted and we are here for the best of the organization and for people... I think you'd be creating even more problems if you had got a massive turnover in the HR Team... because I know that when I first started within the HR Team people thought I was the weakest link and they would go to me... and now they have done the same with the other people... and this kind of like, 'Why don't you do this?' and really trying to influence... but once you have been there longer you kind of know, you can see they are trying it on again. (WCM06 - WC2)

Above, WCM06 reflects on the benefits of having a well-established HR Team of experienced members who have the trust and support of the wider membership as well as the necessary experience to carry out the role effectively. They note that their confidence and strength had been developed over time and that when they first took on the role members had tried to influence their thinking and decision-making and suggest that if turnover were higher it would not be difficult to envision problems emerging. This perceived need for stability in HR, and therefore an amount of structuredness, is buttressed by insights into the challenges faced by the WCs. At WC3, WCM19 described HR as having been "under caution" while at WC4R strains around issues such as sickness and discipline resulted in the cooperative voting to bring in external HR advice and support with a view to resolving some of the stickier issues present in the WC.

7.2.3 Teachers and confidantes

The HR function not only offered important insights into the recurrent tension between relative structuredness and structurelessness of WCs but also raised questions about the decentralisation of authority and the changing state of individual autonomy. Indeed, I would suggest that the position of 'Personnel/HR Officer' is possibly the most interesting and challenging position of functional authority in WCs. It is different from

other manifestations of individual authority because of the combination of reasons for its existence, as well as the variety of tasks that can potentially fall to these individuals or, as is more commonly the case, groups of individuals.

Below, WCM04 describes how the growth of WC2 has necessitated change with regards to HR. When the cooperative was smaller, this function served primarily as a regulatory necessity with most decisions still being made by the full members. That is, a manifestation of collective authority in which individual members retained a high level of their collective power and individual autonomy. However, due to growth and the demands of legal compliance, an increasing amount of authority has been invested in and decentralised to the functional role of HR.

> Personnel, the HR function, has been at different times maybe more or less contested as it has defined itself. I don't see any clear tensions or difficulties in that at the moment or probably not in my time here but I imagine that as the co-op has gone from fifteen people with that circle making all the decisions to accepting that there has to be the sort of special delimited area of HR that doesn't bring everything to everybody for very clear, legal compliance reasons and we have very different levels of functional authority in different teams and areas of the business... but there has been perhaps a woolliness around sort of consenting to the limits of that authority. (WCM04 - WC2)

Of importance here was WCM04's sense that there exists a degree of "woolliness" around the extent to which members have consented to the limits of that authority, i.e. the implications of these changes for the individual autonomy of members. Among my case cooperatives, only at WC3 is the HR function now carried out by a dedicated member, albeit supported by a group of more established members. WC1, WC2, and WC4R, and WC4W all treat the HR function as one of several additional responsibilities taken on by a member, or group or members, alongside their core operational role(s). There may well be good reason for this integrated approach. On the one hand, it may be driven by the size of the case organizations (50-150 members), which neither permits a more informal approach nor justifies a more specialised function. Alternatively, it may be driven by the potential for a 'distance' to emerge between those empowered with the authority of the HR function and the wider membership. These rationales are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Personnel are often viewed a bit suspiciously, like we're a boss or like we are somehow different from the rest of the co-op, and I totally understand why that is. It's true in a way but we only have power that the co-op gives us. We can only do what the co-op tells us to do and gives us remit to do. We can't just do things off our own back [...] When we tell people off we can only tell people off in a very limited way and only in so far as our policy dictates and our policies are all decided by the cooperative... through our democratic processes... but it's still like any HR function. [...] We are the people when people have problems or want to complain about somebody it's us that they come to so we do get that situation where people can be... a bit like teachers... a bit like when kids are in the room and the teacher comes in the room and they stop talking... it's a bit like that with us in Personnel... people feel like they have to behave around us and that people have to act slightly differently when a member of the Personnel Team is there and... I think some people... we have a culture of being open and honest. So openness and honesty are some of our key principles and when you are in Personnel there is always an element of confidentiality and individual confidentiality and I think sometimes... I struggle with it personally because sometimes you'd like to tell people but there's a load of these circumstances which means we did this thing in this situation but you can't reveal that information so I think that makes people suspicious about why we sometimes do certain things and don't do other things [...] I think we get looked on with suspicions because Personnel is a bit of a black box where people don't know what goes on inside. (WCM01 - WC1)

Above, WCM01 offers their reflections on this distance, which they described as a sense of 'suspicion'. They emphasised the role of HR Officers as disciplinarians, likening it to the role of a teacher, and the degree of confidentiality required in order to serve as the point members go to when they have problems, describing it as a "black box". They are keepers of secrets in organizations that are otherwise held together by principles of transparency and accountability. Linking back to 'Jacks of all trades' in Chapter 5.1, WCM01 viewed multi-skilling as a means of mitigating this potential for a 'creaking' or 'slipping' of 'relevance' between HR and the wider membership by nurturing trust in the function and enabling HR to be more in touch with the issues faced and sentiments shared by members. The belief that multi-skilling helps to reduce the

distance and diffuse antipathy toward the line-manager-esque role of HR was shared by WCM06 at WC2.

There is clearly a need for established limits around positions of functional authority and for increasing the extent of accountability. However, how this can be done in the context of a WC is a more complex question than first appears.

> I think one of the things that we are really bad at... well, not really bad at but we just don't really think about is performance management. Performance management sounds like a really scary, corporate, authoritarian term... especially for a cooperative... but I think that it is really important, and especially important for people who take on those responsible roles because we need to know that those people are acting in the best interests of the cooperative and the business and we need to be able to either change this behaviour or remove them from post if they are not acting in a good way... and I think that a lot of the suspicion that the co-op have towards people in those positions would be lessened if we had some good processes that were checking up on those people and making sure that they were acting in the interests of the co-op... (WCM01 - WC)

Above, WCM01 highlights the issue of 'performance management' or rather the distinct lack of effective performance management or appraisals in many WCs. As noted in Section 4.3 ('Passing judgement'), only WC2 had an effective ongoing appraisal mechanism yet it too was 'creaking' due to limited engagement. WCM01 viewed appraisals as not only a means of checking on members in general but also as a formalised means of checking the practices of those assuming positions of functional authority. Of course, there are reasons why WCs are resistant to so-called 'performance management'; when they do stray into this area of practice they tend to favour the notion of 'appraisals' due to its less transactional connotations. Furthermore, making assuming functional authority more arduous than it already is also potentially problematic.

7.2.4 The burden of authority

My impression from WC3 and WC4W was that 'HR' can serve as something of a catch-all role. Somewhere between what conventional organization would delineate as a strict HR function, and something more, perhaps part operations and part general line management. Although this may be common to the HR function in other small-to-

medium size organizations, for WCs the lack of clarity around the functional boundaries of the brokering role presents issues for headspace, wellbeing, and the ability of members to carry out core responsibilities. More to the point, assuming a position of functional authority in a WC is not necessarily pleasant, nor is there any extrinsic reward for the additional and diversified workload. WCM37 describes their HR role at WC4W as being more directed toward generally keeping the organization functioning; checking everything and everyone is working, and ironing out problems where needed.

> I certainly think for a company of our size to have one person trying to manage HR [is problematic], I've had a couple of people who use the phrase, 'Doing HR is a bit like being a shit filter. You just have to listen to everyone's crap.' I think at any normal organization you will always have one person at the top who all the crap is thrown at. Because we're a co-op, you have a lot more low-level shunting and moaning about stuff in a general way. HR seems to filter a lot of that. I think having one person do it on a day-to-day person is, yeah, not fair on the person and not fair on the company. I think we're going in the right direction with having that spread out now. (WCM27 - WC4W)

Above, WCM27 describes the role of HR in WCs as serving as something of a "shit filter". They suggested that this element of the role provides some of the justification for dividing it between a group of members as well as highlighting that part of the reason HR takes such a strain is that it serves as something of a lightning rod in the absence of a formal hierarchy. Indeed, WCM06 described how after some interactions with members at WC2, they have sat in the office and cried. WCM37 indicated that it is sometimes necessary to just let problematic members be, instead of "banging your head against a brick wall" trying to deal with problems the wider membership will not necessarily support you in dealing with. Their view was that it was more valuable to focus on the members who could be helped or wanted support than to focus energy on a very small minority of more problematic members. This highlights the potential for an information asymmetry produced by the practice of confidentiality to have an inverse effect, i.e. backfiring on those in possession of knowledge. Likewise, at WC3, WCM25 had struggled to interface with an HR function that was both poorly delineated and extraordinarily strained due to the lack of delineation and accountability of other roles.

Of course, the 'burden of authority' is not limited to HR Officers. WCM02 and WCM13 described the role of Chair as being more a set of obligations than powers, requiring those assuming the role to quickly grasp power dynamics they may well have been unaware of and then carefully navigate the landscape of member opinion. Compounding this problem, there was evidence across my case cooperatives that members often present poorly developed proposals or shoot down proposals without having developed a substantive argument for doing so, nor offering an alternative proposal. WCM13 describes such a situation below:

> The QC [Quality Control Officer], who's been monitoring the time tags and things, was going, 'We've really got to get a grip on this.' They submitted a proposal to basically either stop frozen [food] or limit frozen deliveries but then nobody else came up with a counter proposal. Then we came to this thing and it was, 'What about this? What about that? We'll lose too many customers.' Because I only had one proposal, it was either this, yes or no. Then people kept on chipping in, so then there was so much noise I couldn't keep up. I came away with a really vague idea of what actually happened during the meeting. (WCM13 - WC3)

WCM13 perceived this situation as a personal failure due to the lack of clarity following the meeting, yet the evidence suggests that 'slipping' occurred due to a lack of structure in the discussion and decision-making process. Likewise, WCM06 highlighted the case of a Finance Officer at WC2 who by the time of their sudden departure had taken on the burden of responsibility for a host of tasks no other members were involved in. While their departure taught the members a valuable lesson regarding members becoming overly 'critical nodes', it also shed light on the range of pressures to deal with ongoing 'creaking' that can build on individuals in positions of authority.

7.2.5 The oppressor becomes the oppressed

Beyond the burdens and trials faced by members assuming positions of functional authority is the extent to which these roles are genuinely empowered and supported by members. This speaks to my concept of bi/multi-directional 'relevance'. Staying close to the 'Goldilocks zone' concerns more than sustaining the 'relevance' experienced by members with more general roles, it is about attending to the 'relevance' of all parts in the 'whole-a-making'.

Ten years ago, a lot of us were doing one main job. For example, HR was just a wee add-on when we had the time... QC [quality control] was the same... but that was such an important crucial role... it [creating a stand-alone role] took a lot of convincing the rest of the co-op to be honest though… because it wasn't a money-generator and also the nature of the job... and even to this day... I mean I took us through SALSA (Safe and Local Supplier Approval) accreditation but nobody wanted to know, I was left to do it myself and it really gave me a sour taste and I thought, 'Is this a co-op?' you know... to be left to do that all alone and even then trying to implement it... people just don't want to... and I think... it's probably fair to say... I don't like talking about other people... but that's why the current QC is leaving and when I actually presented the job of QC I said the nature of the job is overseeing... but we are like, 'No bosses, no...' and I think we take it to the extreme... it's like black and white thinking about things... it's an overseeing role not to say... it's not a blame role... it's overseeing and putting best business practices into place... and still to this day... I think that's the QC is leaving because what's the point in having the role if you're not going to support it... these are legal guidelines... this is... we have to be doing this... but people just go, 'Ah, that's not on my radar. Not on my radar... I'm not doing that. I'm not doing that'. (WCM21 - WC3)

Above, WCM21 narrates their struggle to create a dedicated position for quality control (QC) as the function had grown beyond the capacity of an add-on role. On the one hand, was the difficulty garnering support for having a position that does not inherently generate money and yet holds an amount of authority over other departments. On the other hand, was the lack of ongoing support for the role; which they suggested may have contributed to a member deciding to leave the cooperative.

At WC4R, the inability of the HR Team to carry out their function due to lack of empowerment had resulted in the members bringing in outside help in order to navigate clear and present organizational problems; a testament to the difficulties of exerting authority without the backing of collective power. It is therefore not difficult to envisage why members in positions of functional authority might sometimes shy from acting with authority. For example, Chairs failing to impose order on the democratic process (highlighted by WCM06 and WCM13) or coordinators feeling it necessary to

defer to their team rather than giving an individual opinion as an elected representative (highlighted by WCM02).

> The co-op by their actions that's almost what they are saying... it's almost like, 'We want you to just get on with it and do that.' But then I think certainly for some of our coordinators who write the business plans and for our Management Committee... I think a similar air of mistrust and suspicion is given towards them as comes to the Personnel Team... so it's almost like... we have this weird dichotomy where nobody wants to be told what to do but everybody wants for somebody else to be told what to do if they don't think they are doing something right... if that makes sense. So people often come to us in Personnel and say, 'So and so is doing something wrong, we want you to tell them to not do that anymore...' But then if we went to that same person and said, 'You're doing something wrong; we don't want you to do that anymore...' They would say, 'Well you're overstepping your bounds, you can't do this, we're a workers cooperative, we are all equal.' And I think it's a similar thing that we get as you take on positions of responsibility, you take on things like coordination, responsibility for business planning... is that almost lots of people don't really want to get involved with that sort of stuff and want someone else to do it but are kind of a bit mistrustful and perhaps a bit suspicious of the people that do take on responsibility. (WCM01 - WC1)

As illustrated by WCM01's narrative above, members' attitudes towards functional authority present an interesting problematic. Members want someone else to take responsibility and want authority to be imposed on others yet generally do not want to assume positions of responsibility nor want authority to be imposed on them. This speaks to a classic criticism of collectivist organizing, that of the inefficiency and ineffectiveness of relative structurelessness discussed in Section 7.1 'Finding authority'. However, it was clear that across all my case cooperatives the membership, or at least a sufficient majority of the membership, had found means of navigating the problem; in part by simply accepting it as integral to the decision to be a WC.

While I engaged in more general discussion of this issue in in Section 5.3 'Sharing the load', here this point serves to underline the potential difficulties in making positions of functional authority any more unappealing or challenging for those bearing what is already a heavy burden. To reinforce this, I would offer that WCM36, an established

and evidently capable member of WC4R, had explicitly turned down assuming responsibility for HR and avoided becoming 'involved' with the Management Committee (MC) of WC4. Likewise, WCM37 indicated that at WC4W they 'help' members along the way to sitting on the MC using "a big yard broom", metaphorically speaking.

Even without the imposition of additional oversight, the extent to which positions of functional authority might enhance or diminish the individual autonomy of those assuming said positions is worth consideration. A heuristic switch from the more obvious question regarding the extent to which the creation of positions of functional authority enhances or diminishes the autonomy of members in general. Rather than hold on to these positions of authority, it seems to me that members tend after a time to relinquish roles such as Chair, Secretary, and Treasurer, assuming a suitable replacement can be identified and motivated. While other positions such as those of Coordinator and HR Officer roles present themselves to be somewhat 'stickier', several participants had also let go of these roles (WCM02, WCM06, WCM19, WCM21). Indeed, across all my case cooperatives and in light of this analysis, the fact that many of these roles are shared by one or more members, or are at the very least supported by a team of established members, stands not as evidence of the potential untrustworthiness of the individuals assuming authority but of the fickle nature of the collective and how fragile the structures constructed may truly be.

7.2.6 Summary

In this section I explored the manifestations of individual functional authority in WCs. Following an overview of the kinds of positions evidenced in the case cooperatives, I briefly explained the mechanisms by which individuals are selected for these different roles. In 'Authority limited' I attended to the need for WCs to address the bounds of individual functional authority in order to avoid structural ossification and degeneration. However, this sub-section highlighted the struggle WCs face with regards to creating dynamic structures that both avail themselves to member engagement while also providing the framework for stability that the organization needs to survive. Of interest is the brokering role played by HR/Personnel Officers, which is fraught with challenges for both the cooperative and the individuals who take on the mantle in terms of the potential to 'slip' away from the 'Goldilocks zone' of cooperative practice. The

regulatory necessity of HR, the holistic nature of its oversight, the requirement for confidentiality, and its disciplinary function, all combine to create a singularly 'uncooperative' position of authority. While members have been able to successfully navigate this role, sometimes with the help of multi-skilling, in practice WCs appear to particularly struggle with 'slipping' boundaries and understandings of this position.

Next, I discussed how these difficulties are experienced more widely, so that positions of authority may become burdensome and uncomfortable for those engaged in them. Overburdened and without reward, positions of individual functional authority in WCs represent points of high risk for the 'slipping' of cooperative practice. One of the most significant insights emergent in this section is that the central issue with individual authority in WCs is not that these people become tyrants but rather become almost oppressed by the role; which, in turn, makes it difficult to argue for adding further oversight and accountability. Indeed, established and scaled WCs have a common problem with both finding members to take on these roles and subsequently empowering them to fulfil their responsibilities. Thus, maintaining the 'sense of relevance' of those assuming brokering roles as well as the 'sense of relevance' members experience toward these positions is vital to sustaining the integration of the 'whole-a-making'. My findings support the need for members to reflect on the notions of power as 'power-with' and mutual answerability as 'responsibility with' (Stout & Love, 2015a, p. 165). Follett (2003d) emphasised that "we should think not only of what the leader does to the group, but also of what the group does to the leader" (p. 238).

7.3 Groups, rules, and authority

In this section I explore the manifestation of authority in groups and in policies and procedures. The section consists of five sub-sections. The first, 'The tail wagging the dog', examines how expectations and misunderstandings emerge regarding the structuration of power and authority in WCs, paying particular attention to central hubs and inter-departmental tensions. In the second sub-section I turn to 'Departmental devolution' exploring the challenge of distributing and decentralising authority. The third sub-section, 'Playing by rules', returns to the subject of policies and procedures and highlights further insights regarding their problematic existence. The fourth sub-section, 'Fizzing and bloating', addresses the topic of working groups and consiers how

these might be better understood in relation to the structuration of power and authority. Finally, in 'Cabals or guardians' I return to the notion of hidden or informal hierarchie, giving consideration to both the potential risks and benefits associated with informal connectedness before going on to reflect on the responses of members to the sense that informal hierarchies are at play. I also question the extent to which members are aware of engaging in hidden hierarchies and the implications of this for the legitimacy and potency of the cooperative's structuration of authority.

7.3.1 The tail wagging the dog

In the extract below, WCM30 expresses their sense of how the Management Committee (MC) has changed, particularly in recent years, as WC4 has grown:

> I think at the moment some people that have gone on the Management Committee have been here not a long time, and I think have probably had an idea that it was more of a group of people getting together, and deciding on issues, and directing the business. My understanding of it was it was never supposed to be that, it was supposed to deal with legal things, some HR stuff, you know? There have been people that have gone onto the Management Committee in the recent past with an agenda to try and push certain things […] if you're doing that then you are bypassing the general people here, do you know what I mean? If it's a group of [people] on the Management Committee deciding policy, then that comes down to the members, it's the tail wagging the dog as far as I'm concerned. It should be bottom-up. You know, these issues should be fed up to a Management Committee, that's how I think, especially in a workers co-op. (WCM30 - WC4W)

WCM30 suggested that the MC of WC4 had 'evolved itself' and that this was not something members necessarily wanted, nor want to continue. Their sense was that a cultural shift, perhaps a 'slip', had taken place that resulted in the MC making more management-like decisions. They argued that if this change was to be accepted then the framing of the MC would have to change accordingly. They indicated that the changes in the MC emerged from newer members joining the committee with different assumptions as to its purpose or remit, which had been simply to maintain the legal 'holding space' of the WC4 umbrella. WCM30 balked at how the MC seemed to be bypassing the collective as the primary source of power and authority, describing it as

a "tail wagging the dog" situation. This is problematic because, on the one hand, there is an issue with an oligarchic minority overseeing the majority in a supposedly collectivist-democratic organization and, on the other hand, the potential for hidden agendas and mistrust to proliferate: which ultimately could prove more damaging by undermining the legitimacy of all manifestations of authority and trust in the power of the collective.

Below, WCM30 continues their commentary regarding how members of WC4 have responded to the sense of emergent oligarchy in the MC. This response consisted of increasing the transparency and accountability of the MC by way of improved feedback and more consistent reporting. However, WCM30 voiced misgivings regarding the extent to which this had resolved the issue of the MC directing the focus of the membership at large. Indeed, they view this as a moral and ethical issue for the cooperative, illustrating the depth of feeling to be found in some WCs regarding perceived 'slipping' from collective power being centralised in the authority of representative bodies.

> About two or three years ago, the feedback wasn't great between the Management Committee and general members but at our meeting now we have feedback where the members of the Management Committee have to tell us what they've been talking about. Also, they have to publish the minutes and the agenda. It's not always been the case for a long time. Yeah, it wasn't regulated. I think it was supposed to happen but quite often it didn't. We have a group email thing where the Management Committee send it all out, I don't know how often. We get to see and that sometimes throws up issues that we then talk about here. My issue with that is that we should be talking about those issues first and then they go to the Management Committee, not a group of people that are possibly driven by politics or individual points of view then driving the place. I think it morally and ethically should be the other way around. (WCM30 - WC4W)

It is important to note that members of the MC at WC4 shared an awareness of a misunderstanding between the wider membership and the committee. Members with experience on the committee, such as WCM39, expressed in their interviews a desire to step away if only more members would come forward to assume positions. However, no members of WC4R put themselves forward for the MC in 2018. While there may

indeed have been a profound change occurring in the purpose and remit of the committee, I would argue that what this presents is a potentially more significant issue for the cooperative. That of a divergence in the shared meaning attached to this manifestation of authority; a breakdown or 'slip' in 'relevance' that risks producing further symptomatic 'creaking' and concurrently increases the potential for further 'slipping' and the associated deleterious consequences this may have for the quality of cooperation.

> I'd say it's [forum] quite a nebulous thing... it seems to ebb and flow a lot between what it's doing... one of the key things I'm really hoping to do is to get some consensus around the current business need and role and function of Forum... and also to really push people who bring items to Forum to be intentional about what they are bringing and what they want the outcome to be... so that's another key Sociocratic thing... the intentionality and desired outcomes are crucial... so we have tried to introduce that a little bit. (WCM04 - WC2)

While WC2's central hub does not serve the same representative function as the MC at WC4, members had nevertheless struggled to sustain a shared understanding of its purpose and remit. The central hub had been a focal point for attempts to rethink the structuration of authority and member engagement. Above, WCM04 expresses the shifting understanding of this central hub as seeming to "ebb and flow" in terms of its purpose and functionality. They suggested that Sociocracy offers a means of facilitating the structural and cultural change necessary to redress the perceived weaknesses of the current system; namely by increasing the emphasis placed on the intentionality and desired outcomes.

7.3.2 Departmental devolution

As noted in Section 5.2 ('Siloing'), misunderstandings and divergent expectations are also a problem between operational departments and teams. In the extract below, WCM20, a young and relatively recent member of WC3, highlights these inter-departmental perceptions as a "legacy problem" for the cooperative:

> I think if there's a legacy problem, it's maybe people's perception of how different departments interact. I think there isn't necessarily harmony between departments. There are no full-on rifts, and bear in mind, I've never worked in a place this size. If you were to put me in a similar sized company that wasn't

the co-op, I'm sure it would be a hell of a lot worse. For me, it's partly just adjusting to being in a workplace that even has departments, if you see what I mean. Everyone gets on. I do think they get on very well, it's admirable, but I think maybe there's not that communication of needs that you might expect there would be. From an outsider coming into [WC3], you'd expect everyone to be hippies, and sharing feelings in the morning, and stuff like that. I'm not sad that it's not like that, you can go too far that way, but I think, yeah, there could be more of a global understanding. I'm not entirely sure how that would work though. The thing is, the only reason I would think that, or anyone would think that, is because they feel like their department is not getting understood [...] There's maybe mistrust within communications. Sometimes one department might feel a grievance and maybe state it but not have it heard properly, which then will turn into a bigger grievance, and then you have more gravity for that within that department. It can become a grudge. I don't know how you nip that in the bud. I get the impression maybe that these things are echoes of things that have happened before with different situations, but the personal allegiances still remain from previous things, I don't know. (WCM20 - WC3)

While WCM20 acknowledged that by-and-large the membership seemed to get along, they viewed 'creaking' along the lines created by what are, for the most part, long established departmental boundaries. They considered the issue as being the result of misperceptions regarding inter-departmental interactions, a sense on the part of some departments that they are misunderstood, and a mistrust in inter-departmental communications. Furthermore, WCM20 suggested that by not having acknowledged problems, dealt with problems proactively, or having failed to fully resolve them, grievances ('creakings') have become more like grudges ('slipping'), hanging over the cooperative and shaping members' reactions to contemporary issues. This echoes CMA5's warnings regarding the tendency for members to avoid important conflicts and how this can lead to issues not being 'nipped in the bud'. WCM20 highlights how more of a "global understanding" would be beneficial for WC3, this speaks to Follett's integrative process and the critical importance of members developing and maintaining a sense of 'relevance' across the 'whole-a-making'.

One of the more common responses to inter-departmental divergence at WC3 involved arguing for greater decentralisation of authority to departments, potentially following an iteration of Sociocracy (along the same lines as WC2). The operational arguments for this specialisation of decision-making is understandable, as is the logic of taking decisions closer to their point of greatest understanding and 'relevance'. However, I question whether, for a cooperative already struggling with fractious and mistrusting inter-departmental relations, such a shift would really be the right thing. While it may stop members 'breathing down each other's necks' in the immediacy as well as potentially improve the responsiveness and quality of decision-making, it could also create even further distance between groups; in turn weakening the togetherness and legitimacy of collective power. In the extract below, WCM12 offers their argument as to how Sociocracy might help to ease the inter-departmental strain at WC3:

> It [Sociocracy] would give each department, if you like, more autonomy, if that's the right term. To say, 'These are the buyers, these are the accounts people, these are the warehouse staff,' and for someone that's got the expertise on it, it would let them focus on that and it means that any issues that are raised, everybody's talking from an even playing field. Say there's an issue with the warehouse, all the guys in the warehouse would know how that impacted their department, but I might not see the problem because I'm not part of it, you know? This could be then fed into this co-op, that they all discuss between themselves to say what he best course of action is. If that needs to then go to the co-op then it would do as opposed to everybody voting. I don't know how to explain it. If I was to say, 'Right, I want to go and do this thing,' and I'm in the Buying department, somebody in the warehouse doesn't understand why that's a good or a bad thing, they just know it's maybe going to cost money or something, so they only see a negative aspect to it. Because they're not part of the Buying Team, they wouldn't understand the necessary things. (WCM12 - WC3)

Despite quite clear differences in their positions and practices, members at both WC2 and WC3 were interested in greater departmental autonomy. However, as acknowledged by those implementing Sociocracy at WC2, the real challenge involved in decentralisation concerns the cultural shift required to make it work. WCM14 suggested that certain departments at WC3 might be more culturally prepared than

others to adopt Sociocratic practices into their working routine. Their understanding was that if the cooperative were to make such a shift then it had to be made slowly and members would need time to come around to it at their own pace and in their own time, i.e. through respect for their individual autonomy and agency. In explaining their understanding, they offered an anecdote from an anarchist occupation at which a participant had explained how behaviour, in this case the daily sweeping of some external steps, could be shaped by personally establishing a pattern that becomes familiar as opposed to imposing or demanding a particular behaviour from others.

WCM14 illustrated this in using the example of open agendas that balance the need to sufficiently structure meetings effectively with the need to avoid being overly prescriptive and allowing space for participants to contribute; i.e. balancing structuredness and structurelessness. They suggested that by establishing the basic structure of circles with two members overlapping and allowing member behaviour to naturally respond to this new structure the cooperative might gradually move in a healthier direction without encountering the resistance a more forced or dramatic shift might generate. Of course, WCM14's rationale was broadly based on the assumption that members do want the steps to be swept, the agenda to be a collaborative effort, and for a more dynamic structure to be successful. However, such belief in humanity is the bedrock of prefigurative organizing.

WC2 was much closer than any other case organization to making the transition to decentralisation by way of an iteration of Sociocracy. In this process the members had explored a range of options including, however briefly, the potential for adopting a more representative structure that would see members relinquish their automatic 'director' status. In the extract below, WCM04 explains the reluctance of members at WC2 to move away from a member-director model:

> In the report where we talk about that [reducing the number of member-directors]... that's more of a, 'some co-ops take this approach'. They allocate a certain number of members to be directors of the business and form the board or the Management Committee and others remain members. It was never sort of put out there as a suggestion for us to do because people take member-directorship very seriously here, that we are all directors of the business. In Sociocracy you could definitely go that route. You could have a top circle of people who retain director status and then have membership sort of... but

whether that ever happens one day in the future maybe but certainly not going to be part of our plan for the moment... we don't have... it's very difficult I think having 70 directors of a business because that's a massive amount of people... but in the Sociocratic system with the circles everyone can retain that director status and make their decisions... I mean that report says retain a commitment to a collective, centralised decision-making structure so that would be a big change moving over to Sociocracy. (WCM04 - WC2)

Their view was that member-directorship remains an important and valued part of what 'membership' means at the cooperatives. Indeed, the desire to sustain a member-director model was a key driver in their efforts to review and renew the structure of WC2. Their view was that some iteration of Sociocracy may well hold the key to making this possible as the cooperative continues to grow, although they note that Sociocratic circles do not necessarily preclude the possibility of members of only members of the central circle retaining director status. At the time of writing, the proposals being tested and implemented at WC2 already entailed a shift away from the cooperative's long-standing commitments to centralised collective decision-making, moving to decentralise decisions to their point of most 'relevance'; accountable to the membership at large through reporting at regular intervals. What remains unclear is where the line is drawn in terms of the extent of authority the collective agrees to decentralise to the various groups (or 'circles') that emerge from the transition to Sociocracy.

7.3.3 Playing by rules

WCM37's insights in Section 5.3 'Points of reference' regarding the difficulties of implementing a transparent sickness policy at WC4W highlighted how structuration can be viewed as a means of buttressing individual autonomy by creating a framework in which members can be autonomous. Likewise, the same commentary highlights how structuration can also be viewed as a threat to said autonomy in that it creates limitations to behaviour along with systemic responsiveness that is by design outside the membership's case-by-case control, e.g. a member is automatically able to access additional sick leave as long as they meet specific criteria and notify an HR Officer. This reveals how growth simultaneously extending the need for mutual understanding, i.e. increased concreteness, whilst paradoxically increasing both the potential degree of

variance in interpretation (or meaning) and the barriers to be overcome in resolving such divergence, i.e. increased distance or abstraction.

As previously explored in Chapter 5, multi-skilling is a particularly interesting example of how policies and practices can be perceived as supporting or undermining autonomy and enhancing or detracting from the legitimacy of authority. Multi-skilling may be regarded as an inherently oppressive practice that reduces individual autonomy. However, it may likewise be regarded as empowering in the sense that it reduces the 'distance' between members, including those in positions of authority (e.g. HR Officers), and supports a more holistic understanding of the cooperative. Therefore, it can be argued that multi-skilling increases the legitimacy of authority and thus the level of trust members have in the power of the collective.

At the other end of this continuum is the practice of specialisation, which is regarded by some as inherently enhancing of individual autonomy. However, specialisation increases the 'distance' between both individual members and between departments, creating the potential for greater divergences of interpretation and for misunderstandings to develop, therefore undermining the legitimacy of authority and trust in the power of the collective. While this was not evidenced at WC4, where members seemed notably curious as to what might happen in the event of financial strain, it was evidenced at WC3, where financial strain revealed the 'creaking connectedness' of departments, and where questions regarding the legitimacy of the Management Team and mistrust in the power of the collective were raised. It may seem tempting to suggest that the overall benefits of multi-skilling outweigh the more significant potential problems associated with specialisation in WCs. However, based on my analysis and wider reading it is imperative to emphasise the centrality of individual autonomy to the working notion of worker cooperation, which specialisation can be viewed as enhancing. And furthermore, that specialisation is a powerful, even overwhelming, current within organizing, one that can be challenging to resist and nigh impossible to return from.

> There is a lot of will to make a business work the way it should, but there isn't necessarily the skill to do it. I've been in the business eighteen months but because I've been involved in management meetings, I've read back management notes for years and they just keep talking about the same things. None of it actually comes a conclusion or is brought forward but they have the

will to do it. They just don't do it. The biggest problem is nobody has to really be accountable for anything that they do and that's a bit of a problem. That's led to a culture of 'do what you can' which is not very good in such a competitive market. I worked with lots of other wholesalers in my last place, all of these guys' competitors. The basics have to be there, you know? It's just not tight enough. They don't have any policies or procedures for the business. They don't have anything solid. It's 'turn up and get it done' and that's not how you run a business. You have to look forward. There are a lot of basics that just aren't right. (WCM16 - WC3)

In the extract above, WCM16 offers their observations of where the structure of authority at WC3 falls short of their expectations. They highlighted a sense that complex or contentious issues remain unresolved and thus arise again and again in the minutes of the Management Team meetings over months and years. WCM16 expressed palpable exasperation at the absence of 'basics' in terms of policies and procedures and how this creates a fluid, present-time-oriented working culture that runs contra to their grounding in conventional business organization. While the situation at WC3 perhaps called for a more structured, future-oriented approach, it is noteworthy that WCM16's comments fit neatly with the notion of members entering cooperatives and approaching organizing based on assumptions prevalent in the external environment. However, the combination of an absence of policies combined with a palpable lack of intentionality strikes me as a potentially high risk situation for a scaled WC: how long can a medium-size organization go on without a clear set of policies and procedures?

Reflecting on their time serving as an HR Officer at WC4W, in the excerpt below WCM29 offers insight into how an absence of agreed policies results in the need to "make certain decisions that you would probably rather not" and to deal with situations as they emerge:

You have to be quite impartial and you have to really think on your feet, and you have to make certain decisions that you would probably rather not if there's not a policy. If there's a situation that you have to deal with there and then, you have to make a decision on it. Some of the time you're just plucking a decision out of the air because you're just doing what you think is best at the time. (WCM29 - WC4W)

The implication of the collective not placing authority in clearly codified policies and procedures is that individuals are placed in a position where they are obliged to operate in a grey area in order to 'fill the gap' between the collective power and the authority necessary to deal with situations that arise. In turn, it is possible to appreciate how this may be perceived by members who are less than satisfied with the ad hoc outcomes of decision-making: potentially further undermining trust and support for individuals or groups 'entrusted as keepers'. This further illuminates the interconnectedness of the structuration of authority. It suggests that if we move beyond totally centralised collective power and authority towards any degree of authority being placed in an individual or group, a framework of policies and procedures is necessary not only to constrain this authority but also to protect its integrity and legitimacy. Furthermore, it is important to appreciate how members, and groups of members, in positions of authority can become exposed due to the failure of the collective power to adequately negotiate a framework that facilitates, regulates, protects, and therefore legitimises their authority. Additional examples of such failings present in my case cooperatives include: a lack of departmental budgets, the lack of a transparent credit policy, and a lack of follow-through on agreed action points.

7.3.4 Fizzling and bloating

As explained by CMA3 below, one of the most common ways WCs solve problems and move projects forward is through establishing working groups. These groups tend to be temporary but may nevertheless exist for several years at a time or even become permanent features of the organization.

> Any knotty problem which as a co-op grows it really just can't thrash out around the table... it ends up having to delegate that decision or that power over that issue to a subset to a small working group or whatever you call it. Usually they take on board the recommendation from that group... I see that happening all the time with lots of different issues where as soon as you can't get people around a table, particularly with a worker co-op it's really difficult to get to the meat of a topic or the meat of a problem and so they just have to chunk it up and parcel it out to a smaller group. (CMA3)

It is worth noting that working groups had been and were being used across my case cooperatives to deal with some of the most important issues encountered. Be this

undertaking structural reviews at WC1 and WC2, resolving inefficiencies at WC3, attempting to redesign a seemingly unfair remuneration system at WC4R, or moving site and developing a better policy framework at WC4W.

In the extract below, WCM37 offers a commentary on working groups. They noted the potential usefulness of working groups in dealing with problems that may be "too big and abstract" to be effectively dealt with by the collective, enabling a smaller group of members to focus on the problem more intensely and then bring their findings back to the membership at large. From the perspective of the 'structuration of authority' working groups may be understood as being given authority, and therefore autonomy, to invest resources in exploration within what are ideally a relatively clear set of dimensions and objectives within a specific timeframe.

> Some things are just like too big and abstract so you need to kind of bring it down to have some kind of structure so that's where working groups work really well... so you have a smaller group that look at it and then they will take it back to the meeting and then you've got something to go, 'Stick your hands up, do you want A or B?' And it makes it possible to make consensus decision making... where as if you just take a big abstract idea to a meeting and it just goes round and round and you just realise you're circling, discussing, and you're not getting anywhere... so working groups work really well in that way... as long as they are actioned... so you are still kind of getting everyone's involvement to a degree [...] basically we will go to a meeting and go, 'We need to do this, is anyone interested in forming a working group, let us know.' then we will still say if we are going to be looking at a compassionate policy soon... so we will say that in the meeting and they can just let us know... and then we send an email out saying, 'We are meeting next Thursday at 11 o'clock. If you want to come, come.' [...] They tend to be quite loose. I'm always for minuting them, some people don't which is really infuriating because it's kind of like 6 months on you go, 'Didn't you meet about doing chilled food about 6 months ago?' and they go, 'Ah yeah well so and so said... I can't remember...' So there should be some kind minuting but it can just be quite brief. (WCM37 - WC4W)

WCM37 suggested that working groups might simplify the choices set before the membership in order to reduce the risk of discussions going round-and-round without reaching a consensus. This indicates that in some instances working groups may wield

significant influence over the potential direction of the cooperative. However, working groups have their flaws, namely stemming from their informality, extra-curricular character, and the frame in which they operate; that is, the capacity of the cooperative to render working groups transparent and accountable. WCM37 highlighted how at WC4W working groups loose groups that are open to all members and that they have a tendency to 'slip' in terms of keeping good minutes, following up on action points, and being able to report progress to the membership.

> I do find the downside of the cooperative is some of these working groups can often fizzle out to nothing without a driving force behind them, if you see what I mean, without someone at the top expecting some sort of result of a working group... Maybe at a meeting, someone will say, 'I'd like to set up a working group looking at marketing,' for example, and then you'd have a couple of meetings, and then quite often it'll be the main protagonist in it suddenly has their time taken up doing something else, and they're not the driving force behind it, and then it fizzles out, and in six months' time maybe someone says at the meeting, 'What's happened to the marketing group?' and someone says, 'Oh yeah, I got too busy to do it recently. We'll start it up again and we'll focus more time on it.' And you're back, do you see what I mean? That is the downside of a cooperative, without someone [checking up] and that awareness of the people doing it that they need to report... (WCM40 -WC4W)

Above, WCM40, also an experienced member of WC4W, explains their frustrations with the perceived ineffectiveness and inconsistency of working groups, noting how they tend to 'fizzle out'. It is interesting how WCs struggle to sustain a driving force in these more informal, less accountable, but nevertheless entrusted groups, because it suggests a potential problem with sustaining authority beyond the day-to-day operations of the cooperative. On the one hand, this may indicate a certain fickleness on the part of individual members with regards to their sense of commitment to, or prioritisation of, such informal groups. On the other hand, it may indicate an issue with respect to how collective power is projected and legitimised in less structured elements of cooperative organization. WCM40 identified a lack of accountability as the key reason for working groups 'fizzling out', which I would argue is an instance of 'slipping' cooperative practice.

Working groups can also encounter the problem of 'mission bloat'; similar to how more formal manifestations of authority such as MCs and coordination groups can become increasingly nebulous, poorly defined, and potentially misunderstood from all angles. In the extract below, WCM05 explains how the working group established at WC2 to review the structure of the cooperative may have been given too broad a remit from the outset and how this remit expanded further over time. Indeed, the group's remit seemed to include exploring and developing improvements across all aspect of the cooperative, from governance to rotas and everything in-between.

> The Structure Team is interesting. I think its remit was a bit too broad. I think they had a tendency, as members... if there were any maybe slightly difficult or more involved conversations happening with what we do. 'For the Structure Team? That's a structure thing, the Structure Team will deal with that.' They got given this very broad remit of just improving work generally for everyone, everything from making everyone's rotas better, to improving meetings, to changing governance, to changing people's roles and responsibilities. Just pretty much everything about the business. I think a lot of stuff has been really good. I was a bit involved because it was when I was chairing changes in the meetings, which were a really good consultation and I think we made some really great changes to how we run our members meetings that we have four times a year, loads better than they were. Structure Teams that have started up with one group of people and ended up being a different group of people, I think maybe because it has this broad remit, people were on it who... maybe what it turned into wasn't what they wanted to do. (WCM05 - WC2)

WCM05 noted how this working group has gradually changed in terms of both focus and membership in the four years it has been operational, suggesting that its broad remit may be at least part of the reason for members coming and going from the team. This problem resonates with the situation highlighted at WC3 regarding members' expctations of the new HR Officer and how so much work had landed on their shoulders. While it makes sense that WCs have to be able to take on and solve big challenges, working groups perhaps require more structure in terms of focus and accountability than cooperatives tend to be ready to give to or expect from them.

7.3.5 Cabals or guardians?

As with all organizations, not all groups important to the survival of WCs are reflected in their operational, coordination, or governance structures[14]. The by-products of their informal and opaque groups can be particularly detrimental to WCs in that they can produce exclusivity, non-transparent communication, unaccountable power structures (e.g. voting blocs), and breakdowns in mutual understanding: all of which serve to undermine the legitimacy of collective power and any authority in which it is formally manifest. However, my analysis also suggests that such informal groups can also serve to sustain the cooperative by providing additional attachments, meaning, and spaces for cathartic release. Collectively these strengthen the sense of 'relevance' experienced by members. Furthermore, as growth increases the distance between facets of the formal structure the very same issues may emerge from formal groupings such as departments or functional units, potentially increasing the importance of informal bindings across the structure. Again, we can see how 'creaking' structures may 'slip' towards an increasing reliance on informal connectedness, in turn increasing the opacity of power and authority and undermining the legitimacy of the structuration of 'consensual authority'.

WCM05 suggests in the extract below that at WC2 there may well be a real vulnerability with regards to a group of long-standing and respected members potentially abusing their position and being able to "exercise quite a lot of power". They indicated that they do not believe the group of members in such a position would ever abuse their position in such a way but nevertheless acknowledge that it would be relatively clear at any given time who would constitute an MC if there were to be one.

> I think when people think that there's a formal leadership role, that can easily become a, sort of, rule of authority. I guess that worry that if a group of people maybe, not the people doing it now, who were in that role chose to, they would probably be able to exercise quite a lot of power now in the cooperative, if the wrong people were... Maybe the way we are, we avoid that, but yeah you could

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[14] An issue first discussed in Section 4.3 'Interpersonal space: The ties that bind' and recurrent throughout my analysis so far.

certainly put together, I would say, an informal board of directors if you decided that you were going to scrap the system and have a Management Committee. I think it would be fairly straightforward to work out who would be on it, probably. Maybe it wouldn't be entirely length of service, but I think there'd be quite a big element. (WCM05 - WC2)

Contrasting WCM05's relatively unconcerned description of the existence of an informal hierarchy at WC2, in the extract below WCM15 conveys their frustrations with what they perceive to be a problematic group of powerful long-standing members at WC3.

They've either been here too long and they're annoyed that nothing's ever changed, they've never changed anything, they think they can do what they want. There's a wee cabal of people who have been here for twenty years that get away with whatever they want, will do anything to back each other up and they're all happy about it. It's changing a bit because a couple of them left but it's a constant struggle to deal with this [...] I thought it was changing but I'm still worried about it, I think the cooperative is run by a secret cabal within it. I sit with them but they're stuck in their ways. They think everyone else are idiots. They can't let them just make the decisions. Folk will fucking vote with them and it's made, they [the wider membership] cannot think. Even when you bring a proposal, and you make a bit of headway, and you feel like you're making progress, one of these people from the past, these old cabal members from a secret organization come forward and they fucking do what they want. They just undo things, we have the votes and they undo the votes. They do what they fucking want anyway. An example would be, we were getting rid of a run that's never made any money. For five years it's been making, like, £10 a year or something, and we don't have many customers. It's a total waste of time. For five years we were voting to get rid of it but at the last minute one person will go, 'No, we're keeping it.' Everybody folds and we just keep it, even though we have discussions about it. People are putting together a lot of paperwork, looking at figures, getting loads of people involved in a lot of work, and just one person will go, 'I don't like that,' and take it to another meeting. (WCM15 - WC3)

WCM15 was emotionally affronted by the perceived influence of the informal hierarchy at the cooperative; particularly the sense that this 'cabal' was able to override membership decisions and even undo the outcomes of voting. While it is unclear to what extent this was true, the fact that a senior member of the cooperative might have spent several years feeling this way towards their fellow members and this not having been effectively addressed speaks volumes as to the depth of underlying interpersonal tensions at WC3. I argue that a large part of WCM15's anger is fuelled by a feeling that some members might behave with an air of superiority toward others (for example, "they think everyone else are idiots").

WCM32, whom we heard from in Section 6.3 with regards to the notion of 'bulletproof members', echoed WCM15's sentiments that sometimes a group of respected and thus powerful members can be perceived as having "steamrolled" decisions over the rest of the membership. While WCM32 did not disagree with the need to reintroduce refill stations at WC4R, their objections pertained to the sense that the location of these has been predetermined without the input or consent of departments working in this area of the premises. Both examples underscore how, through permitting perceptibly non-democratic practice or allowing discontent with processes and procedure to go unattended, WCs can see the legitimacy of their collective power and entrusted authority undermined and potentially rendered impotent: 'creaking' becoming 'slipping' and resulting in an absence of 'relevance'.

WCM15 and WCM32 offer particularly strong examples of how disaffection can manifest while other participants only alluded to these issues. However, some of the members WCM05, WCM15, and WCM32 were referring to were those very members who reported experiencing the 'burden of responsibility' in these cooperatives. For example, assuming a range of different roles and responsibilities, engaging in working groups, and becoming highly knowledgeable across multiple departments. This illuminates a confounding problematic in terms of how established members believing they are acting as stewards of the cooperatives might inadvertently be undermine the legitimacy of the structuration of authority. It raises the question; do they know that other members believe they are in a secret cabal?

7.3.6 Summary

This section explored the manifestation of authority in groups and rules (policy frameworks), albeit paying more attention to the former than the latter. MCs and Management Teams arguably represent a problematic shift away from collectivist-democratic organizing. I highlighted insights from WC4 regarding the sense of drifting purpose and remit of the contemporary MC, moving from serving as primarily a regulatory entity toward a more significant role in strategy and management. The potential for such 'slipping' to occur and the detrimental influence this can have on members' sense of 'relevance' underscores the need for WCs to not only clearly delimit the authority of such groups but also to attend to this over time, reflecting on the balance between the need for centralisation and the will amongst members to sustain collectivist-democratic control.

The authority of departments and teams faces the challenge that discordant 'creaking' between teams can spiral and result in 'slipping' of cooperative practice. Linking back to the notion of 'siloing' introduced in Section 5.2, this issue presents a particularly knotty problem for scaled WCs in that there is a balance to be found in permitting greater departmental autonomy with a need to sustain organizational integration and cooperative practice. While Sociocracy presents a route toward greater 'relevance' in addressing this problem through a structure of interconnected 'circles', it is questionable whether this can heal a 'legacy' of inter-departmental schisms.

Returning to the issue of rules, policies, and procedures (instrumental boundary objects) as manifestations of collective authority, I have explored how the struggle to create such frameworks can lead to ad hoc decision-making on the part of persons or groups with functional authority as well as expose both those with authority, and the cooperative more generally, to further issues of uncertainty, misunderstandings, and insecurity. More-or-less temporary working groups play an important role in enabling established and scaled WCs to address complicated problems through developing proposals the members are able to process and make decisions about. Again, we see the question of relative structuration emerge, with these groups facing issues due to their informality, resulting in difficulties in galvanizing and in sustaining momentum and increasing the potential to experience mission drift (particularly where their remit is either unclear or overly broad). This speaks to a need to reflect on 'the situation' and

find ways to stay closer to situationally determined authority so that accountability and thus legitimacy can be maintained.

Finally, informal groups and concurrent power structures are inherent in human organization, whether based on friendship or functionality, and are arguably essential for sustaining organizing. Yet, in WCs they have the potential to be hugely problematic if unchecked. Regardless of their intentions, such groups can be detrimental to the sense of 'relevance' and quality of cooperation by other members simply being somewhat or wholly aware of their presence and influence on either the whole or part of the organization. This analysis reinforces the need for members to practice cooperation while holding in their minds the notion of 'conscious inequality', continuously reflecting on and attending to the bounds of their autonomy and the power created through formal and informal associations with other members. Through this practice, not only can individuals gain greater subjective 'relevance' but the intersubjective 'relevance' of the 'whole-a-making' can also be attended.

7.4 Chapter summary

In this chapter I have explored how structures of autonomy, authority, and power emerge, manifest, and interface in WCs. 'Consenting to authority' involves a consciousness on the part of members about their tacit and/or explicit agreement with the autonomy and agency of individual members as well as the authority entrusted to individuals, groups, and the rules of the organization. Such agreement requires members to actively empower authority: 'the cooperative' is the manifestation of this ongoing acceptance. However, what also emerges from my analysis is the need for members to regularly attend to the terms and boundaries of this agreement. That is, that functional authority is responsive to 'the law of the situation': "legitimate authority flows from co-ordination, not co-ordination from authority" (Follett, 2003h, p. 132, 2003j, p. 189). As WCs age and grow, the extent of individual autonomy and the authority placed in people and boundary objects inevitably changes and this must be reflected in the practice of 'consenting to authority'. Indeed, no matter how tacitly synergistic a WC may be, time and scale necessitate reflection on, and renegotiation of, structuration in order to maintain 'relevance' and stay close to the 'Goldilocks zone' of prefiguration.

While members may enjoy the idea of having 'no strings', in practice scale increases the need for 'nailing down' some shared understandings and members must engage collectively in the practice of 'finding authority'. In turn, this authority must be limited, its complications articulated, its burden acknowledged, and those assuming such roles both sufficiently empowered and held to account. 'Conscious inequality' is similar to 'relevance' in that it is bi-directional: where missions drift and remits expand, it is as much the responsibility of the membership at large as it is of those directly involved to point to this and take action to address it. Scale increases the potential for inter-departmental friction, arguably more so in WCs practising specialisation than those practising multi-skilling, and the need for cohesion calls for addressing these divisions head-on. Whether through interventions, training, multi-skilling, job rotation, or the restructuring of the cooperative to decentralise further authority and reduce friction, any solution to this problem must be collectively negotiated.

Rules, policies, and procedures need to be viewed as potentially beneficial to autonomy, agency, and the quality of democracy. The creation of these boundary objects, and ongoing attention to them, is worthy of the effort this process requires of members, not least because there is a fine line between healthy and unhealthy structuration. More informal manifestations of collective authority present vulnerabilities in terms of their potential to either drift and/or become more than the membership initially intended. A slightly more formal treatment would increase their standards of accountability, bounds of legitimacy, productivity, and ultimately the quality of their cooperative practice. Only through 'conscious inequality' can WCs limit the potentially detrimental effects of informal power; this entails members acknowledging their own positions of privilege and calling it out in those that fail to do so.

In this chapter, I have illuminated where tensions emerged at the structural of organizing. Through this analysis I have identified the need to value, respect, and protect the autonomy of members, whilst simultaneously constraining and channelling this autonomy in a way that facilitates the legitimate empowerment of authority in a situationally determined manner. Positions of authority are inherently problematic as they are both mistrusted and overburdened, creating a situation where additional oversight and accountability may well cause the 'creaking' structures of authority to 'slip' into degeneration. Furthermore, there is an inherent tension between creating structures that are sufficiently closed so as to be effective, and sufficiently open so as

to be 'relevant' to the wider membership. Within this there lies the issue of balancing informal connectedness with the dangers of hidden power structures manifesting in WCs, regardless of whether the intentions behind such structures are qualitatively 'good'.

The empirical analysis explored in this Chapter develops the four heuristic constructs introduced in Chapter 4 in the following ways. The notion of 'relevance' is framed in terms of the role of autonomy in sustaining or undermining identification (engagement, alignment, and imagination) and the increasing importance of coherent and consistent structures over time and scale in facilitating a sense of meaningfulness and connectedness (i.e. 'relevance'). Likewise, the necessity of holding on to a shared sense of the purpose and function of authority, be this invested in individuals or group, articulates this quality that binds members together across the distances between departments, coordination groups, and indeed individuals. This structural level analysis illustrates 'creaking' and 'slipping' through insights regarding the perceived or real shifting of power and agency between the individual and manifestations of authority. An apparent tendency toward undermining authority instead of holding it to account productively, viewing it as something 'other' as opposed to something collectively 'owned', also speaks to, firstly, movement in the quality of organizing and, secondly, where this movement becomes detrimental. My conceptualisation of 'creaking' and 'slipping' is also furthered by the risks associated with either the increasing structuredness of formalised authority or the structurelessness of more ad hoc or semi-permanent authority. The former produces alienation through real or perceived bloating and/or mission drift and the latter through a lack of clarity of purpose, direction, and action. Lastly, this analysis contributes to the concept of the 'Goldilocks zone' through insights pointing to a more or less proactive search for a balance between the 'interests' of the individual, the collective, and the act of organizing; all of these being bound up in the notion of 'cooperation' as aspirationally equal measures. This heuristic construct is also enhanced through insights into the extent of nuance between the activities of empowering, guiding, controlling, and limiting individuals as inherent features of authority, leadership, and indeed membership within the context of collectivist organizing.

In the following chapter I turn to the decision-making level of organizational analysis, through exploration around the practice of 'cutting the knot'.

8.0 Cutting the knot

So far, this thesis has developed my conceptual framework at the individual level ('the cooperative journey'), cultural level ('keeping it together'), and structural level ('consenting to authority') by exploring the relationship between individual autonomy and collective authority, the challenges presented by and for individuals assuming authority, and the tensions pre sent in entrusting authority to groups and structures. This chapter presents the fourth and final pillar of my empirical response to my three sub-questions. I explore insights concerning decision-making in established and scaled WCs through the practice of 'cutting the knot'. This references the mythical Gordian Knot of Phrygia[15], a metaphor for the solving of a seemingly intractable problem by finding means of rendering perceived constraints moot. In the present context, I see this practice as embracing both a need to understand the means by which worker cooperatives (WCs) make decisions and the 'knots' experienced in their 'cutting'.

In Section 8.1, I consider the loci of and approaches to decision-making in established and scaled WCs, exploring this through the various types and examples of decisions made, the challenge of making decisions 'relevant', and the need for nuance in the approaches taken. My key assertion in this section concerns the need to find a 'Goldilocks zone' of 'relevance' with respect to where and by what means decisions are made so as to maximise the quality of 'nuance' in 'cutting the knot'.

In Section 8.2 I turn to the processing of information, exploring this through the availability of information and the flow of communication as well as how members engage with information and communication as WCs age and scale. My central point is the need to avoid pushing decision-making beyond transparency and accountability by attending to the 'relevance' of information and discussion in order to avoid unnecessary pressure on 'headspace' and increase the potential for members to be able to engage at higher levels of abstraction.

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[15] A knot of incredible complexity about which a prophecy was made stating that the man who could unravel the knot would become king of all Asia. According to legend, the knot was unravelled by Alexander the Great using a sword or lateral thinking, depending on who you believe.

In Section 8.3 I address the need for productive conversations, exploring this through two 'knots': the prevalence and problem of 'vested interests' and the tendency of members to engage in 'political chicanery'. My key point in this section is the need to find a balance between passivity and aggression in moving towards 'constructive conflict' (see discussion in Section 4.1.3), particularly with regards to members' openness to let go of attachments and move away from both passive aggression and conflict avoidance.

8.1 Locus and approach

In this section I explore what, where, and by what means decisions are made in established and scaled WCs. I first attend to where different kinds of decisions are made before turning to the methods by which decisions are made and the issues these approaches present.

8.1.1 The what and the where

WCs make decisions about a wide range of items. While many decisions are common to other businesses, some are more unique to cooperative organization. In Table 7.2 these items are grouped into four broad categories: planning, policy and procedure, coordination, and expenditure. These are broad categories and some items bridge or interplay across these groupings. Decisions are made in a variety of settings, such as annual general meetings (AGMs), member meetings, Management Committee meetings, central hub meetings (e.g. Forum or Management Team), departmental meetings, and within the course of daily business operations.

The central tension in 'cutting the knot' is the degree to which decisions are 'relevant' to the levels at which they are made. On the one hand, this may be considered in terms of appropriateness or perhaps proximity to the point of action. On the other hand, the 'relevance' of these decisions to members more-or-less directly or indirectly affected by their outcome is of concern due to the dynamics of power, authority, and individual autonomy in WCs. As explored in the Chapter 7, the question of how to reconcile individual autonomy and collective power in order to achieve the necessary distribution of authority to enable organizing at 'scale' is central to the sustainability of WCs.

Table 8.1 Categorising decisions identified by participants

CATEGORY	EXAMPLES
Planning	− Business planning − Strategic analysis
Policies and procedures	− Structural and system-level changes − Health and safety (e.g. mandatory steel toe-cap boots), − Sickness and wellbeing − Pay scales − Temporary pay or dividend reductions − Use of external services (e.g. outsourcing) − Training programmes − Contract hours − Non-member labour − Multi-tasking and specialisation − Product offerings (e.g. vegetarian, vegan, or sugar content) − Customer retention
Coordination	− Selecting organizational-level functional authority (MCs, HR/Personnel Officers) − Selecting team-level functional authority − Voting for new members (membership entry) − Allocation of general tasks and responsibilities − Reacting to customer complaints (e.g. finding stones in rolled grains)
Expenditure	− Refurbishments and renovations − Site expansion − Buying land or moving location − Organization-level purchasing (e.g. IT systems) − Team-level purchasing (e.g. vehicles, machinery) − Allocating funds and charitable donations − Amenities (e.g. a new fridge or on-site dog shed)

One of the most prominent sources of 'creaking' and 'slipping' in established and scaled WCs is the challenge of determining the point at which decisions are most 'relevant' and matching this with mechanisms and behaviours that both permit and enable this 'cutting' to take place.

> We also need to recognise sometimes that some of the meetings we have as a Management Team to discuss some things... that's not the best group of people we have got together for certain decisions... like I said, if we have a Management Team agenda and for example say one of the things is, 'Should we get a new fridge?' and one of the things is 'What strategic ways should we think

about the transport system?' you know... everyone is happy to talk about a fridge for an hour and a half because everyone has an opinion on a fridge... it's easy to have an opinion on a fridge... when we move on to more difficult decisions everyone becomes mute or a certain amount of people maybe feel they don't have anything to offer... because it's maybe not the right group of people we have at the table for that one meeting... so these things need to be split up so we are not giving so much time to the minutiae and looking at the bigger picture and maybe making each department a bit more autonomous to make more decisions in place. (WCM25 - WC3)

Linking with the frustrations shared by WCM15 in Section 6.3 ('The price of success'), in the excerpt above WCM25 expresses their view that the central hub at WC3 should not be "giving so much time to the minutiae" because it can hamper them in "looking at the bigger picture". Making sure the right people are around the table for a given decision proves difficult, but there is also potential for increasing the autonomy of departments to "make more decisions in place". This was also raised as a reason for using working groups to deal with 'knotty problems' in Section 7.3 ('Fizzling and bloating').

The 'knot' of 'relevance' was also experienced during members' working days. Below, WCM03 explains how members might feel about making decisions that sit ever so slightly beyond their sense of operational autonomy and the perceived need to run it by a team, which might require waiting for the necessary opportunity; describing this as a kind of 'delayed autonomy':

While we have lots of autonomy in our day-to-day actions, when it comes down to things that perhaps are a little broader than our day-to-day working, that autonomy becomes delayed. Those, I suppose, are the bits where it could become a bit tricky. It's also some of the benefits of a cooperative group. It's not all negative things, but sometimes it just breaks up the flow of doing something quickly. 'It's not a big job, I'll just do it. Oh, I can't, I just need to run it by this team. The meeting doesn't happen for another week and a half.' You know, it's that kind of thing. (WCM03 - WC2)

However, the extent to which decisions are made within the formalised structure, and thus are able to be recorded, will necessarily determine the degree to which the

decisions might be said to be transparent and the decision-makers to be accountable. Thus, the balancing of structure, which facilitates transparency and accountability, and action, which facilitates operationality may considered to be a critical tension within the question of how to improve the 'relevance' of decision-making. This highlights once again the underlying tension between structuredness and structurelessness in WCs.

8.1.2 Finding nuance

I now turn to exploring the 'how' of decision-making and the tensions present in these practices. At WC2, there had been a long-standing tradition of consensus-based decision-making. This approach involves an iterative process of discussion, which gradually moves towards deciding by consensus; that is, finding the point at which the most members possible are happy with a given decision. In the making of these decisions the members work through four levels:

- Members can be in 'active agreement': this is where, ideally, everyone would be in every consensus-based decision, meaning "you fully support it, you agree with it, you're going to take it forward and get on with it" (WCM02 – WC2).
- Members can 'agree with reservations': WCM02 suggests this is a popular option that indicates you agree but perhaps are unsure of some of the finer details.
- Members can assume a position of 'non-support': this is similar to an abstention vote in terms of neither actively 'blocking' nor supporting the proposal's progress.
- Members can 'block' the proposal: if one or two members 'block' it is recorded in the minutes; if three or more members 'block' then the proposal cannot go any further.

In the process of reaching the point at which members are asked to assume one of these four positions WC2 uses a 'temperature check' mechanism: wherein members are asked at various points to indicate how they feel about a proposal and the ongoing discussion using a 'traffic light system'. This involves holding up one of three cards:

- RED indicates you do not agree with a proposal
- YELLOW indicates you might agree with reservations
- GREEN indicates you are ready to agree with a decision

- WHITE indicates you need more information or have questions that need answering before you can decide.

While these temperature checks are recorded, they mean little beyond facilitating the discussion. This process can take a matter of hours or weeks, with proposals often being sent back to an individual or, more commonly, a group for further research and refinement. WCM06 emphasised that the process tends to achieve high-quality decisions that members can feel comfortable about, even if they turn out to be the wrong decision in the long term. However, the time and energy required by this process had increased as the cooperative had grown; leading members to begin exploring whether a consent-based approach might be more suitable as they continued to grow and evolve.

'Harder' approaches to decision-making, either binary voting (yes, no, abstain), or less developed iterations of the consensus-based approach, also have their issues. One such issue was highlighted at WC4 where in order for a decision to pass, a 75% threshold (of members present) must be reached. WCM27 highlighted that at WC4W, although this might seem reasonable, 'abstentions' are counted in the overall number of votes and therefore have come to be treated as a means of giving a 'soft no'. Although there is a difference between decisions being prevented because of 'abstentions' and straight 'no' votes, in that the former can be brought back for a further vote at some point in the future, the short-term result is the same. This problem has both an instrumental dimension, with respect to the mechanism by which votes are counted, and a 'meaning' dimension, with respect to the loss of nuance within members' voting.

This loss of nuance in decision-making was also highlighted as a problem for WC3 where there are several different mechanisms used for different kinds of decisions. Indeed, the system was so ill defined that I was unable to attain clarity from any single member. However, the underlying problem within their system as a whole was suggested by WCM25 as being a lack of nuance in members' voting; the absence of quantification or qualification in terms the substance of a 'no' vote, and thus an opacity as to how a decision might be effectively moved toward a 'yes'. Thus, taking these insights from WC2, WC3, and WC4 in hand, I suggest that there is a tension around seeking means of being more decisive and action-oriented while sustaining the quality of nuance in the process.

Although superficially it might seem that the consensus approach practised at WC2 might offer the answer to the problems highlighted at WC4 and WC3, I would argue that the issues faced by WC2 regarding the scaling of highly developed consensus-based decision-making will ultimately emerge in these organizations of proximal size and operational diversity. This underscores the challenge of keeping processes 'feeling cooperative' while being effective at scale.

> That whole thing about range of tolerance... and personal preference... so consensus definitely says what would you prefer to do? What would you like to do? What do you as an individual think is the best thing to do at this time? And we spend a lot of time faffing about looking for the kind of perfect thing that's going to suit everybody and is going to be ok with everybody whereas consent says, let's just not worry about that... let's just figure out what we can work with, what's going to be ok... not fundamentally causing problems and where we see problems let's say clearly what they are and how we are going to figure out whether they happen or not... I love that about it... that emphasis on action rather than discussion... but that is a massive shift... I think we probably do it more than we realise there's so many of us now we can't hash out for hours the pros and cons of everything... we've probably got more into the mindset of consent than anyone would know at the moment [...] I'd like us to adopt consent as our decision-making framework so I'm going to work hard on trying to push that... but we will see what people think... the funny thing about the Sociocratic proposal is that it will come in at a time whilst we are still doing consensus so it will still be under the framework of 'Do you like this?' not 'What are your objections?' but 'Are you ok with this? Do you like it? Can you live with it?' all the sort of phrases we use now. (WCM04 - WC2)

Above, WCM04 explains their understanding of the difference between 'consensus' and 'consent' driven decision-making. Of interest are the questions these approaches ask of members. On the one hand, 'consensus' decision-making is driven by questions such as: What would you prefer to do? What would you like to do? And what do you think is the best thing to do at this time? On the other hand, 'consent' is driven by the question: What can we work with? What is going to be ok? WCM04 viewed the latter as offering a means of moving away from a problem-oriented approach involving time-consuming discussions and toward a solution-oriented approach that prioritises action.

WCM04, and indeed some of their fellow members at WC2 (e.g. WCM02, WCM03, and WCM06), suggested that they already engaged in consent driven decision-making more than they might realise due to the size of the membership and concurrent inability to "hash out the pros and cons of everything". However, a consent-based decision-making framework was yet to be formally adopted by the cooperative, a decision that will necessarily have to be made using the existing framework of consensus decision-making.

While there is no agreed definitive solution to the best approach for scaling collectivist decision-making, my experiences within and around the WC movement, observations, and grounded analysis, point to an increasing interest in the devolved-yet-integrated consent-driven practices that are central to Sociocracy.

8.1.3 Summary

In this section I explored what, where, and how decisions are made in established and scaled WCs and reflected on members' experiences with different approaches to decision-making. One of the key issues is the degree of 'relevance' decisions have to the point at which they are made and how coordination groups can become bogged down in minutiae, reducing their ability to make the decisions only they can make. On the flip side of the 'relevance' problematic is the extent to which members are empowered and feel able to make decisions of their own accord during their day-to-day practice. What emerge are difficulties at both ends of this spectrum with respect to how collectivist-democratic WCs balance the structuredness and structurelessness of decision-making. My conclusion was that in some ways one issue begets the other: the clearer members are as to the decisions they can make at the individual or group level, the freer coordinating groups would be to focus on the issues that only they can address outside of large-scale meetings. The latter also have their purpose but are likewise vulnerable to becoming bogged down in minutiae that certain members feel strongly about.

Beyond the content and locus of decisions, my grounded theory analysis highlighted issues regarding the approaches or mechanisms used for making decisions. I detailed the complex consensus-driven approach that had evolved at WC2 over the years, explaining how this potentially long process was able to produce outcomes that members could get behind and feel good about. I also highlighted how other WCs rely

on 'harder' voting procedures to make decisions, and the issues this can create. Furthermore, I pointed to the complexity that can develop over time. While some scaled WCs were working toward increasing the extent of consensus-based decision-making, the writing appeared to be on the wall in terms of the scalability of consensus approaches. The potential appears to be in developing consent-driven mechanisms and structures along the lines of Sociocracy, as was being explored and tested at WC2.

Central to this analysis is the question of finding nuance in systems, mechanisms, processes, and practices of decision-making; that is, nuance in terms of the 'relevance' of decisions to the point at which they are being made; nuance in the connections between the points at which decisions are being made; and nuance in communicating more than simply 'yes', 'abstain', or 'no' by teasing out what positions are held and why they are held. To this end, Follett (2003b) argued that integration through 'constructive conflict' is the only viable and productive method for dealing with diversity, difference and conflict; rejecting both domination and consensus as delivering undesirable outcomes. Within this approach, a heuristic switch is made from conceiving decision-making as 'responsibility-to/over' to 'responsibility-with', thus underscoring the need for not only attending to structure but also to member behaviour.

8.2 Processing information

This section examines how information and decisions are processed in established and scaled WCs. I first turn to the challenge of sustaining a 'flow' of communication, returning to the issue of breakdowns in formal coordination channels as well as the emergence of and potential challenges presented by a reliance on informal communication channels. I then explore how members experience the decision-making process with regards to their ability to engage with information and decisions, how complaints and proposals are communicated, and how their voices can become lost as 'the machine' gets bigger and busier.

8.2.1 Flow

The questions raised in the previous section of transparency and accountability feed into consideration of the 'flow' of information through formal and informal channels in WCs.

In our interview, WCM02 described the key feature of information 'flow' at WC2, identifying the role of the central hub (forum), the circulation of minutes to the wider membership, the role of team meetings, the minuting of these meetings, the role of Chair, and the occasional use of internal email chains to facilitate cross-organizational communication. While this overview does not include full member meetings or the AGM, it nevertheless provided a sense as to how day-to-day information is made available. Of course, the 'flow' of information does not necessarily work according to any 'ideal model'. For example, as first noted in Section 4.2.4 (Creaking and Slipping), at WC2 there was a sense that the central hub has become increasingly disconnected and lacking in terms of producing a two-way flow of information. Likewise, along with concerns around the 'relevance' of the content of discussion and decision-making in their Management Team, WCM25 highlighted that a lack of clarity of purpose and functionality in terms of information flow were ongoing points of contention at WC3.

Central hubs are not the only locus at which sustaining two-way or multi-directional flow of information presents a challenge for WCs. In Section 4.3 ('Endurance meetings'), I noted that as cooperatives grow collective decision-making practices can also 'creak' and 'slip'. This may be due to one or a combination of factors, including: the scale and scope of meetings, the depth of thinking possible in such settings, the multiplicity of opinions present, the speed of decision-making necessary to keep the organization functioning, and, concurrently, the difficulties faced by Chairs in keeping meetings on track whilst enabling democratic participation. In the extract below, WCM05 describes formal decision-making at WC2 as "leaning towards rubber-stamping" decisions that have for the most part been decided ahead of time:

> I guess my sort of understanding of the consensus-based decision-making process involves a two-way flow of information, where you're almost, like, writing the proposal as you make the decision, which doesn't seem to be feasible at the current size of meeting we have. It's not quite rubber-stamping but it's leaning towards rubber-stamping an already agreed upon position. You almost have to go around and make sure you have consensus before you even bring the proposal to the meeting now because there isn't time for fifty people to actually get involved in the changing of bits of the meetings, bits of the proposal. It kind of works and it doesn't at the moment. (WCM05 - WC2)

WCM05's understanding of consensus-based decision-making was as a process involving two-way flow of information: a live, iterative, process in which members collectively participate. However, WCM05 suggested that the scale of meetings in WC2 had started to necessitate greater emphasis on pre-decision communication and negotiation taking place outside of the formal locus. Speaking to this phenomenon, in the excerpt below WCM27 highlights the importance of informal conversations at WC4W; noting again the tendency for members to sound-out ideas with others well before moving to present an idea or proposal in a formal setting:

> This is something else that's very different about co-ops, whereby because everyone has an equal say in the business, to a certain extent, a meeting, as such, or decisions and talks about things, they might not always happen in a boardroom, or during a meeting. They could happen down the drinks aisle when somebody catches somebody for five minutes. It's a lot more flexible, because in most companies there are only a very small amount of people who would have any say in any decision. Something that I found at WC4 was, whether it's a good thing or a bad thing, what people will tend to do is if they've got an idea they will talk to somebody about it, and they'll talk to somebody else about it, and often people will go round the company getting a bit of a feel as to whether this idea is... almost, like, trying to drum up support. (WCM27 – WC4W)

My view is that this is more than just checking with those close to them to ascertain if an idea has 'legs', instead serving as means of identifying and working through potential 'knots' and securing sufficient support ahead of time through a kind of 'campaigning' process. As indicated by WCM27, it is difficult to definitively say whether this practice of informal pseudo-campaigning is qualitatively 'good' or 'bad'. On the one hand, it can be viewed as enabling the development of proposals in a way that ensures they reflect the diversity of views and interesting present among the membership as opposed to an individual or group prescriptively presenting proposals. On the other hand, if done in the 'wrong way' it has the potential to make the process of developing and making decisions obscure, partial, vulnerable to abuse, illegitimate, and potentially undemocratic, with decisions being made through politicking and lobbying 'behind closed doors'.

As highlighted in Section 7.3.4 (Fizzing and bloating) WCs often use small working groups or teams to attend to specific aspects of governance, coordination, and

operations as well as to explore issues and carry projects forward. However, as cooperatives grow, both informal conversations and such groupings can face difficulties in terms of information sharing due to the constraints placed on time and space. Below, WCM03 articulates how this 'knot' in information flow can hamper the ability for members to move forward with decisions as well as potentially generate frustration and tensions within the organization; 'creaking' due to variable availability and prioritisation:

> When you're smaller, all it takes is four or five people who are working together to come up with something that works, which maybe we would now do at a meeting because those people aren't available at the same time. It's one of those kinds of things. Or you need to talk to somebody that isn't in your team, and you're not working with them. It's little things like that, rota bits that get in the way. This isn't major things necessarily, but it's little things that can get forgotten if you don't deal with them when they happen they become niggles for people. Someone will say, 'What's happening with this?' and it will annoy them, and someone, sort of, started doing it but then circumstances prevented it from being finished and so on. Those kinds of little things can happen because it's just not as easy to talk to the relevant people as it used to be. (WCM03 - WC2)

WCM03's insights are pertinent not only to formalised groups but also the aforementioned informal conversations that are critical to the good functioning of WCs. They highlight how it can become increasingly difficult to talk to the 'relevant' people, let alone get them together in one place. With respect to the need for creating additional opportunities for this engagement, it is noteworthy that since entering a period overshadowed by a sense of crisis WC3 had increased the frequency of their members meetings from a single AGM to a quarterly system in order to improve the proximity and flexibility of decision-making.

With regards to informal interaction, I believe it is important to note the significance of the meals shared at least twice daily by members of WC3. During my fieldwork, I observed that these meals are an important part of their organizational culture and that, other than quarterly meetings, they are the only time when all the members are together in the same space. However, while there was some mixing around the dining tables, I also observed that the warehouse-based members (e.g. order picking and transport)

tended to stick together; and I was also told that in recent years it has become increasingly common for office-based members (e.g. Buying, Sales, and Finance) to take meals to their desks. This could be considered both a cause and symptom of 'creaking' fragmentation, and perhaps reflective of the strain on the organization.

Across my cases, these planned meals were unique to WC3, apart from the weekly 'jacket potato day' at WC4W. However, member recreation spaces and kitchens were noted as important loci for interaction at WC2, WC3, WC4W, and, although perhaps to a lesser extent, at WC4R. A further example of a means of creating a semi-formalised space for enabling information flow is the allocation of Thursdays for meetings and collective training sessions at WC2. Excluding those on holiday, these sessions bring the full membership into the space for at least two hours in the morning. WCM03 provided the most succinct evaluation of this feature of WC2's organizing: "Work wise, it's inefficient. Communication-wise, it's probably essential".

Alongside frustrations with the transfer of information between coordinators and the wider membership are issues concerning information feedback in the development of projects, proposals, and the general operations of WCs. In the extract below, WCM13 expresses their concerns regarding a lack of feedback on their work maintaining and updating IT systems at WC3:

> I think there are a lot of unsaid things. It worries me that maybe I'm not getting enough feedback in terms of what to prioritise. In some senses, I want people to look at the bug tracker and say, 'Where's my thing? Why has this not happened?' because I almost think there are a lot of people suffering in silence and there are a lot of people shouting about something that maybe isn't a business priority necessarily. I don't necessarily have the perspective to judge what will be most effective. (WCM13 - WC3)

In seeking to address this problem, the IT department had set-up a 'bug tracker' system that was visible to all members. Their hope was that this would increase transparency but also enhance the two-way feedback between the IT function and the membership at large. WCM13 and WCM14 shed light on the challenges of establishing and sustaining information repositories and communication systems in the absence of member feedback and engagement. They attributed this to limited member awareness and variable member ability. However, their experiences spoke to a wider issue of members

across the WCs either not taking ownership of or finding it difficult to take ownership of projects, initiatives, and systems, especially where they did not feel it was 'relevant' to them or that they were 'relevant' to it.

8.2.2 Cogs and noise

In the extract below, WCM03 returns us to the problem of 'creaking headspace' with regards to information flow and engagement with decision-making; first attended in Section 4.3 (Headspace):

> I think that [headspace] has become a bit more constrained. I'm not sure how much of it is as a result of feeling like they're a smaller cog in the wheel... or in the engine... and therefore it, kind of, disrupts the thought processes a bit more, they think they don't have as much input or power as they used to have, or whether it's genuinely more things happening that are taking up the space. I think there's a bit of a mixture, in that sometimes because there are more options now, with more people and more things happening, you therefore have more areas of doubt as to who you might want to speak to and so on. Sometimes I think it's quite cloudy, the area as to what's the actual cause of the lack of headspace. Sometimes it's uncertainty that creates it rather than specifically lots of things that you need to think about. While we do have lots of things on the go, not everybody will have all of them on the go. We're all, kind of, expected to have an ear out for them, you know, just in case. I think that also creates elements of that. There's a lot of noise which may not necessarily be relevant to you but it's there and probably does encroach on the ability to do your work well, yeah [...] I'd be very surprised if everyone was [aware of everything going on], there might be a few who have an idea. A lot of it would come about if you work in the same area. The Store Team work next to the Veg Team, so you can see what they do, you can hear the conversations they have, potentially, some of them. So you might hear things, see them, things like that... and you might pick up on things but you wouldn't necessarily know everything that's going on and probably it's a good thing that you don't know really because that probably would really cause an issue with headspace if you were constantly thinking about all the other teams that you didn't work in were trying to do. (WCM03 - WC2)

Members' sense of constrained, or rather 'creaking', headspace may be a combination of, firstly, a real increase in the quantity and variance of information and activity (things going on) and secondly, a reduced or lesser sense of agency due to members' self-perception in relation to the scale of the organization. WCM03 suggested that the cause of a lack of headspace is "quite cloudy" and that their sense is that uncertainty might play as much of a role as actual workload. They thus drew a distinction between what members have going on and what they might need to "have an ear out for" yet acknowledging the potential for "noise" that may not be 'relevant' (note 'in vivo' usage) but may nevertheless affect the ability of members to get on with their work. Indeed, WCM03 indicated that few members might have such a holistic overview because it would "really cause an issue with headspace".

> We have lots of information available at WC1... we have most of our documentation, any business documentation, saved on a server which is open to everybody within the co-op... Just because people have access to it doesn't mean that they look at it... you know certainly I don't have the time to be trawling through what the Buyers are doing and what Finance are doing... though it's useful, certainly in my strategic role, that I can have easy access to financial information without having to go to our Finance Team and bother them for it when I need it... that's really useful. In the run up to meetings we always have... we produce a meeting pack... so normally two weeks before the meeting happens there is a big paper pack full of lots of information like minutes of the last meeting, business planning updates from all of our coordinators, a financial update from our Finance Team, any proposals or anything we actually have to vote on or make a decision... they are in the pack often with supporting information and details... and to be fair to most members, most members will take that pack and read it... how much of it people read, I'm not so sure... and I think people will very much pick and choose the information that they relate to or are most interested in. (WCM01 - WC1)

Above, WCM01 questions member engagement with the general availability of information at WC1. All four WCs had a digital repository for general information regarding the cooperative as well as minutes and procedures, although the extent and quality of this information varied. Apart from confidential HR information, the general rule was that all members have access to this information. However, participants

indicated that members either neglect or struggle to engage with the information available to them. This includes contemporary information on decision-making and the position of the organization, captured and disseminated in pre- and/or post-meeting 'packs'. This illustrates the bi/multi-directional character of 'relevance': members need help to understand why they are 'relevant' to information and why this information is 'relevant' to them. Some members might argue that everything is 'relevant' to an owner/director of a medium-size business. However, the reality is that a 'Goldilocks zone' needs to be sought out, balancing reasonable expectations with nuanced communications that direct attention without 'slipping' toward problematic manipulation. Below, WCM01 goes on to further illuminate the issue of member engagement in decision-making:

> One of the problems we do find is that we have things like business planning and then we have things like proposals and proposals might be things like, 'Oh, we'll increase our holiday entitlement or we'll have a wage rise or we'll change the way that we pay our bonus' and I think they often generate much more discussion and much more interest than things like business planning and you could really argue that something like business planning is actually much more important but I also think it's a lot bigger and it's a lot more complicated and it's a lot more difficult for people to naturally engage with... whereas we often... we have an all-work email system so you can send an email that goes to everybody in the building... everybody in the business and we often laugh about some of the engagement, like a recent one was somebody sent an email round asking if they could build a shed for dogs in the car park so that WC1 members with dogs could put their dogs in the dog shed and this generate lots and lots of discussion and it generated more discussion than our business plan for the next year. We often put that down to that things like a dog shed or a bonus proposal is something that everybody can really understand to and really relate to on a personal level, whereas those things like a business plan... it is a little bit more difficult, a bit more complex, and it's more difficult to see how you connect with it personally... so I think that's a real key thing about engagement with information systems, getting that balance. (WCM01 - WC1)

It is understandable that as WCs grow and become less immediately concrete in the minds of members there might be a tendency for members to focus on their immediate

physical and operational environment as well as issues that affect them more directly, given the lesser psychosocial distance and more concrete nature. However, because of the nature of cooperative practice, there remains a need for members to continue committing resources, i.e. time and attention, to sustaining their awareness of and engagement with more abstract and less immediately comprehensible decision-making in order to sustain the quality of cooperative practice. An example of this problem is the contrast made by WCM01 regarding members being more able to engage with the idea of building a shed for dogs than with the cooperative's business plan. This narrative interplays with my earlier discussion of the 'relevance' of decisions and how teams and coordinators can 'slip' into focusing on minor issues (e.g. buying a fridge for the kitchen) as opposed to dealing with more complex and contentious issues (see Sections 8.1 'The what and the where' and 6.3 'The price of success').

A lack of member engagement with the information available to them was suggested by WCM06 to contribute to and be perpetuated by the presentation of poor quality, or at least badly supported, proposals at WC2. Along with WCM05, they emphasised the potential for members to engage the cooperative in 'reinventing the wheel' or 'going over old ground' by neglecting to research proposals before bringing them forward. This effort might involve looking back through minutes and reports as well as speaking with more established members. While more established members may not intend to crush enthusiasm, hearing ideas brought forward that have previously been dealt with and decided upon can evidently be frustrating and thus a source of tension with 'cutting the knot'. Poor quality proposals were also highlighted as problematic by members at WC3, namely WCM13 and WCM21, who suggest that a lack of formalisation and/or standardisation in both departmental reporting and proposal development contributes to both inefficiency and opacity in decision-making. Below, WCM13 shares their insights on this area of cooperative practice:

> I've created the proposal template just to try and get people thinking beforehand. Now, we live in a world of brain farts. People have a vague complaint and then they don't follow up with any kind of analysis, or details, or things. That's what it seems like to me, anyway. Their complaints might be legitimate but they don't have options. I'm all for moaning, but I'm saying forensic moaning. 'This is what you want,' rather than, 'We should do this,' and then you go, 'That's not actionable.' I was just trying to get a bit more of a structured proposal, get

people to think about it beforehand... so we're voting on A, or B, or C, rather than it spiralling and, 'What about...?' 'Please try and...' Yeah, so I do try decision tree things that might go that way, try and anticipate. You've got to debug a proposal most of the time. We've moved away from trying to hash it out, where there are fifty people in the room. We're trying to move away to try and distribute the ideas first, come together, talk about it, and then go away and think about it, then vote. (WCM13 – WC3)

While WCM13 highlighted the commonality of "vague complaints" that are not supported with the necessary analysis, they also acknowledge the potential legitimacy of these complaints. The sense here is that in WCs there is space for "moaning" but that this needs to instead be "forensic moaning", that is, characterised by having the structure necessary to facilitate action. This ties in with the potential for structurelessness to destabilise democratic organizing and result in an unproductive "spiralling" of issues within the membership and organization. WCM13's position was that in a scaled WC there is a need to find ways of distributing ideas and encouraging a priori discussion in order to avoid a situation where the full membership is attempting to simultaneously "debug" and "hash out" a complex and/or contentious item.

The expectation that members develop a working opinion on such a diverse range of issues, combined with an appreciation of the limitations of their ability to process potentially complex information about unfamiliar items, leads us toward the conclusion that members in scaled WCs are increasingly disempowered. Indeed, as articulated by WCM03, part of members' inability or unwillingness to engage may potentially be driven by the feeling of being "a smaller cog in the wheel". That is, a 'sense of irrelevance' that disrupts their thinking and reduces their sense of autonomy and agency. However, my analysis suggests that individuals and small groups remain powerful in established and scaled collectivist-democratic WCs, for better or worse.

Indeed, WCM04 highlighted that an ongoing issue at WC2 were the potentially contradictory interpretations of what a "good director decision is" as opposed to members potentially making decisions based on what is it best for them as employees. Switching between these states of being and relating (sensing or perceiving 'relevance'), both to issues and to one another, must indeed be a challenge for members who, as WCM05 observed, generally have between them very limited experience as directors: "certainly not company directors of somewhere employing ninety people and with a

multimillion pound turnover". However, learn to 'switch' they must. In terms of members assuming the mindset and behaviours of responsible, pragmatic, directors there are several issues highlighted by participants that are worth exploring further, and these are addressed in the following section.

8.2.3 Summary

In this section I set out to explore how members experience tensions and strains in the flow of, and engagement with, communication and information in established and scaled WCs. Key focal points are the coordination 'hubs' and coordinators that serve as the primary channels of formal communication in the day-to-day practice of organizing and the members' meetings that serve as the formal spaces of collective decision-making. A combination of scale, scope, pace, and diversity of opinion push formal meetings toward being perceived as 'rubber stamping exercises' wherein decisions have largely been made beforehand through informal channels. 'Slipping' toward a reliance on informal channels poses a risk of oligarchic illegitimate power structures gaining influence. However, informal interaction can also be viewed as essential to sustaining cooperation: from shared meals to breakout spaces, these provide opportunities for socialisation, solidarity building, and the wellbeing of members. Collective participation and/or training may be expensive but are extremely valuable to cooperative practice. Engaging with and feeding back information and, in turn, taking ownership of systems and processes, is essential for maintaining 'relevance'.

A critical issue is the potential for a 'sense of irrelevance' to develop over time and scale, subjectively and towards 'parts' of organizing that feel distant or abstract. This presents issues for members' 'headspace' in terms of the real and/or perceived quantity and diversity of information and activity as well as the potential for a reduced sense of agency. Likewise, there is more 'noise' to be filtered in order to determine what is 'relevant'. Trying to sustain a truly holistic awareness can cause 'headspace' issues for members, despite any cohesive power it might confer. Limited engagement with information undermines the quality of participation. A 'Goldilocks zone' needs to be sought in terms of balancing 'relevant' information and engagement. Over-engagement with minor issues and disengagement with important concerns underscores this issue. While the attraction of the concrete over the abstract is understandable, members need to collectively participate for the quality of democracy to be sustained. The quality of

this participation also matters, as illustrated by the issue of ill-prepared proposals and arguments. These problems can be viewed as being both symptomatic of 'creaking' and 'slipping' engagement but also as exacerbating a greater 'sense of irrelevance' on the part of both new and established members.

While members may feel they are less 'relevant' in established and scaled WCs, my findings and analysis indicate that individuals and small groups remain powerful. When we think about members, it is important not to forget that they are not only workers but also owners, and potentially directors, of these organizations. Ownership and/or directorship are part and parcel of the basic role. Although this may not be emphasised, their training, development, and expectations need to correspond to this level of responsibility and concurrent quality of participation.

8.3 Productive conversations

In this section I explore the need for members to be able to engage in 'productive conversations', addressing two notable 'knots' in decision-making practices and processes. I first turn to the challenge of dealing with members' 'vested interests' and the attachments formed to particular boundary objects. I then explore the apparent tendency toward engaging in forms of 'political chicanery' and the need to sustain 'productive conversation'.

8.3.1 Vested interests

One of the prominent issues highlighted with regards to member attitudes in decision-making may be succinctly described as that of 'vested interests'. While these are present to some extent in all decision-making, they become particularly noticeable with regards to big decisions. Examples include moving the location of the business (WC4W), adjusting pay scales (WC4R), and making reductions in wages or dividend payments (WC3). Such decisions have significant ramifications for members' economic and social wellbeing and can, understandably, elicit emotional responses that undermine the quality of decision-making. However, vested interests also manifest in value-based decisions such as determining where to allocate charitable funds or policies around vegetarianism and veganism.

The effects of such vested interests are manifest in resistance to changing policies, procedures, and operational systems. This was highlighted by WCM37 regarding

resistance to developing a formalised sickness policy at WC4W [16]. This can be interpreted as either or both a problem with the extent of empathy within decision-making and/or a resistance to diluting autonomy in decision-making through increased structuration. Indeed, as illustrated in the commentary of WCM03 below, it only takes a minority of members to effectively render such change impotent:

> No one will necessarily know why something was set up or who did it or whatever and it would have made sense when it was done but it can make things a bit more difficult now. […] That reason is kind of lost over time, but everyone has kind of accepted it as being truth. […] [A decision that was] made fifteen years ago could have been completely correct but now the understanding has changed or society has changed or whatever has changed […] They are sort of sacred cows really [...] They can be challenged or asked about certainly, but sometimes people don't even want to go there really because they know when they did it didn't lead to anything and nobody knew the answer and it was too difficult to even try and sort everything out and it's not that much of an issue anyway or whatever. There's a number of reasons why it kind of 'stops'. Sometimes it's because some people are particularly wedded to the idea, some people think it's ridiculous... but we are in a consensus environment, you don't need many people to be wedded to an idea to make it pointless actually pushing. You get those kinds of things that again, people just leave and work around. (WCM03 – WC2)

In considering the difficulties WC2 faces with regards to breaking from the past. WCM03 raised several salient points, the most obvious being that policies and processes do become outdated. Although these perhaps made sense when they were created, over time they become less useful, even detrimental, to effective and 'relevant' organizing. The second point is that the reasons for things being the way they are can become lost over time yet remain accepted as being 'truth' and may even have gained iteratively evolved explanations through word-of-mouth that reinforce the rationale for their existence. Furthermore, some members may be particularly attached to these

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[16] Sections: 5.3.2 'Points of reference', 7.2.2 'Authority limited', and 7.3.3 'Playing by rules'.

"sacred cows"; because they were present at the time of their making, because that is the way things have been since they arrived, or because it suits them in some way. This narrative links with CMA1's notion of WCs problematically holding on to perceived "ontological truths" in Section 6.2.3 (There's nobody like us).

Either way, the result is that these attachments become very nearly untouchable. When members do decide to question them, which they are entitled to do, it can be too difficult a 'knot' to unravel and/or may simply seem not worth the effort. WCM03 noted that if some members are particularly "wedded to the idea" it can make it almost pointless to try pressing the issue: it would inevitably fail a consensus decision because the number of 'blocks' would exceed the threshold. Thus, members leave these 'sacred cows' alone and find means of working within or working around them. This leads us into an area of discussion highlighted by the CMAs I interviewed, though less clearly reflected upon by the WCMs.

8.3.2 Political chicanery

CMA3 argued that WC members tend to be "nice people", having at least to some extent found worth in cooperative values and principles. As a result, they suggested there might be a tendency for members to be less overtly aggressive or argumentative and more prone to passive-aggressive behaviour that simmers beneath the surface. This sentiment was echoed by CMA2 who suggested members, possibly because of a "sense of vulnerability", tend to resort to "political chicanery" in their personal conflicts and efforts to shape or prevent change. Below, CMA3's experience illuminates this 'conflict avoidance' and sheds further light as to the reasons underlying this behaviour.

> I would think it manifests more in avoidance of conflict and under the surface conflict than big slanging matches and that sort of thing. It's for every reason you may have to fall out... whether it's pay, whether it's how to do a job... the biggest thing is performance management... it's fairness... 'this person's not pulling their weight' is by far in a way I think the biggest source of conflict. (CMA3)

Given the nature of WCs, it seems reasonable that a perceived 'sense of unfairness', be this in terms of effort, remuneration, or treatment, could play a central role in hampering the effectiveness of decision making by way of underlying conflict. Without effective mechanisms for mediating such conflict or dealing with problematic individuals, WCs

can be vulnerable to a build-up of resentment and interpersonal tension. How this 'creaking' affects the organization and spills out into functions, operations, and individual behaviour varies. CMA3 suggested it ranges from decisions being put off to not being made at all. Individual responses can also present wider challenges for WCs, for example if members, for whatever reason, begin to emulate the perceived social loafing behaviour of others, potentially resulting in reduced overall productivity or stoking tensions further.

CMA5's experiences buttressed the insights offered by CMA3 and CMA2. They highlighted how financial problems could create a state of tension, which then precipitates greater conflict by intensifying underlying issues or increasing the perceived significance of otherwise minor issues. This state of play was evidenced in the experiences of members at WC3. Furthermore, CMA5 suggested that interpersonal tensions could escalate to the point where schisms emerge within the organization; potentially resulting in individuals or groups essentially driving other people away from the cooperative. They indicated this is often down to poor communication early on and a lack of effective conflict resolution mechanisms, noting that smaller WCs can be even more vulnerable to the 'problems of one person'.

CMA2 pointed to 'emotional intensity' in member engagement as a further source of conflict in WCs. In contrast with conventional business entities where workers do not necessarily emotionally invest in decision-making to the same extent, in WCs emotional intensity is heightened because it is the members' business and they are responsible for its actions. While this can be a boon for WCs in terms of member commitment, increasing their ability to sustain and survive, it also presents a challenge in that members can be too emotionally involved to make pragmatic decisions.

> The problem in worker co-ops is people get too engaged, they actually can't see the wood for the trees, their emotions are so heightened and engaged and working overtime that trying to get them to ratchet that down enough to take semi-rational decisions about what's going on is really quite difficult sometimes... their emotions just cloud everything... and that goes both ways as well... so you can have people who are really involved and really intensely emotional about things and other people who are going, 'I can't cope with that, I'm just disengaging... I'm stepping outside of this.' And you're going, 'No, you've both got to be involved. You have got to be more emotionally involved

and you have got to be less emotionally involved before we can get a decision taken here.' Which brings into account all sorts of communication skills... so non-violent communication, giving and taking criticism, and focusing on the problem and not the person and all sorts of stuff like that which people get absolutely no training in so they don't know how to do it. (CMA2)

Above, CMA2's insights highlight the importance of members being able to effectively engage and communicate with one another. Neither over-involvement or disengagement are acceptable in the behaviour expected and required from members. Both are symptomatic of a cooperative 'slipping' towards what CMA5 described as a "cycle of despair" (see also Section 4.3 'Headspace').

CMA2 suggested that in some WCs the cost of "productive conversation" can become so high that members try to keep to the "safe stuff", a kind of ritualised disagreement, and avoid difficult conversations as much as possible for fear of being verbally attacked and ostracised. When this 'slipping' of cooperative practice takes place, members become 'stuck' in repetitive conversations that go nowhere, interrupted by instances where conversation becomes unhealthy and destructive and thus reinforces the repetitive 'safe' behaviour. According to CMA2 and CMA5, these issues are symptomatic of WCs that are at risk of failure.

The trick, therefore, is to maintain the conversation between these two extremes (as in Follett's 'constructive conflict'), neither allowing members to entirely avoid conflict by staying on 'safe' topics and ignoring 'the elephant in the room', nor engaging with contentious topics through unhealthy, unproductive, and costly communication. CMA2 highlighted the importance of communication skills and related training for members and a perceived dearth in this kind of training for WCs, arguing that there is a real need for WCs to find ways of having 'difficult conversations'. They noted cultural differences with 'Latin countries' such as Spain and France where members seemed more able to engage in conflict without triggering 'fight or flight' responses. It is worth noting that CMA2's cooperative development work focuses almost entirely on developing members' communicative capacities, placing these above business theories and structures in order of importance.

That's one the key things about a successful co-op, a willingness to address that sort of stuff... to really try to nip stuff like that in the bud earlier on... find out if people aren't happy why they aren't happy, what can be done about it. (CMA5)

CMA3 suggested that is it possible for WCs in a state of conflict to 'realign' and rediscover their common purpose. As in the case of the team intervention at WC4R, external facilitators offer a means of achieving this realignment, enabling a healthy, productive conversation about unhealthy communication to take place. Similarly, WCs can engage members in ongoing training, such as the programme at WC2 that uses both internal and external facilitators. Inevitably, however, sometimes members do decide to walk away. Above, CMA5 emphasises the need for WCs to develop cultures that 'head stuff off' before things go wrong. This entails finding out why people are not happy and what can be done about it. They argued 'best practice' in WCs involves developing conflict resolution mechanisms early on in order to build up capacity as opposed to waiting for something to go wrong or thinking: "We're never going to need that".

8.3.3 Summary

In this section I explored the need for members to be able to engage in 'productive conversation' and the challenges this faces with respect to the emergence of 'vested interests' and attachments to boundary objects. In addition, it is characterized by the tendency towards engaging in 'political chicanery' instead of 'productive conversation', both of which inhibit or even damage the 'sense of relevance' and quality of integrative unity. While it is inevitable that members will have and will develop certain 'vested interests', these can present a challenge as WCs age and scale. Understandably, participants suggested this is particularly true for bigger decisions and with respect to value-based decisions. However, my findings indicate similar issues emerge regarding operational change, such as reorganizing a workspace or changing a process. These interests become problematic when they undermine the integrative process; in this case, the ability of WCs to integrate diverse opinions, develop systems that facilitate organizing at scale, and to be open to change as time moves on. Because of their collectivist decision-making practice, WCs are vulnerable to the 'vested interests' of a minority preventing change. These attachments can be further understood through the

notion of aspects of organizing becoming like 'sacred cows', or members becoming 'wedded to' visionary and instrumental boundary objects.

It was suggested there is a tendency for members to avoid conflict and aggressive argumentation, instead favouring engagement in passive-aggression and 'political chicanery'. A build-up of resentment and simmering conflict hampers WCs' ability to make sophisticated decisions, and to operate more generally. It can lead to further 'creaking' and 'slipping' in the organization to the point where schisms emerge between individuals and groups. The 'emotional intensity' of cooperation can increase members' commitment but can also undermine pragmatic decision-making. Members can get stuck in the 'cycle of despair'; that is, unhealthy and destructive patterns which reinforce the repetitive 'safe' behaviour. In response, WCs need to maintain a conversation between these two extremes, neither 'slipping' into passivity nor aggression. This underscores the need for members to develop communication skills that facilitate 'productive conversation'. It is possible for WCs to 'realign' and find this 'Goldilocks zone', potentially through internal training and/or using external facilitators. Alongside this is the need for a will to tackle things early on, nip problems in the bud, and find out when and why people are not happy.

8.4 Chapter Summary

In this chapter I explored the tensions and strains experienced by members with regards to decision-making, the complexity of which is captured in the titular practice of 'cutting the knot'.

The construct of 'relevance' plays a central role in my understanding of 'cutting the knot' in WCs. It provides a heuristic through which to not only explore how the content and locus of decision making are paired, but also the extent of autonomy and agency conferred to both groups and individuals in relation to the power of the collective. This ties in with the ongoing theme of walking a line between structuredness, in this case a source of transparency and accountability, and structurelessness, in this case as means of enabling operational dynamism and action. Well-designed 'consensus' approaches are preferable to poorly designed consensus approaches or a reliance on 'hard voting' with various thresholds and the 'soft no' of abstention. However, complex and time-consuming consensus decision-making faces issues when scaled. The central problematic is the question of how to find and sustain nuance in systems across time

and scale: nuance in finding the point of greatest 'relevance', nuance in connecting points of 'relevance', and nuance in the act of 'cutting the knot'. Interest and possibility lie in developing consent-driven mechanisms within structures that enable 'relevance' through decentralisation, without losing too much transparency, accountability, and holistic awareness.

Scale, scope, pace, and diversity of opinion can push much decision-making practice into informal channels, rendering meetings a 'rubber stamping exercise'. While solving the immediate issue, this undermines the collective participation that is essential to sustaining cooperative practice. Furthermore, reliance on informal channels risks the influence of illegitimate power structures. Nevertheless, informal interaction is also essential, highlighted by the importance of shared meals and breakout spaces as a means of mitigating the 'siloing' of CoPs. Encouraging members to 'take ownership' of systems and see the 'relevance' of engaging with information runs parallel with the need for potentially expensive but worthwhile collective participation and training. These activities work to counteract the 'sense of irrelevance' that can develop over time and scale, i.e., when members lose sight or sense of the 'relevance' of their 'part' and that or other 'parts' in the 'whole-a-making'. Contributing to this is the real and/or perceived quantity and diversity of information and activity, as well as sense of reduced sense of agency. The volume of general information made available due to transparency can be viewed as problematic but distinct from that of members' unwillingness, disinterest, or silent inability to engage with the information provided for decision-making, all of which undermines the quality of participation. This was an issue shared across the case cooperatives, along with members over-engaging with 'minor' and under-engaging 'major' issues and the poor quality of proposals and counterproposals.

While proposal standardisation and efforts to make informal decision-related communication more transparent were being explored, the need for members to be able to sustain their focus and engage in abstraction speaks to a wider issue. Members are more than workers: they are also owners if not directors. Although they may not enter cooperation with skills or education, part of the journey is an educative process. Thus, 'unlearning and learning' (Section 5.3) takes centre stage in the form of member training, development, while expectations and accountability need to correspond to the level of responsibility and concurrent quality of participation. This is even more true

considering time and scale as opposed to less so, for the threat of and potential gains from oligarchy are greater.

'Cutting the knot' faces further tensions in the form of 'vested interests'. These tend to affect big and/or value-sensitive decisions but can also emerge with respect to seemingly innocuous operational decisions. Along with their personal value frameworks, over time and scale members become 'wedded' to certain instrumental and visionary boundary objects in the landscape. These become problematic when others want to change the way the cooperative functions or the position it takes on issues. Due to consensus processes and voting thresholds, small numbers of members can prevent decisions passing and can also make even the process of raising the issue painful: to the extent that some issues have become such 'sacred cows' that members will not broach them anymore. It is important to consider that the typical WC member is likely to be a relatively 'nice person' who wants to be 'cooperative'. Indeed, there is a tendency for members to avoid direct conflict and instead interact through passive-aggression and 'political chicanery'.

While overt aggression would be outrightly uncooperative, avoidance is also problematic. Issues simmer and fester beneath the surface, tensions grow, and schisms can emerge. The imperative is therefore for members to avoid such 'cycles of despair' through engaging directly and transparently in 'productive conversation'. Yet again, we return to the notion of striving for a 'Goldilocks zone', in this case avoiding the unproductive extremes of passivity and aggression in favour of finding a point of integration and possibility. To achieve this, we yet again return to the centrality of ongoing 'unlearning and learning' to sustaining collectivist-democratic organizing across time and scale.

In this chapter, I have explored where and how 'creaking' and 'slipping' manifested at the decision-making level of organizing through the practice of 'cutting the knot'. The findings of this chapter highlight the importance of striving to make decisions at their point of 'relevance', maintaining 'nuance' in the processes and outcomes of decision-making, balancing the availability of information with potential for engagement, and attending to the strain experienced by members whilst also setting expectations that are commensurate to the role of owners and directors. This section underscores a need to find ways of navigating boundary objects that have become 'sacred cows', ideas members have become particularly 'wedded to', tendencies toward passive-aggressive

'political chicanery', and poor-quality communication. It also reinforces the centrality of ongoing 'unlearning and learning', 'reviewing and renewing', and indeed the possibilities that could be achieved by consciously 'turning outwards' (see Section 6.1.4).

The empirical analysis explored in this Chapter develops the four heuristic constructs I introduced in Chapter 4 in the following ways. What emerges from this thread of analysis is a need to articulate the totality of issues regarding the pertinence, directness, indirectness, and comprehensibility of information, decisions, and associated action in collectivist organizing. 'Relevance' encapsulates these facets while also addressing the challenge of maintaining a sense of the extent of personal responsibility on the part of members toward activities beyond the scope of 'work' but within the scope of 'membership' (and even more so of 'directorship'). This analysis furthers 'creaking' and 'slipping' through tensions around understanding 'the system' of information-sharing and decision-making, productive communication, opportunities to contribute, and the 'responsibility' of members to engage and where necessary contribute (linking back to 'relevance'). Furthermore, it extends my earlier analysis of the cultural level regarding 'holding on' or 'letting go' of boundary objects and practices too tightly or too readily. The 'Goldilocks zone' is enhanced by this analysis in terms of the flow of information and making of decisions being reliant upon an ongoing tug of war between structuredness and structurelessness in the frameworks, practices, and behaviours promoted, engendered, and enacted by members.

In the following chapter I draw my analysis and my thesis to a conclusion, recapitulating the key literature, my conceptual framework, and grounded theory constructs before moving to synthesise my analysis and findings. I also set out my contributions and reflect on the implications, recommendations, limitations, and possibilities for future research.

9.0 Discussion and conclusion

In this final chapter I bring together my empirical findings and conceptual framework to formulate an answer to my research questions and discuss the contributions, implications and recommendations of this thesis.

In Section 9.1, I review my aims, questions, and approach as discussed in the first three chapters of my research. In Section 9.2, I respond to the first two of my sub-questions by first reviewing my emergent conceptual framework, introduced initially in Chapter 4, and discuss my findings in relation to the extant literature. I attend to my four core concepts before considering these in the context of the three spaces of tension and strain identified through my analysis. Next, I discuss each of the levels of organizational analysis explored in Chapters 5-8, highlighting my areas of focus and contribution. In Section 9.3, I draw together the contributions identified in my discussion and reflect on these as well as my methodological and empirical contributions. Responding to my third sub-question, I address the implications of this research in Section 9.4, considering these in relation to different forms of democratic organizing and organizing more generally. In sub-section 9.4.1, I explain my intentions for making my research valuable to practitioners and provide a heuristic framework a potential resource for reflecting on and developing practice in worker cooperatives (WCs), other democratic or horizontal organizations, and potentially academic research. Section 9.5 offers my reflections regarding the limitations of this project and my thoughts regarding future research. Finally, Section 9.6 concludes this thesis with my final remarks.

9.1 Main aims, questions, and approach

In this section I summarise my first three chapters to recapitulate the main aims, questions, and approach of this research. In essence, this research focused on how members experience tensions and strains in the practice of worker cooperation. I adopted a constructivist grounded theory (CGT) approach primarily based on interviews with members from four WCs in the UK. Through an iterative process of batch coding and writing extensive analytic memos, I developed a series of novel grounded theory constructs for exploring and progressing democratic theory and practice.

This thesis was an inquiry into the issue of sustaining direct forms of democracy in human organizing over time and at scale. Direct forms of democratic organizing are interesting because they are instances where the boundaries of human capability are pushed toward their apparent limits. Participants ask themselves and others to engage in a manner that is counter to prevailing hegemonic forces and pressures, as captured in the concept of the 'isomorphic environment' (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Thompson, 2015). These instances of direct democratic organizing are not only interesting to the field of organization studies, which is my primary academic audience; they are also sites of value in terms of sustaining similar projects and improving our understanding of democracy more generally. Thus, this research sought to contribute to the body of knowledge attending to the potential for developing the democratic experience and enhancing the quality of democracy in organization studies and beyond.

There are long-standing assumptions regarding the inevitability of bureaucracy and oligarchy and the fragility of direct democratic organizing, particularly in more formal organizational structures (Weber, 1968). In the UK, this is arguably evidenced in the infrequency and limited size of formal collectivist-democratic organizations. However, some direct democratic economic organizations do survive and have even thrived. The focus of my enquiry was four such aspirationally collectivist WCs that had survived for several decades and had grown to more than fifty worker-members. My main aim was to understand how such organizing is sustained, identify associated issues, and illuminate these in a manner that could be beneficial not only to worker cooperation but also to democratic organizing more broadly. As such, the over-arching research question guiding my investigation was:

– How do members of worker cooperatives that have aged, scaled, and are still growing experience the tensions involved with sustaining organizational democracy?

This main question was supported by three sub-questions.

– Where do tensions emerge in sustaining and expanding worker cooperatives?
– How do members make sense of and attempt to address these tensions?
– What are the implications for growing and sustaining organizational democracy?

In Chapter 2, I introduced and explored the concept of prefigurative organizing (Maeckelbergh, 2012; Reedy et al., 2016), a present-time manifestation of future-oriented aspirations and intentions. This fed into my conceptualisation of 'cooperative prefiguration' as an aspirational position composed of the cooperative definition, values, and principles. This understanding was extended by the concepts of participative democracy (Pateman, 1970) and collectivist-democratic organizing (Rothschild-Whitt, 1979; Rothschild, 2016). Next, I turned to the degeneration thesis, which provided a meta-narrative for the presumably inevitable challenges, tensions, and strains associated with sustaining cooperation and democratic organizing (Cornforth et al., 1988).

The primary contradiction facing cooperation is the lack of coherence with the external environment, as this influences and shapes both constitutional and internal challenges (Varman & Chakrabarti, 2004). However, of particular interest to this study are the internal issues highlighted in the extant literature, including a lack of understanding and/or experience with capitalism (Rothschild-Whitt & Lindenfeld, 1982), limited time for engaging in/with democratic practice (Ng & Ng, 2009), the inherency of intra-group conflict in participatory democracy (Rothschild-Whitt, 1979), and reconciling individual power dynamics with functional leadership (Kioupkiolis, 2010). The inevitability of degeneration has long been tied to the so-called 'iron law of oligarchy' (Michels, 1915), oligarchy being inevitably harmful to democratic organizing by virtue of its inherent illegitimacy (Leach, 2005).

Responding to these challenges and threats, authors have pointed to organizational conditions and features that support sustained cooperation. One example is the advocacy of a provisional temporal orientation toward organizations, structures, power, and practices to avoid ossification and oligarchy (Rothschild & Whitt, 1986). Another example is the deliberate diffusion of knowledge and technology in order to mitigate against the emergence of hierarchies of knowledge and specialisation, and thus oligarchy (Diefenbach, 2019; Ng & Ng, 2009; Rothschild & Whitt, 1986). A further example is promoting a sustained commitment to the cooperative principles, in particular open membership and equal democratic control in order to maintain a shared vision and prefigurative purpose (Cornforth et al., 1988; Novkovic et al., 2012).

Beyond exploring, identifying, and analysing factors that contribute to the sustainability of cooperation, a broad argument for the potential regeneration or reproduction of

democratic organizing has emerged (Batstone, 1983; Cornforth, 1995). Challenges to the degeneration thesis have notably moved toward process-driven reconceptualisations and resolutions. This was crystallised in Diefenbach's (2019) analysis that degeneration is more of an ongoing, ever-present threat than an absolute inevitability: embracing the imperfections, contradictions, and paradoxes of democratic organizing as an "evolving reality" (Varman & Chakrabarti, 2004, p. 187). Thus, authors have identified processual responses and practices of resistance. These include the "reproduction of membership" (Stryjan, 1994, p. 65), processes of "individual-collective alignment" (Langmead, 2016, p. 81), "antiperfectionism" (Kioupkiolis, 2010, p. 150), and the appreciation of democratic organizations as "spaces of possibility" (Cornwell, 2012, p. 731; Kokkinidis, 2015).

Figure 9.1 Sustaining prefigurative cooperation (III)
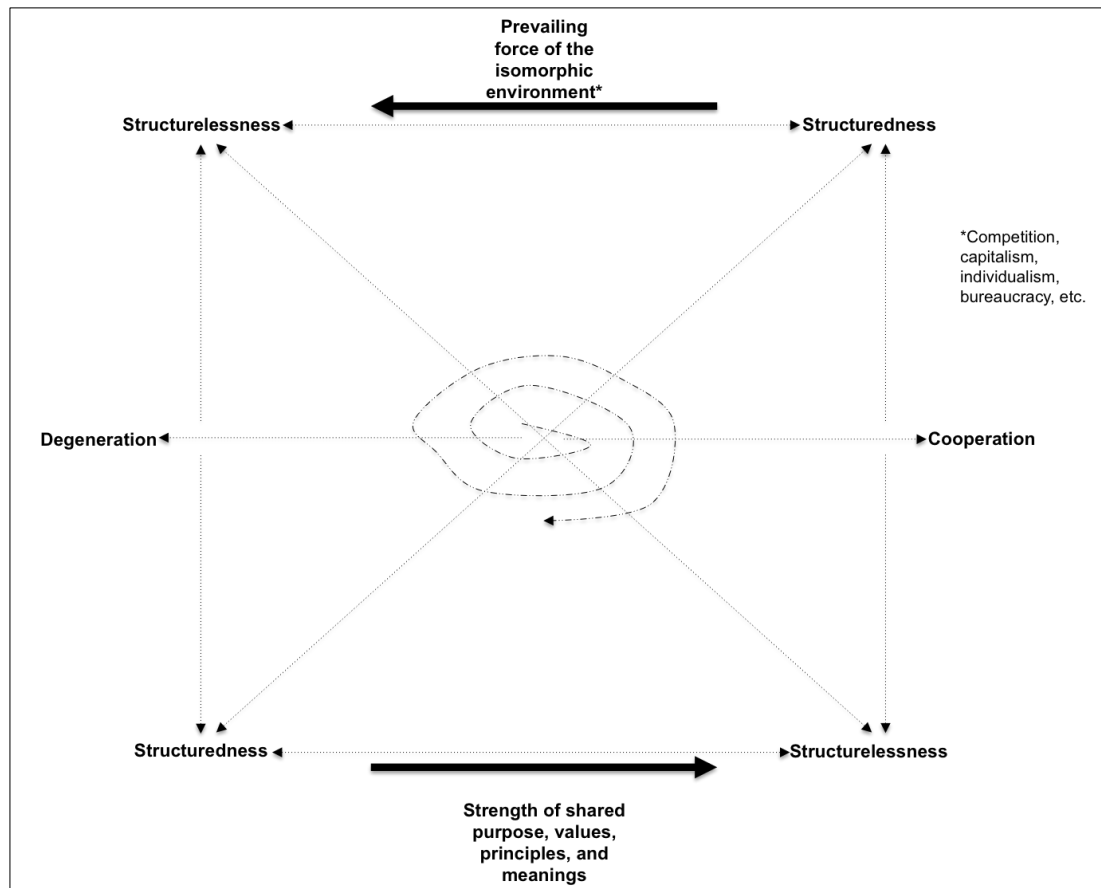
During the latter cycles of my grounded theory analysis, I developed a novel illustration to express how established and scaled WCs experience the forces of structurelessness

and structuredness (see Figure 9.1[17]). In the model I chose to highlight the degenerative force of the isomorphic environment and the cooperative force of 'shared purpose, values, principles, and meanings', although these could be exchanged for other factors. The model captures the essence of the processual conceptualisation of the contradictory nature of democratic organizing, illustrating how organizing is pulled and pushed by more-or-less 'cooperative' structurelessness and structuredness. This is valuable in that it articulates an important understanding: that neither one nor the other is inherently good or bad for cooperation.

Over time and scale, organizing inevitably moves between these points. For example: structures are re-developed to provide clarity and certainty, they ossify or become obsolete, members break them down, space enables creativity, clarity is needed again, and structures are developed. However, the structures are never the same, nor is the creativity enabled by structurelessness; for this reason my illustration draws on the concept of 'Ba' from knowledge creation (Nonaka & Konno, 1998; Nonaka, Toyama, & Konno, 2000) and uses a misshapen spiral to depict 'the organization', or rather, 'organizing'. The spiral is my representation of Follett's 'circular response' (Stout & Love, 2015a, pp. 69–70) and the 'evolving reality' of cooperation (Hernandez, 2006; Varman & Chakrabarti, 2004): it is ongoing, ever contested, yet also growing and never quite the same as it was before. It is important to note here that it is not my intention to over-simplify the situation; even if we overlaid many spirals it would be difficult to depict the 'whole-a-making' (Follett, 2003j, p. 180) in a single diagram.

Due to an interest in its scalability, attention has been given to larger examples of democratic organizing, namely the Mondragon Corporation, the world's largest federation of WCs based in the Basque Country, and the John Lewis Partnership, the largest employee-owned trust in the UK. Contemporary interest in instances of more direct democratic organizing has focused on prefigurative social movement organizations, collectives, and smaller formal organizations, including WCs. For example, Langmead (2016, 2018) investigated three small UK WCs and explored the

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[17] First introduced in Section 2.3 ('Processes of reproduction') and returned to in Section 4.1 ('Summary').

role of democratic praxis in enabling participants to develop coherent collective responses to problems, challenges, and the inherent contradictions of prefigurative democratic organizing. This thesis attends to a notable practical and conceptual gap in the contemporary body of knowledge about prefigurative democratic organizing by focusing on WCs that have been established for more than twenty years and have grown beyond fifty members.

Chapter 3 set out my motivation, philosophical position, and explained the constructivist approach to grounded theory (CGT) I adopted. This approach was suited to the study because I was interested in qualitatively understanding the experiences of members. CGT focuses on staying close to the data and building thick descriptions over iterative cycles of constant comparison and analysis. This approach enabled me to meaningfully engage with the subject(s) of my research and gradually build a detailed picture of contemporary cooperative practice. Data collection involved two phases. An initial phase of five extended expert interviews enabled me to gain insight into the UK WC movement and the challenges faced by cooperatives. Furthermore, it facilitated the identification of, and to some extent access to, the cooperatives included in this study. In the second phase, I undertook interviews with forty worker-member participants across four UK WCs matching the selection criteria of being collectivist-democratic, having existed as a WC for more than twenty years, and having at least fifty full worker-members. These interview data were supported by participant observation as well as secondary documents, depending on the access provided. Analysis involved coding and the writing of twenty extensive analytic memos which iteratively moved toward conceptual development, theoretical saturation, and the crafting of this thesis. This grounded process enabled me to remain close to the extensive empirical data collected whilst developing a nuanced understanding of participants' experiences. As my analytic memos developed, I gradually began to form links between my findings, emergent concepts, and the extant literature.

In the following section I summarise the conceptual framework and heuristics introduced in Chapter 4 before integrating these with the main finding from my empirical chapters.

9.2 Cultivating relevance: Creaking, Slipping, and the Goldilocks zone

This section integrates the main conclusions from Chapters 4 to 8 with a conceptual framework that responds to my overarching research question:

- How do members of worker cooperatives that have aged, scaled, and are still growing experience the tensions involved with sustaining organizational democracy?

In doing so I address the first two of my sub-questions:

- Where do tensions emerge in sustaining and expanding worker cooperatives?
- How do members make sense of and attempt to address these tensions?

My conceptual chapter first set out my conceptual framework and illustrated the grounded theory constructs of 'relevance', the 'Goldilocks zone', 'creaking', and 'slipping'; I then established the constructs of 'creaking' and 'slipping' through three types of 'space'. In the four empirical chapters that followed I explored how my four grounded theory constructs worked in greater detail across four broad areas of organizational analysis: the individual, cultural, structural, and interactional level of decision-making.

Figure 9.2 Dimensions of analysis (II)
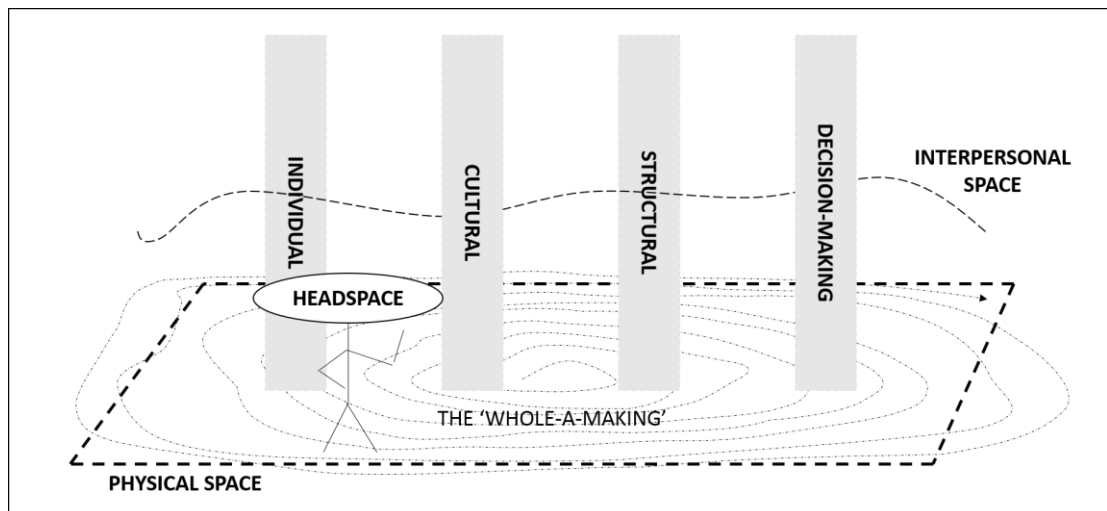
My understanding of the relationship between these various dimensions of analysis is illustrated in Figure 9.2 (first introduced in Section 4.3). The four empirical 'pillars' of my analysis were the 'individual level', 'cultural level', 'structural level', and 'decision-making' level. 'Physical space' concerns the actual physical boundaries in

which cooperation and thus organizational democracy take place; be this a single room, a building, across a site with multiple buildings, or across multiple sites. Interpersonal space concerns the 'creaking' and 'slipping' connectedness of organizing, interweaving itself around the four main pillars of analysis. 'Headspace' concerns the 'creaking' and 'slipping' inside the minds of members. At the individual level I explored 'the cooperative journey' experienced by members, and the tensions and strains involved with the development of individuals. At the cultural level I examined how WCs engage in and struggle with 'keeping it together' over time and scale. At the structural level I focused on the practice of 'consenting to authority' and the tensions this revealed between individual autonomy and manifestations of collective authority. Lastly, at the decision-making level I attended to the practice of 'cutting the knot' with respect to the challenges members experience and issues faced by WCs. As indicated in my illustration, I conceive of all of these dimensions evolving within what Follett (2003j, p. 180) describes as the 'whole-a-making'. In Figure 9.3 I provide a map of the analytical threads my thesis followed, highlighting the corresponding chapters, sections, and sub-headings. At the centre of this illustration are the four grounded theory constructs that bring my research to life; these were introduced in Chapter 4 and developed across my empirical chapters (Chapters 5 to 8).

Figure 9.3 Mapping core concepts, headings, and sub-headings

8.1.1 *The what and the where*
8.1.2 *Finding nuance*

8.1 Locus and approach

8.0 CUTTING THE KNOT

8.2 Processing information

8.3 Productive conversations

8.2.1 *Flow*
8.2.2 *Cogs and noise*

8.3.1 *Vested interests*
8.3.2 *Political chicanery*

The more the merrier?
The ties that bind
Endurance meetings
Who's doing what?
Passing judgement
Uncooperative technology
Who are we?

4.3.1 Interpersonal space

4.3 SPACES OF CREAKING AND SLIPPING

4.3.2 Headspace

4.3.3 Physical space

Under pressure
Thinking operationally and strategically
Check yourself

Feeling the squeeze
Localised cooperation
Near and far

7.1.1 *Got no strings*
7.1.2 *Nailing it down*
7.1.3 *Finding authority*

7.1 Autonomy and authority

7.0 CONSENTING TO AUTHORITY

THE GOLDILOCKS ZONE

CREAKING – SLIPPING – CREAKING – RELEVANCE – RELEVANCE – SLIPPING – CREAKING – RELEVANCE – RELEVANCE – CREAKING – SLIPPING – SLIPPING – RELEVANCE – RELEVANCE – CREAKING – SLIPPING

7.2 Individuals and authority

7.3 Groups, rules, and authority

7.2.1 *Positions of individual authority*
7.2.2 *Authority limited*
7.2.3 *Teachers and confidantes*
7.2.4 *The burden of authority*
7.2.5 *The oppressor becomes the oppressed*

7.3.1 *The tail wagging the dog*
7.3.2 *Departmental devolution*
7.3.3 *Playing by rules*
7.3.4 *Fizzling and bloating*
7.3.5 *Cabals or guardians?*

5.1.1 *Demands of the job*
5.1.2 *Holding out for a cooperator*
5.1.3 *Making space*
5.1.4 *Evolving*

5.1 Becoming members

5.0 THE COOPERATIVE JOURNEY

5.2 Organizing work

5.3 Unlearning and learning

5.3.1 *The hierarchical hangover*
5.3.2 *Points of reference*
5.3.3 *Acclimatisation*
5.3.4 *Sharing the load*

5.2.1 *Jacks of all trades*
5.2.2 *In search of masters*
5.2.3 *The 'worker' identity*
5.2.4 *Neither multi-skilling nor specialisation*
5.2.5 *Siloing*

6.1 Purposive prefiguration

6.0 KEEPING IT TOGETHER

6.1.1 *Coming together*
6.1.2 *Why can't we just be normal?*
6.1.3 *Reviewing and renewing*
6.1.4 *Turning outwards*

6.2 Uniqueness and exceptionalism

6.3 Growing pains

6.2.1 *Are we special?*
6.2.2 *How special are we?*
6.2.3 *There's nobody like us*

6.3.1 *The price of success*
6.3.2 *Just not the same anymore*
6.3.3 *Bulletproof members*
6.3.4 *More similar than that which divides us*

9.2.1 Conceptual framework

My grounded theory analysis led me to develop a conceptual framework that extends the processual, paradox-embracing approach to democratic organizing through a 'toolbox approach' (Nicolini, 2012) that combined practice theory, relational process ontology (RPO), and Follettian 'integrative process'.

In order to operationalise the organizational context, I turned to the practice theory literature regarding landscapes and communities of practice (LoPs and CoPs). This literature helped to more tangibly understand and analyse how RPO and Follett's ideas are enacted, negotiated, and contested in organizational practice. LoPs consist of complex systems of CoPs and the boundaries between them. CoPs are engaged in multiple activities and have their own histories, domains, and regimes of competence. 'Regimes of competence' describes the dimension of knowing negotiated and defined within a single CoP, whereas the concept of 'knowledgeability' is manifest in the interconnectedness of practice(s) across the landscape. Individuals exist within/across multiple communities and landscapes. Their relative identification or dis-identification can be described using three interdependent and interwoven modes of identification: engagement, imagination, and alignment (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015, pp. 13–21). The extent of identification influences the 'legitimacy' and 'accountability' of participation and perceptions. The boundaries that define and delineate different CoPs and landscapes are unavoidable and problematic. 'Boundary objects', either 'instrumental' (structures) or 'visionary' (concepts), give definition and legitimacy to CoPs and landscapes. 'Brokers' work across boundaries, connecting practices, introducing new practices, and facilitating cross-boundary experiences. 'Brokering' involves emotional and practical challenges, particularly regarding legitimacy and accountability. However, the ultimate purpose of brokering is rendering practice 'relevant' across CoPs' regimes of competence and landscape's knowledgeability.

RPO provides the foundations for theoretically framing my findings and conceptualisations. RPO focuses on the relationships and interconnectedness that facilitate the integration of difference through inclusivity and authentic participation in self-governance. Three cross-cutting principles were drawn from the works of Follett (Stout & Love, 2015a, p. 230):

- 'Integrative process' sustains and guides all structures and practices through 'circular response'

- 'The situation' is constituted by all the factors that are 'relating'; it is dynamic, iterative, and thus ever-evolving. All situations are interconnected, cumulatively they make up the 'total situation'. Engagement with and awareness of the total situation is described as the 'whole-a-making'

- 'The law of the situation' embodies situational responsiveness; actions should be directed by and responsive to changes in the situation by which they are contextualised.

The implications of integrative process for democratic organizing are manifest in situationally-determined authority and responsibility, participatory planning and decision-making, division of labour as an ongoing process of integrative action, and the emergence of federalism and non-hierarchical coordination (Stout & Love, 2015a, p. 236). Integrative process calls for negotiating diversity of identity, interest, and opinion through engaging in 'constructive conflict' that focuses on integration over domination or compromise. Constructive conflict achieves three outcomes: all parties get what they want (although not necessarily what they knew they wanted from the outset), the total situation moves forward (i.e. the 'whole-a-making'), and by going through this process additional value is added to the community. In sum, only through the process of integration can democracy be sustained as 'a way of life'.

These, or very similar, ideas are found in the extant organizational democracy literature, although, as I note in Section 4.1, Follett's influence is only acknowledged in a few instances. For example, 'constructive conflict' is referred to by Maeckelbergh (2009, p. 100) in her discussion of creating 'conflictive spaces' and shares similarities with Mouffe's (1999) 'agonistic pluralism' wherein democracy is conceived as "part collaborative and in part conflictual and not as a wholly co-operative game" (p. 756). Likewise, Kioupkiolis' (2010) concept of 'antiperfectionism', a critical perspective on more-or-less absolutist approaches toward hegemonic (verticals) and rhizomatic (horizontals) organizing, and advocacy for "autonomous, inclusive, and imaginative spaces" (p. 150) integrates harmoniously with the organizational implications of integrative process. The combination of RPO and Follett's integrative process consolidates these ideas by offering both a solid philosophical grounding and a substantive, progressive, democratic theory of organizing.

Through this framework I was able to breathe conceptual life into my grounded theory analysis and constructs and move towards the following response to my overarching research question:

- How do members of worker cooperatives that have aged, scaled, and are still growing experience the tensions involved with sustaining organizational democracy?

My central argument is that members of established and scaled WCs are engaged in an ongoing search for the 'Goldilocks zone'. This is an impossible point of situationally bound perfect integration between more-or-less 'cooperative' structurelessness and structuredness, embracing the paradoxical, contradictory, and perpetually imperfect nature of democratic organizing (Griffin et al., 2020; Kioupkiolis, 2010; Varman & Chakrabarti, 2004). It is conceived as a point of perfect 'relevance' where members feel connected and meaningful to the organization and all its constituent parts; that is, the 'total situation' and thus the 'whole-a-making'. 'Relevance' is an emergent concept that brings together Follett's cross-cutting principles of integrative process, the situation, and the law of the situation with the three modes of identification from practice theory; engagement, alignment, and imagination). 'Relevance' is conceived as a multi-directional relational process between the individual members and the organization and between members. The 'Goldilocks zone' calls for the organization to feel 'relevant' to the individual, for the individual to be 'relevant' to the organization, and for members to feel 'relevant' to each other. This ongoing relational process may be more-or-less conscious and/or intentional. While its existence may escape members, their experiences of the tensions it produces are very real. These tensions are manifest in members' experiences of the 'creaking' and 'slipping' of practice between points of variable quality in collectivist-democratic cooperative prefiguration. Although philosophically and empirically grounded, in essence 'relevance', the 'Goldilocks zone', 'creaking', and 'slipping' are simple concepts and in this simplicity lies their heuristic strength and utility. In the following sub-sections I provide more complete explanations of these concepts and discuss their emergence and application to my findings, tying this in with the extant literature.

Through my grounded theory analysis, I constructed and developed the following four heuristics in part-answer to my overarching research question and second sub-question:

– How do members make sense of and attempt to address these tensions?

Creaking and slipping

'Creaking' and 'slipping' express how members experience the strains and changes emerging over time and through scaling. In essence; tensions emerge in the form of 'creaking' across interpersonal space, headspace, and physical space, leading to slipping of 'relevance'. Both initially emerged in vivo from my interview data before being developed in dedicated analytic memos. The extant literature had identified and explored the paradoxes and contradictions of democratic organizing but to my knowledge had not developed heuristics for describing how members experience these conditions (Langmead, 2016; Ng & Ng, 2009; Varman & Chakrabarti, 2004). 'Creaking' and 'slipping' are active, process-oriented concepts intended to capture and communicate how members of democratic communities and landscapes experience the tensions and possibilities of their ever-evolving realities (Kioupkiolis, 2010, p. 149; Kokkinidis, 2015).

'Creaking' communicates a sense of tension or strain on the WC: as a whole, of a structure or system, in the minds and behaviours of individuals, or even the physical environment. As stated in chapter 4, one may imagine a plumbing system or a wooden ship, respectively 'creaking' to keep water in or keep water out; with water being a useful metaphor for all that is either within or outside the organizational landscape. 'Creaking' is understood as a dynamic, inherent, ever-present feature of the wider practice of sustaining democratic organizing. It describes the inevitable sound of change; the sound of landscapes, communities, practices and boundary objects shifting.

'Slipping' captures a sense or observation that, as a result of tensions and strains on the organization and its constituents, a particular practice or boundary object (or set of them) has or is beginning to diminish, decline, or no longer be a feature of day-to-day organizational reality. Thus, we may hear or observe that 'slipping' was happening, is ongoing, or has happened. It is crucial to not think of 'slipping' as deviating from any supposed 'one true path' of prefigurative cooperation. Instead, we can point to practices as being more-or-less 'cooperative' or 'uncooperative' within the evolving reality that is the 'whole-a-making'. 'Slipping' is inherently deleterious to a 'sense of relevance' and is processually disintegrative.

In this conceptualisation, 'creaking' and 'slipping' are intrinsically interconnected. 'Creaking' may result in 'slipping', 'slipping' may result in further 'creaking', 'creaking' may be indicative of 'slipping' taking place or having taken place, and 'slipping' may be indicative of 'creaking' having taken place. However, while it is possible for there to be 'creaking' without 'slipping', it is not possible for there to have been 'slipping' without some kind of 'creaking' preceding it; even if simply to the extent of the organization not having had the capacity to consider or address an issue in a given moment. The extent to which members are conscious of and able to attune to, identify, and/or address 'creaking' and 'slipping' becomes more challenging as democratic organizing becomes stretched across time and scale.

Relevance

When we consider the experiences of members, it simply is not enough to say that what is lost by a lack of participation or a lack of opportunities for involvement is the 'quality of democracy'. This seems evident and to stop there would not do justice to my data. 'Creaking' or 'slipping' in one part of the organization might not only be detrimental in that 'situation' but also result in wider degeneration of individuals and organizing. 'Relevance' captures both the essence of this process and the nature of the efforts toward mitigating its adverse effects. To my knowledge, this is a novel contribution to the extant literature.

'Relevance' conveys more than simply connectedness: it involves a sense of meaning or meaningfulness that encompasses identification through engagement, imagination, and alignment (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). 'Relevance' builds on the ideas of 'relatedness' and 'reciprocal relating' that are central to RPO and integrative process (Stout & Love, 2015a, p. 229). It is similar to Langmead's (2016) processes of 'individual-collective alignment' which run throughout democratic praxis and "see individuals and the organization change and develop in response to one another" (p. 81), but goes further in communicating the need for a sense of the bi/multi-directional importance or significance of parts within the 'whole-a-making' (Follett, 2003j). Individual-collective alignment captures a series of integrative processes, whereas 'relevance' is the emergent property of these processes.

The importance of 'relevance' as a concept is that it provides an answer to 'what' is 'creaking' or 'slipping'. Whether we are speaking of the pressure members are feeling

when making decisions, how coordination roles have not been rotated in three years, or declining participation in member appraisals, 'relevance' is the integrative property that is being qualitatively diminished. Interestingly, it may not be immediately apparent why this is necessarily 'bad' for organizational democracy. Take the example of unrotated coordination roles, which is a non-issue for some members; they see that Sam is doing a good job, has the most experience, and is therefore the best person for the role. However, suppose these same members express frustration at the coordination group or feel disconnected from other departments. Through their lack of engagement with the coordination roles, or interest in actively rotating them, their 'sense of relevance' is being eroded. Furthermore, the lack of member engagement from various positions or angles of organizing risks reducing their 'relevance' to the organization; the less the 'whole-a-making' involves members, the less involved and thus 'relevant' members become.

The Goldilocks zone

I conceive of the 'Goldilocks zone' as an impossible point of perfect 'relevance', where the relative temperature of porridge is replaced with the relative structuration and coherence of democratic organizing. It emerged initially in vivo from WCM04, a practitioner with a particularly keen interest in the restructuring of their cooperative in order to devolve decision-making to the team-level whilst retaining collectivist-democratic authority across the overall cooperative.

The 'Goldilocks zone' builds on Varman and Chakrabarti's (2004) notion of organizational democracy as an evolving reality involving a fine balancing act between many contradictions. What is remarkable about the WCs I have studied is that despite time and scale they have sustained relatively collectivist approaches, however imperfect and strained these may be. This speaks to Kioupkiolis' (2010) concept of 'antiperfectionism' as a feature of sustainable democratic practice that encourages practitioners to embrace praxis over theory. As elucidated by Selznick (1966), organizational democracy is sustained through a combination of ideals and operational goals. Prefigurative cooperation by its very nature cannot be an absolutely defined operational goal. Instead, it is an ideal that shapes the operational goals of organizing. It is always aspirational and can only be worked towards. Thus, in the 'Goldilocks zone' we can of course choose to see ever-moving frustratingly unattainable goalposts; but I would encourage practitioners to see it as an ever-shifting sweet spot of the 'whole-a-

making'. Through relational processes of individual-collective alignment (Langmead, 2016), members are continuously 'trying' to understand the situation, be responsive to its dimensions (laws), engage constructively in conflict, and ultimately sustain ongoing integration (Stout & Love, 2015a).

To understand how the integrative process of (re)cultivating 'relevance' is fostered and inhibited by the ways in which members respond to 'creaking' and 'slipping', we can to look to the three 'spaces' and four 'levels' of my analysis.

9.2.2 Spaces of creaking and slipping

'Space' emerged in both the literature and my analysis as being of great importance to sustaining prefigurative cooperation. We can see this in the conceptualisation of democratic organizing as 'spaces of possibility' (Cornwell, 2012; Kioupkiolis, 2010; Kokkinidis, 2015). Also of note is Varman and Chakrabarti's (2004) call for "progressively creating slack" (p. 204) in order for democracy to be institutionalised. However, as Varman and Chakrabarti acknowledge, for democracy to be sustained there is likewise a need for a degree of coherent infrastructure to maintain the boundaries of the space (Blasi et al., 1984).

My grounded theory construction of 'creaking' and 'slipping' emerged across three kinds of space: interpersonal space, headspace, and physical space. After introducing my conceptual framework of RPO, integrative process, and LoPs in Chapter 4, I used these to initially illustrate and develop my central concepts. As noted previously, these three spaces of analysis are distinct from the four main avenues I adopted for my empirical analysis and findings. Tensions and concepts identified across these 'spaces', for example 'headspace', were then examined in more detail and/or drawn upon in the four subsequent empirical chapters. Thus, the following offers an initial response to my first sub-research question:

 – Where do tensions emerge in sustaining and expanding worker cooperatives?

Interpersonal space

Growth of the LoP changes the needs of the WC and reduces the availability of roles beyond quotidian operations. Essentially, this implies that growth implicitly creates a more pyramid-like operational structure, if not a hierarchy, wherein most members are needed for "hours downstairs rather than more roles being created for office-type

functions." (WCM04 - WC2) Over time and scale the WC develops from a more closely-knit social group to become a more diverse mix of groups with identities and relationships both inside and outside of work based on mutual interests and interwoven social lives. The 'creaking' that comes with the increasing complexity of the 'total situation' across the LoP is not inherently problematic. However, it can lead to two further forms of 'creaking' and 'slipping'. Firstly, increased heterogeneity and social fragmentation can reduce the solidarity between members (as highlighted in Section 2.2.1, see Rothschild & Whitt, 1986). Secondly, where social divisions follow lines between more established and newer members or between those in positions of authority and those that are not, there is a risk of informal oligarchic power structures emerging that can adversely affect members' sense of 'relevance' (as highlighted in Section 2.2.2, see Diefenbach, 2019; Leach, 2005).

Large-scale meetings can become disengaging and unwieldy "endurance" (WCM07 - WC2) experiences, therefore decreasing the 'relevance' to members, not only of the meetings but also their content, particularly those not directly or immediately affected. Likewise, the shift from being a smaller, more integrated, organization creates issues in terms of how responsibilities are allocated and how time is managed throughout the organization, as suggested by Ng and Ng (2009) in their study of smaller, younger WCs. Systems of individual accountability, namely appraisals, presented an awkward problem due to the ostensibly equal and autonomous position of members. Beyond what gives members the 'right' to pass judgement on one another, WCs struggle to maintain a sense of why appraisals are necessary and thus 'relevant'. However, missing here is the understanding that as WCs age and scale, creating opportunities for checking in on individual members and finding ways to address their personal needs and development become increasingly essential to sustaining the quality of cooperative practice.

An unanticipated point of strain was found in the replacement, development, and/or implementation of new technology systems in established and scaled WCs. This kind of innovation has presented a major obstacle at some point for three of the WCs studied (WC1, WC3, and WC4W). I included this in 'interpersonal space' because it became apparent to me that it was the 'networked' character of these systems that was the root of the issue. Technological systems in medium-size organizations are commonly implemented in a top-down manner (by managers or 'champions'). There is a good reason for this: people do not like change, especially when it requires engaging with an

unfamiliar system that impacts on many aspects of their day-to-day practice. In the absence of hierarchy and expertise or familiarity with developing these systems, WCs face a challenge in overcoming inertia, misunderstanding, and resistance throughout the process. It is noteworthy that where systems had been internally developed, the systems appeared to have faced less resistance to adoption.

Lastly, the collective 'sense of relevance' (who 'we' are) becomes strained and tested over time. As members come and go, the profile of the business changes, and attitudes shift, a range of complexities can emerge with regards to not only the values the business stands for but potentially the status of the organization as a cooperative. This is a key issue that will be returned to in my reflections on my cultural level analysis.

Headspace

'Headspace' is conceived as both a state of existence (identification), which may be reinforced or undermined, and as a flexible yet finite resource which may be replenished or depleted. 'Headspace' speaks to the role of members as both worker and owner, a fine line that regardless of their operational role factors into their ability to engage, align, and imagine possibilities of organizing (Cornwell, 2012, p. 730). Pressure builds as the organization becomes bigger and busier, which can negatively affect members' ability to step away from the immediate demands of running the business. This 'creaking' is captured in the notion of members having their 'nose to the grindstone'. Moreover, the CMAs warned that it could potentially precipitate a 'cycle of despair' that may prevent solutions being identified and developed; i.e., 'slipping'. A lack of headspace leads to members not engaging, individually and collectively, in 'higher-level thinking' or strategic thinking regarding the business or cooperative practice. This points to issues in the balance between members behaving as workers and as directors. In theory, all members should have the headspace to think strategically about the organization, but this is often pushed out from the day-to-day reality.

Specialisation presents challenges for integration and thus 'relevance'. However, the practice of multi-skilling can also prove to be problematic due to it fragmenting members' time to the extent that they are unable to engage effectively with any of their particular roles and responsibilities. Members can become overly stretched across multiple CoPs, and therefore hold multiple regimes of competence and identities. Furthermore, the desire to see the cooperative succeed can result in members putting in

more time than they are paid for or is recorded by the organization. This bears issues for the wellbeing of members, the ability to understand how many hours the organization actually needs to allocate to particular roles and responsibilities and produces a potential problem in terms of the equality of time members can and do invest in the organization (Langmead, 2018; Sandoval, 2016). It also underscores the substantive character of WCs as more than simply businesses but also as value-laden prefigurative socio-economic projects. However, inequality in members' ability to dedicate their 'free time' to the cooperative more than others highlights a further risk with regards to the emergence of informal hierarchies based on this greater informal involvement, awareness, and thus knowledge.

Physical space

Growth puts pressure on the physical space occupied by the cooperative, making it difficult for members to work effectively and thus increases the potential for personal friction. There is a limit to how much an organization can expand on a single site. Once these limits are reached, creaking is inevitable with regards to how many workers can be on site at any given time, how much stock can be stored, and how many customers can be served. As in the case of WC4, cooperatives can opt to split functions across sites or move the entire business or department. The other option is to create a new site, but this raises issues both for the business in terms of strategy and competition and for the cooperative in terms of the autonomy of members and the way direct democratic organizing works across multiple locations. As in the case of WC4, it appears to necessitate some form of centralised management structure. Regardless of how authoritatively impotent this coordination structure is designed to be, it inevitably creates issues for the quality of the collectivist-democratic 'whole'.

Due to their purposive nature, WCs are particularly bound to their sites of operation. While this is especially understandable with customer-facing businesses, as in the cases of WC2 and WC4R, there is more to this in terms of how the purposive character of WCs is tied to the context in which they are set. However, increasing physical space can inadvertently lead to slipping with regards to an increasing sense of disconnection and/or segregation between various departments, teams, and positions of functional authority. At both WC3 and WC4W, where expansion across a bigger site had been possible, similar issues were voiced regarding a sense of strain in the 'relevance' experienced by my members working in separate areas.

9.2.3 The cooperative journey

My analysis revealed the emergence of three areas of 'creaking' and 'slipping' at the individual level: pathways through membership, the nature of membership, and practices of unlearning and learning. My contributions in this area of analysis are threefold. First, the push and pull of specialisation (efficiency) creates contradictions between the needs of democratic organizing (namely demystification and integration) and the extent of members' individual autonomy in terms of their working practices. Second, though in contradiction with efficiency and some members autonomy, full or partial multi-skilling is integral to sustaining a shared 'worker identity'. Third, where established and scaled WCs are able to engage members in ongoing cooperative 'unlearning and learning', the benefits to cooperation and collective cohesion are tacit yet apparent in the mutual 'sense of relevance' shared by members. Thus, the following moves toward addressing my overall research question in responding to my first and second sub-questions:

- – Where do tensions emerge in sustaining and expanding worker cooperatives?
- – How do members make sense of and attempt to address these tensions?

Central to the 'creaking' and 'slipping' of cooperative practice at the individual level of organizing is the struggle to find the 'Goldilocks zone' between individuals' autonomy as willing and free participants in the collective project and the collective will as the beating heart of direct democratic organizing. Building on the work of Kokkinidis (2015), I developed an ideal, prefigurative, understanding of autonomy from the perspective of individuals engaged in the collective project. My 'ideal' of autonomy holds members as being self-managing and actively engaged in processes of creating and curating autonomous spaces of possibility, driven by the intention and motivation of realising their self-creating, self-altering, and self-instituting capacities. The objective of this aspirational mode of autonomy is the fashioning of 'rule-creating' rather than 'rule-following' subjectivities (Kokkinidis, 2015, p. 848). This fits with the implications of Follett's integrative process for organizing, in particular with respect to members developing both their understanding of the 'whole-a-making', ability to meaningfully engage in mutual answerability as 'responsibility-with', and participate in the planning and decision-making essential for effective functional unifying (Stout & Love, 2015a).

The design of working practices was the central issue in the theme of 'pathways through membership' and continued to play a central role throughout my individual level analysis. My findings indicated that there are clear arguments for some degree of specialisation in established and scaled WCs; such as in business functions that require specialist training (investment), knowledge (experience), and continuity. However, in line with the extant literature, I found a prevailing need for WCs to lean closer to the practices of multi-skilling, job-rotation, and overlapping experience with a view to reducing the distance between members, demystifying knowledge, and increasing the diversity of members' experience across the LoP (Langmead, 2016; Ng & Ng, 2009; Rothschild & Whitt, 1986). This contradiction between efficiency and the quality of democracy is well documented (Cornforth, 1995; Harnecker, 2009; Varman & Chakrabarti, 2004). However, what emerged from my analysis was that members themselves pull in the direction of specialisation; not only for the sake of operational efficiency but also a desire to simplify their 'headspace' and/or feel a greater sense of agency over a given functional area.

When the 'needs of the organization' are considered, it is possible that we too readily assume these 'needs' align with 'efficiency' and therefore specialisation. However, the 'need' for sustaining the integrative unity of established and scaled WCs by way of keeping members engaged with the 'whole-a-making' likewise conflicts with individual autonomy and agency, potentially becoming oppressive and undemocratic in its prescriptions. It is difficult to determine whether some members' proclivity toward specialisation is a product of nature (i.e. an innate psychological response to complexity) or nurture (i.e. the isomorphic environment). Either way, it leaves established and scaled WCs in a paradoxical position where multi-skilling, job sharing, even the mandatory rotation of positions of authority may be theoretically 'good' for the quality of cooperation yet, in practice, are counter to the will of individual members whose very autonomous and voluntary engagement is the bedrock of democratic organizing. Evidence from the WCs studied indicates a 'Goldilocks zone' needs to be maintained between the iterations of multi-skilling found in WC1 and WC2 and the more problematic extent of specialisation found at WC3 and arguably WC4W.

In exploring the 'nature of membership', I identified maintaining a shared 'worker identity' as an important unifying status that levelled the membership and sustained a sense of individual-collective interdependence and therefore 'relevance'. Failing to

sustain this sense of mutuality between members and across boundaries precipitated 'creaking' and increased the potential 'slipping' towards interpersonal and intra-organizational conflict. Multi-skilling was held as being beneficial to sustaining this shared identity because it creates additional opportunities for ongoing integration and increases the 'relevance' members feel across the 'whole-a-making'. Conversely, specialisation served as a barrier to sustaining a shared identity among both existing and new members. Specialisation essentially forces WCs rely on spaces beyond day-to-day operations for diverse individual-collective engagement, alignment, and imagination to occur. Likewise, although specialisation enables WCs to recruit more effectively to meet operational needs (for example at WC1), it also presents issues in terms of how integrated these new members will potentially be. In order to address this some WCs have developed member job descriptions (MJDs) alongside membership policies. These instrumental boundary objects set out what it involves and means to be a member of the cooperative. In theory, this document transcends any specific job description and provides a means for members to hold one another mutually accountable.

The subject of recruitment provides a segue into a further point of 'creaking' and 'slipping': the tensions between more established and newer members. As Wenger (2000, p. 241) highlights, intergenerational encounters have the potential expand the identities of all participants. Newer members can gain a sense of established regimes of competence, knowledgeability, and history whilst established members can gain perspective and insights into new possibilities. Three conditions emerged as important for members to develop their 'sense of relevance' toward membership: 1) operational space to 'engage' with organizing, 2) psychosocial space to 'align' and '(re)imagine' organizing, and 3) empowerment from more established members to occupy this operational and psychosocial space in order to engage in, align with, and imagine possibilities of organizing. In this third point the emergent implications of Follett's integrative process for 'leadership' in democratic organizing come into play: that is, leadership being predicated on the coordination of integration and purposed with drawing-out the fullest potential from individuals in the organization (Stout & Love, 2015a, p. 174).

Linking back to the tension between multi-skilling and specialisation; regardless of dominant working practices, some members will 'evolve' their roles and

responsibilities over time (as noted by Cornforth et al., 1988, p. 101). This process highlights the potential for member development and increasing individual-collective alignment over time. Furthermore, it provides a potential avenue to alleviate some of the issues associated with specialisation. However, it also calls for members to let go of responsibilities as their role develops to avoid negatively impacting the development of other members' 'sense relevance' due to either resentment or disengagement (Diefenbach, 2019; Nilsson, 2001).

Practices of 'unlearning and leaning' emerged as crucial to enabling individual-collective alignment and the balancing of individual autonomy with the needs of the organization (see also Diefenbach, 2019; Langmead, 2016; Ng & Ng, 2009). My focus here was on the acclimatisation of members into the practice of cooperation. This is necessary in the first instance to overcome assumptions, behaviours, practices, and institutional conditioning which are incoherent with cooperative practice (Stryjan, 1994). As emphasised by Pateman (1970) with respect to democratic participation, 'integration' is a skill that must be established, regularly exercised, and most importantly developed by all participants in order to be successful (Follett, 1998; Stout & Love, 2015a, p. 276). Induction programmes, specific training, appraisals, ongoing training, and mutual support all contribute. However, despite broad agreement among participants about the need for explicit processes of 'individual-collective alignment', in established and scaled WCs such initiatives are fraught with issues: prioritisation, low member interest/commitment, and high transaction costs (Cornforth et al., 1988; Ng & Ng, 2009; Rothschild & Whitt, 1986). For example, only at WC2 was a collective programme of training built into the routine of the cooperative; implemented on the basis that the immediate financial costs are outweighed by the medium to long-term benefits. Likewise, I found that across the case cooperatives there was a lack of acknowledgement as to the need for more established members to be engaged in training and sustaining their 'sense of relevance'.

The creation of instrumental boundary objects such as membership guides is a relatively cost-effective and therefore popular tool for supporting newer members and later holding members to account (as noted previously regarding MJDs). The issue with such fixed objects is that they can potentially be overly prescriptive and fixed to a given interpretation of the organization. Thus, they can be viewed as inherently mistrusting, even undemocratic. Connecting with Langmead's (2016) notion of such objects being

considered "loose frameworks for action" (p. 94) as opposed to being carved in stone, finding a Goldilocks zone between guidance and oppression is necessary if WCs are to maintain the quality of democracy whilst sustaining their organizational integrity. The practice of 'unlearning and learning' itself calls for an ongoing iterative methodology.

9.2.4 Keeping it together

My analysis identified 'creaking' and 'slipping' of cultural 'relevance in WCs' worldviews and how these are sustained, the perceived 'uniqueness' of WCs, and how members cope with and respond to change. Furthermore, it highlighted two practices of creating and sustaining cultural relevance: 'reviewing and renewing' and 'turning outwards'. My contributions in this area of analysis are threefold: first, developing a contemporary understanding of the role of purpose and the art of cooperation entailing 'keeping it together' while 'letting go'; second, capturing the tension between a healthy 'sense of uniqueness' and an unhealthy 'sense of exceptionalism' in established and scaled WCs; third, identifying the importance of intentional practices of 'reviewing and renewing' and 'turning outwards' in the ever-imperfect search for 'relevance' and the 'Goldilocks zone'. Thus, the following moves toward addressing my overall research question in responding to my first and second sub-questions:

– Where do tensions emerge in sustaining and expanding worker cooperatives?
– How do members make sense of and attempt to address these tensions?

Of foremost importance to cultural 'relevance' is the appreciation of WCs as purposive organizations created and sustained by the needs and aspirations of participants and their context; including time, place, ideology, and psychology. This purpose is conceived as the nucleus of the 'metaphorical cell' (Morgan, 2006, p. 40) that is the shared worldview. It is shaped by the values held by members and in turn plays a key role in shaping cooperative practice in the organization. Whilst underscoring the boundedness of WCs, it is not fixed to an initial position or set of participants. In order to remain 'relevant', the worldview, and thus purpose, of the WC requires ongoing negotiation and renegotiation; i.e., 'keeping it together'. In the words of Follett:

> We want to arouse not the attitudes of obedience, but the attitudes of co-operation, and we cannot do that effectively unless we are working for a common purpose understood and defined as such. (2003d, p. 262)

The evolving visions and aspirations of members "keep the tension in the contradictions alive and propel the organization further, through swings from one pole to the other" (Varman & Chakrabarti, 2004, p. 203) However, this is not to say, 'out with the old and in with the new'. The maintenance of collective 'relevance' is concerned with continuously 'integrating' in order to remain close to the 'Goldilocks zone' between the contradictions interwoven between structurelessness and structuredness. The 'art' of integration, and therefore prefigurative cooperation, is thus found in neither holding on to visionary boundary objects too tightly, nor letting go of them too freely (Stout & Love, 2015a, p. 276).

If a 'sense of purpose' forms the nucleus of a WCs' worldview, then a 'sense of uniqueness' might be considered its cell walls. I argue this perceived uniqueness is vital in sustaining early solidarity and cohesion but also continues to be an essential feature of a WC's worldview as the organization ages and grows for two reasons. Firstly, it serves as a point of competitive differentiation; it sits at the heart of how the cooperative communicates its value. Secondly, it functions as a continual source of solidarity; members are collectively working toward a prefigurative aspiration beyond normal economic or social engagement. This sense of mutual interdependence is necessary for sustaining sites of collective action (Luhman, 2007). Interestingly, however, the extent of actual difference is questionable.

My 'expert interviews' indicated that while organizational features may differ, the issues and tensions faced by established and scaled WCs are similar. Problems with this 'sense of uniqueness' emerge when it 'slips' into more of a 'sense of exceptionalism'. This is when members begin viewing themselves and the WC as excessively unconventional, apart, and/or more special than not only conventional organizations but also other cooperatives and prefigurative organizations. The emergence of a 'sense of exceptionalism' results in a detrimental sense of isolation and burden. Exceptionalism can also manifest internally with members holding certain practices and/or visionary and instrumental boundary objects as 'ontological truths' or 'sacred cows' that are untouchable or unchangeable. While this kind of 'small-c conservatism' can serve to protect WCs from being too reactive or not thinking decisions through sufficiently, it becomes highly problematic when it prevents members from being able to render the organization meaningful and 'relevant'. This ultimately undermines the quality of cooperative practice and organizational democracy. As Gibson-Graham

(2006) articulated, prefigurative organizing "needs to be sustained by the continual work of making and remaking space for it to exist in the face of what threatens to undermine and destroy it." (p. xxvii)

Linking with the risks associated with exceptionalism are the challenges faced when dealing with cultural change. Three areas of vulnerability emerged from my analysis. Firstly, 'slipping' towards an increasingly 'economic orientation' (Cornforth et al., 1988; Varman & Chakrabarti, 2004), which calls for integrating members' "legitimate perspectives" (WCM39 - WC4W) without foregoing the quality of cooperative practice. Secondly, the changing internal landscape creates dissonance with the 'sense of relevance' experienced by both more established members (e.g. "when we were smaller, we were all friends") and newer members (e.g. "I don't understand why this is still that way"). Thirdly, 'slipping' towards a position where members become divided along particular 'lines'. This may be between established and newer members or between groups of departments (Rothschild-Whitt, 1979), but either way, it calls for ongoing reflection on the similarities and solidaristic factors uniting members.

Two practices emerged as important to WCs being successful at 'keeping it together'. First, is the internal practice of 'reviewing and renewing'. This entails intentionally engaging in 'productive conversations' (see Section 8.3, further discussed in 9.2.6 below) that work through conflict and engage members in (re)imagining the possibilities of cooperation in order to achieve 'individual-collective alignment' and sustain both an individual and shared 'sense of relevance'. Through these processes individual experiences and values are given new and coherent meaning as they are understood in the context of, and oriented towards, collective ways of being and knowing (Beeman et al., 2009; Langmead, 2018). Second, is the practice of 'turning outwards'. Echoing Paton (1989) and Kleinman (1996) regarding the role of external resources in mitigating counter-democratic forces, this calls for active engagement with the wider cooperative movement in order to check and/or improve quality of practice and reduce sense of isolation and/or exceptionalism.

The key lesson from exploring the purposive nature of WCs, their 'sense of uniqueness', and how they struggle with cultural change was the importance of appreciating the absence of a single true ideal of cooperation (Kioupkiolis, 2010). All WCs are bounded by a particular set of needs and aspirations belonging to a particular group of people in a particular place and time. Time and growth lead to an inevitable loss of 'relevance'

as these factors 'creak' and change (Cornforth et al., 1988; Rothschild & Whitt, 1986). This underscores a need for the creation and protection of internal and external spaces in which members can reflect on and reshape the WC and cooperation more broadly in order to render the organization and its practice 'relevant'. This is necessarily an ongoing process that requires attention over time through consistent investment in both individuals and the collective (see also Ng & Ng, 2009; Stout & Love, 2015a, p. 276).

9.2.5 Consenting to authority

My analysis revealed three areas of 'creaking' and 'slipping' at the structural level: autonomy and authority, individuals and authority, and groups, rules, and authority. My contributions in this area of analysis are threefold: first, the practice of 'consenting to authority' is integral to maintaining the integrity of scaled WCs; second, the practising of 'conscious inequality' by all members is a means of reducing ossification, increasing accountability, and empowering functional brokers to effectively apply their authority; third, the need for iterative tightening and loosening of structures in order to stay close to the 'Goldilocks zone', embracing the need to 'nail things down' whilst also collectively engaging in the ongoing process of rendering organizing 'relevant' (i.e. processes of individual-collective alignment). Thus, the following moves toward addressing my overall research question in responding to my first and second sub-questions:

- Where do tensions emerge in sustaining and expanding worker cooperatives?
- How do members make sense of and attempt to address these tensions?

One of the foremost points of structural 'creaking' and 'slipping' is the extent to which members are aware of their tacit and/or explicit consent regarding how individual autonomy and agency are balanced with the authority conferred to brokering positions, groups, or policies and procedures in the LoP. This awareness is prerequisite to command and control being the situationally-responsive manifestations of authority and responsibility that facilitate sustained non-hierarchical organizing (Stout & Love, 2015a, p. 236). Thus, 'consenting to authority' calls for members to actively empower and support authority. The cooperative is a manifestation of members' ongoing consent. However, maintaining its legitimacy requires regular attendance to its terms and the boundaries of authority; following the 'law of the situation' (Stout & Love, 2015a, p. 232). The passage of time and growth in membership change the extent of individual

autonomy conferred to members and the extent of authority placed in brokers and boundary objects (Cornforth et al., 1988; Kubiak, Cameron, et al., 2015; Kubiak, Fenton-O'Creevy, et al., 2015). No matter how tacitly synergistic a WC may be, time and scale necessitate reflection on and renegotiation of structuration. Members are therefore encouraged to proactively engage in the collective practice of 'finding authority'. This authority must necessarily be limited, its complications made aware of, its burden acknowledged, and those assuming roles both sufficiently empowered and held to account (Diefenbach, 2019; Leach, 2005).

The tension between democracy and leadership necessitates narrowing the gaps between members (Ng & Ng, 2009). "Conscious inequality" (CMA1) speaks to how members, and particularly brokers, can be proactively aware of power dynamics and the associated risks of mission drift and remit expansion. This involves pointing to instances of 'creaking' and/or 'slipping' and acting to regain the collective consent to authority and therefore legitimacy. Bernstein (1976, p. 505) articulated a similar notion as 'democratic consciousness', which he used to underscore the additional demands on the practices and behaviours of members due to the non-democratic context. 'Conscious inequality' also interplays with Harnecker's (2009) call for members to practice "awareness of the interests and problems of […] co-workers; a willingness to contribute resources towards their solution; and the materialization of this disposition into statements and/or actions" (p. 107-108) .

Cooperation asks of the individual an open-mindedness and willingness toward engaging in and relating within organizing (Follett, 2003d). In turn, it asks of the organization an openness and explicitness in exposing itself internally. While participatory coordination can be facilitated, it cannot be orchestrated in a top-down manner (Follett, 2003i). My findings support the need for members to reflect on the notions of power as 'power-with' and mutual answerability as 'responsibility with' (Stout & Love, 2015a, p. 165). Follett (2003d) emphasises that "we should think not only of what the leader does to the group, but also of what the group does to the leader" (p. 238). Indeed, the problem of functional leadership being undermined by the behaviours and practices of functional brokers was emphasised. While this is in part the manifestation of ongoing tensions between structurelessness and structuredness, this informal practice of "leadership trashing" (Sirianni, 1994, p. 561) is ultimately detrimental to ongoing integration. We see a similar issue playing out in how scale

increases the potential for departmental friction, particularly where specialisation prevails as the risk of 'siloing' is higher, but primarily due to the increased 'distance' between members and functions. The inherency of such intra-group misalignments and conflicts renders the balancing act more challenging (Ng & Ng, 2009; Rothschild-Whitt, 1979; Varman & Chakrabarti, 2004). This risk must necessarily be tackled head on through integrative activities such as interventions (WC4R), training (WC2), multi-skilling, job rotation, or perhaps restructuring to facilitate decentralisation and the increased 'relevance' of decision-making.

Evidence of a core group of committed members shouldering more of the burden of authority and essentially leading a WC is not inherently 'bad' (see Cornforth et al., 1988, p. 101; Langmead, 2018, p. 217; Parker et al., 2014). What determines the quality of the arrangement are the processes and participation that support it. Arrangements could pragmatically allow for more flexibility in combining coordination and representative functions yet remain grounded in the input of collective mobilisation. However, such arrangements do not eliminate the threat of oligarchy. Thus, an attitude of critical responsiveness must be maintained. Embracing the relational movement between structurelessness and structuredness fully affirms the primacy of praxis over democratic theory (Kioupkiolis, 2010; Langmead, 2016; Varman & Chakrabarti, 2004).

Freeman (1970) argued that structurelessness precipitated informal rules being known by and thus empowering a small group of members, suggesting that 'rules' must be formalised in order to prevent the 'tyranny of structurelessness'. Based on her analysis of small UK WCs, Langmead (2018, p. 201) challenged this assertion, arguing that rules support democratic praxis not through their formalisation but by being intersubjectively negotiated through processes of individual-collective alignment. For example, Langmead (2016, 2018) uses the phrase 'loose frameworks for action' to describe governing documents and job descriptions. My findings indicate the expectation that such frameworks, for example sickness policies or probationary mentoring, can remain as flexible as they were when the organization was smaller is unreasonable and potentially detrimental to the quality of practice. Members may enjoy the idea of having 'no strings', but scale necessitates an increasing extent of 'nailing down' collectively agreed policies, procedures, and administrative processes. These instrumental boundary objects provide structure and form to the organization, presenting both a point of problematic tension but also of opportunity and possibility.

In dealing with these boundary objects, Langmead (2018, p. 272) acknowledges the potential of such 'soft infrastructures' to reflect and facilitate shared ways of thinking and being. Kokkinidis (2015) also acknowledges the need for collectives to develop repertoires of organizational innovations (see also Chatterton & Pickerill, 2010).

The need for tightening these frameworks does not preclude relational processes of individual-collective alignment and the maintenance of 'relevance'. My findings strongly indicate these can be beneficial to autonomy, authority, and the quality of democracy. Staying close to the 'Goldilocks zone' requires finding a cautious balance between throwing everything open to questioning all at once and all the time (structurelessness) and having everything nailed down, tidied away, and beyond reproach (structuredness). What we loosen and tighten at any given time is a matter of situationally determined prioritisation, and thus of 'relevance'. While all aspects of organizing should be open to the ongoing relational process of integrating, for members to progressively deal with the increasing complexity and scale or organizing an extent of certainty, and thus structure, needs to be present elsewhere in the LoP. This brings us back to the implications of integrative process for organizing, this time with respect to the ongoing engagement of members in participatory planning and decision-making, which I explore further in the following section (Follett, 2013a).

9.2.6 Cutting the knot

My analysis of 'creaking' and 'slipping' at the level of decision-making developed along three lines: what decisions are made where and by what means, the flow and processing of information, and the behavioural knots emergent in member experiences of decision-making. My contributions in this area of analysis are threefold: first, the importance of nuance in processes of communicating and decision-making; second, the need to keep processes feeling 'relevant' to members and members 'relevant' in processes; third, the need to develop and sustain members' openness to and ability to engage in integrative, 'constructive conflict'. Thus, the following moves toward addressing my overall research question in responding to my first and second sub-questions:

- Where do tensions emerge in sustaining and expanding worker cooperatives?
- How do members make sense of and attempt to address these tensions?

Cornforth et al. (1988) highlighted two 'costs' associated with collectivist-democratic organizing: the inability to decide and act in a timely manner (that is coherent with collective participation), and the transaction, or frictional, costs associated with effective information dispersal. Speaking to the first of these costs, a key point of 'creaking' and potential 'slipping' of 'relevance' in established and scaled WCs was with respect to where certain decisions are supposed to be made. Participants shared frustrating instances of coordination-level groups investing in discussions about seemingly minor issues, whilst others highlighted the inability of members to make seemingly straightforward decisions in their day-to-day work, underscoring the contradiction of control versus empowering member initiative (Varman & Chakrabarti, 2004, p. 201).

The approaches WCs adopt for 'cutting the knot' illuminate the challenges of sustaining 'relevance' and finding the 'Goldilocks zone' of structuration. While consensus-driven approaches appear to have served WCs reasonably well at smaller scales, they become either convoluted or disengaging as the number of intended participants increases. 'Harder' approaches to decision-making are also problematic in that they fail to address root-level conflicts, remove nuance from the equation, and do not facilitate the exploration of pathways forward. Furthermore, the apparent popularity of abstention votes as a form a 'soft no' can prevent decisions being made either way. Three of the four WCs studied were exploring the potential of consent-driven decision-making. Popularised by Sociocracy, consent-driven processes err more closely to Follett's (2003b) 'constructive conflict', Maeckelbergh's (2009, p. 100) 'conflictive spaces', and Mouffe's (1999) 'agonistic pluralism' in that they give primacy to integration. Furthermore, in consent-driven approaches members see opportunity for pragmatic structuration that in theory would enable greater member participation across the collective, group, and individual levels of organizing. Indeed, Sociocracy not only promotes a shift toward solution-driven consent but also promotes the redistribution of decision-making to increase the autonomy of groups and teams as well as the legitimacy of authority by addressing the proximity, and thus the 'relevance', of decision-making to where decisions matter most.

Interest in decentralising decision-making is not the preserve of Sociocracy. Scale appears to demand such restructuring if 'relevance' is to be maintained in the connection between members and their immediate work and/or issues. However, it

carries with it a profound risk to members' holistic awareness of the 'whole-a-making' and, by extension, the 'sense of relevance' experienced across the cooperative. These ongoing issues underscore the broader challenge facing established and scaled WCs of keeping processes 'feeling cooperative' while being both effective and legitimate at scale (Diefenbach, 2019; Stout & Love, 2015a, p. 171). We live in an age where the quantity of information available to us as individual citizens far exceeds our processing capabilities. Identifying and engaging with only the most 'relevant' information is therefore of utmost importance to our ability to function. This seemingly obvious point is vital to understanding how the quality of cooperation can be undermined or sustained.

My case WCs all experienced issues with sustaining the effectiveness of communication between coordination groups and the wider membership. Moreover, for all of them it was of vital importance to attend to the informal spaces and channels of communication emergent in WCs. This affirms understanding of the organizational fabric of WCs being interwoven with deep friendships. In my analysis of 'keeping it together', a common feeling among established members was a sense of proximity, community, and friendship being lost in lieu of scale. Rothschild-Whitt (1979) noted how these connections produced intense emotions, arguing that interpersonal tension is endemic in collectivist-democratic organizing. This makes conflict difficult to absorb, and pressure towards consensus can make it awkward, even threatening, to disagree; particularly where intimacy leads to personalisation of issues and ideas. Where conflict poses real or imagined risks to important relationships, carrying both personal and operational costs, integration will inevitably suffer (Ng & Ng, 2009). Furthermore, disagreements and informal hierarchies are left to fester (Chatterton & Pickerill, 2010, p. 481; Langmead, 2018, p. 184). The case of WC3 underscores why deferring problems is so problematic; when challenging times come, these 'creaks' and 'slips' suddenly resurface and can potentially further undermine integrating and collective action.

The individual power of members to affect or, worse, prevent decision-making in WCs necessitates attending to the 'creaking' and 'slipping' of disengagement or senses of disempowerment. Reflecting on the 'creaking' of 'headspace' in terms of the extent to which members engage with available information and decision-making processes, constraints may be 'perceived', driven by a reduced sense of empowerment or increased uncertainty, or 'real', driven by a genuinely heavier workload, yet the detrimental

impact on individual and organizational 'relevance' was the same. Likewise, member engagement may be influenced by the perceived immediacy and concreteness, versus distance and abstractness, of issues. Disengagement may also arise from the poor quality of proposals and/or reinventing the proverbial wheel, both of which notably affect the relations between more established and newer members. The question of what makes a 'good' member (worker-owner) raises the need to understand the dynamics of member behaviour in terms of unhealthy attachments formed with specific boundary objects, resistance to change, and conflict avoidance. Members' aversion to both collective and individual planning and risk-taking is an ongoing problematic for WCs. However, it can also be understood to provide a necessary condition for maintaining spaces of possibility (Cameron, 2009; Kioupkiolis, 2010; Langmead, 2016). While some opportunities are inevitably missed, one of the reasons my case cooperatives have survived is the very small-c conservatism that is the source of such momentary frustration. Democracy takes time.

Along with individual and collective insecurities and the increased risk of tribalism due to scale, these issues underscore the importance of members sustaining some sense of holistic 'relevance' that connects and holds them to the 'whole-a-making'. However, they also highlight a need for the collective to pay attention to the communicative and operational capacities of individuals; in particular, members' ability to engage with contentious issues in a productive fashion. Productive conversations that tackle issues head-on and integrate as opposed to avoid or suppress conflict are essential to sustaining cooperation. The ability to engage, align, and imagine through conflict is part of the integrative skills members learn and develop through practicing individual and collective 'unlearning and learning'. These findings integrate with the extant literature that holds organizing as an 'ongoing conversation', one that is central to sustaining democratic praxis (Cannell, 2015; Chatterton, 2010; Mouffe, 1999; Springer, 2011). I build upon this in emphasising the importance of nuance, the need to keep members feeling 'relevant' to processes of decision-making and vice versa, and the need to (learn how to) engage in integrative, 'constructive conflict'. Through integrative process, emotions and conflicts can be effectively integrated and a 'Goldilocks zone' found between the contentions and contradictions of both the membership and of democratic organizing itself. In terms of identification, we can view talking and listening as a process of individual-collective alignment that progressively develops the 'relevance'

of individuals, structures, and activities (Humphreys & Brown, 2002; Langmead, 2018). Kioupkiolis (2010, p. 142) articulates this process as members and the collective engaging in a push and pull that brings together the singular and the common. Such experience, however imperfect, reinforces the superiority of this model in a worker's mind over the 'conventional model' (Pateman, 1970; Varman & Chakrabarti, 2004).

9.2.7 Summary

In this section I have engaged in discussion of my conceptual framework introduced in Chapter 4 and empirical analysis presented across Chapters 4 to 8, integrating these with the extant literature detailed in Chapter 2. Through this discussion I have presented my responses to my first and second sub-questions and in doing so have substantiated my response to my overarching research question.

With regards to my first sub-question:

– Where do tensions emerge in sustaining and expanding worker cooperatives?

I found that tensions emerge:

– In the 'interpersonal space' that connects members to each other and to 'the organization', which I conceive as an ever-evolving process of 'organizing'

– In the 'headspace' of members in terms of the behaviours, practices, knowledge, and connections they are asked to hold in their mind

– In the 'physical space' occupied by the members

– In the 'cooperative journeys' of members through the communities and landscapes of cooperative practice

– In the 'keeping together' of the shared purpose, values, and identity of the members as a collective

– In the practice of 'consenting to authority' through which members negotiate the balancing of autonomy and manifestations of collective authority

– In the practice of 'cutting the knot' through which members navigate the mechanisms, processes, and requirements of collectivist-democratic decision-making.

With regards to my second sub-question:

– How do members make sense of and attempt to address these tensions?

I found that members' experiences of the tensions found in prefigurative collectivist-democratic organizing can be explored and understood as the 'creaking' and 'slipping' of practice between points of variable quality in collectivist-democratic cooperative prefiguration.

At the individual level of analysis, I found that members' experiences and responses focused on:

– The contradictions between organizational need and individual autonomy associated with the push and pull of specialisation
– The value of practising full or partial multi-skilling
– The centrality of ongoing, preferably collective, 'unlearning and learning' to sustaining healthy cooperation.

At the cultural level of analysis, I found that members' experiences and responses focused on:

– The art of cooperation entailing 'keeping it together' while 'letting go' of the shared worldview
– Enabling the practising of ongoing 'reviewing and renewing'
– Allowing new ideas to be integrated through the practice of 'turning outwards'.

At the structural level I found that members' experiences and responses focused on:

– The ongoing and active practice of 'consenting to authority'
– The practising of 'conscious inequality'
– The iterative 'tightening and loosening' of structures.

At the decision-making level of analysis, I found that members' experiences and responses focused on:

– Sustaining 'nuance' in communicating and decision-making
– The need for processes to feel and to be 'relevant'
– The need to address attachments, maintain openness, and continuously develop the skills and mentalities of members with respect to engaging in 'productive conversations' (constructive conflict).

In response to my overarching research question:

- How do members of worker cooperatives that have aged, scaled, and are still growing experience the tensions involved with sustaining organizational democracy?

I argue that, consciously or unconsciously, members of established and scaled WCs are searching for and striving towards a 'Goldilocks zone'. That is to say, cooperation is not something that is ever absolutely achieved and can only be qualitatively moved towards. It is an ever-moving target that evolves from the individuals and the context in which cooperation is taking place. This ongoing search is a contradictory and paradoxical process that inherently involves balancing elements of organizing that may be more-or-less cooperative and more-or-less structured or structureless. While the 'Goldilocks zone' may represent unattainable perfection, I argue that the construct of 'relevance' captures what is being sought and that this emergent property can be attended by members to improve the quality of cooperation. 'Relevance' pertains to the meaningful connectedness of members to the organization and all its constituent parts; what Follett describes as the 'whole-a-making'. My findings call for members to explore how organizing can be rendered more 'relevant' to the individual, how the individual can be rendered more 'relevant' to organizing, and how members can be rendered more 'relevant' to each other.

In the following section I focus on the contributions I have made throughout my thesis, reiterating key points from throughout the preceding discussion and beginning the shift toward looking forward from this investigation. My response to my third sub-question regarding the implications of my research for democratic organizing is detailed in Section 9.4.

9.3 Contributions

In this section I highlight where this research has made contributions to the extant body of knowledge; methodologically, empirically, conceptually, and practically. Further practical contributions are identified in the following section about the implications and recommendations I make in responding to my third sub-research question regarding the implications of this research for democratic organizing.

Methodologically, this thesis contributes through my deployment of a CGT approach adapted to the access conditions and focused on attaining a deep understanding of participant insights. This approach fits with the prevalence of qualitative, interpretivist

research into prefigurative democratic organizing (Griffin et al., 2020; Langmead, 2016; Ng & Ng, 2009). Its strength lies in having engaged in intensive constant-comparative analysis of the data in place of being able to 'return to the field'. My analysis involved batch-coding interviews and then writing an extended memo around a theme or idea that was showing promise. Subsequently, as opposed to asking new questions of participants, I asked new questions of the next set of interview transcripts. In part, this was possible because I had been aware of the access limitations from early on and thus opted to actively seek to keep my interviews 'broad' in terms of the themes and topics I encouraged members to speak about. Through gradually coding and producing in-depth analytic memos, I was able to immerse myself in the large quantity of qualitative data while maintaining a sense of direction and progress. Allowing the data to guide me, ahead of preconceptions or a priori knowledge, meant that the analysis as well as subsequent findings, conclusions, and contributions were fully 'grounded'. The high degree of credibility this process gives to the product of my social constructivist qualitative research supports this approach as a methodological contribution.

The outcome of this methodological approach was a huge body of data conceptualised in an integrative manner through analysis and discussion that covers three spaces (headspace, interpersonal space, physical space) and four dimensions of organizing (individual, cultural, structural, and decision-making). Thus, it has enabled my research to make a major empirical contribution by generating extensive data captured across four of the UKs largest and long-standing 'collectivist-democratic' WCs. Through the experiences of members, as well as those working to develop UK cooperatives, these data illuminate the tensions between more-or-less cooperative structuredness and structurelessness in established and scaled 'collectivist-democratic' UK WCs that have received limited attention in the contemporary academic literature.

Conceptually, my research contributes to the increasingly prominent processual understandings of worker cooperation and direct democracy (Kokkinidis, 2015; Langmead, 2016; Varman & Chakrabarti, 2004). It has confirmed that this perspective resonates beyond smaller and/or less formal instances of direct democratic organizing, adding additional nuance to our understandings of prefigurative practice over time and scale. Furthermore, by integrating RPO, integrative process, and LoPs, my research has offered a robust conceptual framework that embraces and refines our extant theoretical

understanding of democratic organizing. This framework is distinct in that these conceptual approaches have not been connected previously in organization studies literature in a way that offers a philosophically grounded framework for exploring organizational practice. In addition, in Chapter 2, I presented an original model that combines processual and contradictory (paradoxical) conceptualisations of sustaining organizational democracy (see Figure 9.1). This model is useful for synthesizing and visualizing the body of related work and has the potential to be developed further in order to capture more of the contradictions of democratic organizing.

As discussed in the previous sections, my research introduces and establishes a set of four grounded theory constructs for understanding and addressing the tensions involved with democratic organizing and their interconnectedness, all of which originally emerged in vivo: the Goldilocks zone, slipping, creaking and relevance. 'Creaking' offered a means of capturing members' experiences of the ever-evolving nature of democratic organizing. 'Slipping' emerged as a way of actively describing the manifestations of degeneration. 'Relevance' (sometimes 'sense of relevance') was conceptualised as an active property that can be enhanced or detracted from. It is not a process but rather the product of processes. 'Relevance' evokes a combination of senses of 'integratedness', 'oneness', 'value', 'importance', and 'relatedness'. It embraces identification through processes of engaging, aligning, and imaging (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). It also embraces the processes of relating and becoming (Stout & Love, 2015a). More importantly, in terms of its conceptual contribution, it integrates with the relational processes of 'individual-collective alignment' identified and explored by Langmead (2016, 2018), which I position as resulting in the emergent property of 'relevance'. While Langmead's work shares many similarities with this thesis, they are differentiated by my focus on larger WCs and the integrated, empirically grounded conceptual framework I developed.

I conceived of the 'Goldilocks zone' as a means of illustrating members' experiences of trying to sustain and maintain 'relevance'. It has significant potential for capturing the essence of prefiguration as an aspirational activity that drives present-time collective practice in the direction of an intersubjectively desirable future (Kokkinidis, 2012; Maeckelbergh, 2009; Reedy et al., 2016). Furthermore, in conveying a sense of impossible, unattainable perfection between extremes (contradictions) the 'Goldilocks zone' also speaks to Kioupkiolis's (2010) notion of 'antiperfectionism'; embracing the

ever-imperfect possibilities of democratic organizing. The 'Goldilocks zone' contributes an accessible heuristic for engaging with and reflecting on this struggle, its outputs, and its outcomes.

From the 'individual level' of analysis, my findings contribute conceptual support to the work of Kokkinidis (2015, p. 848) regarding 'autonomy' in self-managing organizations being concerned with a prefigurative ideal of 'rule-creating' rather than 'rule-following' subjectivities. I extend this understanding through integration with Follett's concepts of the 'whole-a-making' and 'responsibility-with' (Stout & Love, 2015a). My analysis also lends support to understandings of a need to lean closer to 'multi-skilling' and its associated practices as a means of demystifying organizing and overcoming diversity (Langmead, 2016; Ng & Ng, 2009; Rothschild & Whitt, 1986). That said, my research underscores the disconnect between conceptual ideals and the realities of organizing. For example, WC3 and WC4W both practise specialisation and have sustained relatively collectivist modes of cooperation while scaling over forty and thirty years respectively. However, this evidence must be taken in hand with the 'creaks' and 'slips' identifiable in these organizations and the argument that these may be preventable 'if' additional steps were taken toward some form of multi-skilling or pan-organizational demystification.

My research also contributes to our understanding of how members 'evolve' their roles (Cornforth et al., 1988), highlighting a need for members to practice 'letting go' as much as they practice 'taking on' responsibilities in order to mitigate wider disengagement (Diefenbach, 2019; Nilsson, 2001). My analysis of 'unlearning and learning' supports extant understandings of the centrality of education and training to cooperative practice (Ng & Ng, 2009). On the one hand, my findings highlight the dearth of such practice in established and scaled WCs and the reasons for this (Cornforth et al., 1988; Ng & Ng, 2009; Rothschild & Whitt, 1986). On the other hand, my analysis also evidences the benefits that can be reaped through focusing on the 'reproduction of membership' (Stryjan, 1994), experience of collective participation (Pateman, 1970), and the development of integrative skills (Stout & Love, 2015a). With regards to the creation and use of instrumental boundary objects my analysis contributes to Langmead's (2016) argument that these serve as "loose frameworks for action" (p. 94), highlighting how in established and scaled WCs there is a need for tightening these

frameworks to enable collective action across a greater number of people whilst also maintaining the ability to 'loosen' these structures in order to render them 'relevant'.

From the 'cultural level' of analysis my research contributes to the need for members to be conscious of the evolving nature of cooperation and the changing visions and aspirations of members, harnessing emergent contradictions as opposed to suppressing them (Varman & Chakrabarti, 2004, p. 203). I extend this understanding in arguing that the 'art' of integration, and therefore prefigurative cooperation, is thus found in neither holding on to vision boundary objects too tightly, nor letting go of them too freely (Stout & Love, 2015a, p. 276). With respect to 'what' members are 'keeping together', I contribute the notion that WCs should sustain a healthy 'sense of uniqueness' over time and scale, enabling the internal and external communication of differentiated 'value' and acting as the keystone of a sense of mutual interdependence (Luhman, 2007). However, I also contribute the notion that WCs can 'slip' into an unhealthy 'sense of exceptionalism' that goes beyond the potential benefits of 'small-c conservatism', serving to create a sense of isolation, burden, and limiting the ability of members to engage in the necessary 'reviewing and renewing' that keeps organizing 'relevant' (Gibson-Graham, 2006).

Along with supporting the need to engage in ongoing reimagining (Beeman et al., 2009; Langmead, 2018), my research contributes to understandings of the role of external resources in sustaining cooperation (Kleinman, 1996; Paton, 1989) in calling for active engagement with the wider cooperative movement in order to mitigate senses of isolation and exceptionalism as well as to support the constant development of cooperative practice within and beyond of the WC. Furthermore, my research supports and emphasises the need for WCs to create and protect spaces in which members, preferably collectively, can engage with, align to, and imagine the possibilities of cooperation (Cornwell, 2012; Kioupkiolis, 2010; Kokkinidis, 2015).

At the structural level of analysis, my contributions focus on the extent to which members are 'aware' of their tacit and/or explicit consent regarding the integration of autonomy and authority. The practice of 'consenting to authority' calls for members to actively empower and support situationally-responsive functional authority (Stout & Love, 2015a, p. 236). This practice requires ongoing attendance to the terms and the boundaries of authority, following the 'law of the situation' (Stout & Love, 2015a, p. 232). I also contribute to conceptual understanding of the necessity of narrowing the

gaps between members (Ng & Ng, 2009). The practising of 'conscious inequality' builds on extant understandings of the need for 'democratic consciousness'(Bernstein, 1976) and the need for collective 'awareness' (Harnecker, 2009) in calling for members to be proactively aware of the dynamics and problematics of authority. I mean this in terms of the risks of mission drift and remit expansion on the part of brokers but also of the tendency to undermine the legitimacy of authority, ignoring it being a manifestation of collective will and consent. 'Conscious inequality' is an amalgam of 'power-with' and 'responsibility-with '(Follett, 2003d; Stout & Love, 2015a).

I also contribute to understandings of inter-group friction (Ng & Ng, 2009; Rothschild-Whitt, 1979; Varman & Chakrabarti, 2004). Specifically, my findings illuminate the 'siloing' effect that emerges from specialisation but also from greater physical distance between members and departments. A further point of contribution to structural analysis of WCs is with respect to the apparent tendency for a core group of members to essentially be 'leading' the WCs (Cornforth et al., 1988; Langmead, 2018; Parker et al., 2014). My findings offer support to assuming a balanced perspective that acknowledges the stability and direction provided by structuredness whilst also remaining suspicious of rhizomatic tendencies (Kioupkiolis, 2010). Indeed, my final area of contribution to this area of analysis concerns the long-standing debate between the qualities and possibilities of structurelessness and structuredness of democracy (Freeman, 1970).

It is by now well established that democratic prefiguration and thus collectivist-democratic WCs exist in a state of paradoxical contradiction between these poles (Beeman et al., 2009; Cornforth, 1995; Varman & Chakrabarti, 2004). Langmead (2018) argues that instead of formalisation of structures, smaller contemporary WCs are able to create flexible frameworks that facilitate individual-collective alignment without necessarily precipitating what I would describe as 'slipping' in the quality of democratic praxis. For older and larger WCs, I argue the need for the iterative tightening and loosening of structures in order to stay close to the 'Goldilocks zone', embracing the need to 'nail things down' whilst also collectively engaging in the ongoing process of rendering organizing 'relevant'. Once again, however, I acknowledge that calling for organizations of more than fifty members to collectively engage in this as a highly intentional process might make sound conceptual sense but runs counter to the evidence from organizational reality. To this end, the key lesson was

that established and scaled WCs should not shy away from creating more structuration based on it being inherently 'bad' or 'uncooperative'. Instead, increasing structuration should be evaluated based on its potential to increase the overall quality of cooperative practice and the wellbeing of members; foregrounding the primacy of collectivist-democratic praxis (Kioupkiolis, 2010; Langmead, 2016; Varman & Chakrabarti, 2004).

At the decision-making level of analysis, my research contributes to our understanding of the challenge of determining the appropriate point of 'relevance' for a given decision to be made (Cornforth et al., 1988). This pertains to the ability of coordination groups to 'filter' the topics they spend valuable time negotiating and the extent to which members feel able to use their initiative. My research also contributed practical insight into the mechanisms and processes of decision-making, highlighting interest in the potential for consent-driven decision-making, as found in Sociocracy. I argue that this interest is motivated both by the integrative character of consent-driven decision-making and its potential to be combined with decentralisation. Some iteration of this approach may hold the key to sustaining collectivist-democratic organizing at scale (this fits with assertions from Follett, 2003b; Maeckelbergh, 2009; Mouffe, 1999).

My research also contributes conceptual support and offers practical insight into our understandings of the emergence of interpersonal and interdepartmental conflicts in collectivist-democratic organizing (Ng & Ng, 2009; Rothschild & Whitt, 1986). In particular, my work highlights the importance of dealing with conflict head-on; despite a tendency to let problems 'fester' (Chatterton & Pickerill, 2010, p. 481; Langmead, 2018, p. 184). In response to this, my research contributes to arguments for 'productive conversation', drawing on Follett's (2003b) practice of 'constructive conflict' which in itself underpins contemporary discourse (Cannell, 2015; Chatterton, 2010; Mouffe, 1999; Springer, 2011). Indeed, my work evidences a need for the collective to pay attention to the communicative and operational capacities of individuals, integrating with the notion of the organization as an ongoing process that is central to sustaining democratic praxis (Cannell, 2015; Chatterton, 2010; Mouffe, 1999; Springer, 2011). I argue that only through such integrative practice can values, emotions, and tensions be synthesised and a 'sense of mutual relevance' sustained.

To conclude, my thesis offers a unique contribution in developing and adopting a comprehensive and integrative framework that combines practice theory, RPO, and integrative process and brings their synthesis to bear on an extensive body of qualitative

data from established and scaled WCs. The value of this conceptual frame is that it emphasises the importance of striving for integrative unity. Addressing, for example, the learning processes of new members, the behaviour of functional brokers, or the loci of decision-making in isolation will not necessarily ameliorate the quality of democratic practice. Practices and structures must necessarily be considered in terms of their integrative 'relevance' to one another, to the members immediately affected, and to the collective as the 'whole-a-making'. The drive to sustain democracy must first and foremost come from the membership as a 'whole'; this is captured succinctly in Follett's (1998) notion of "the will to will the common will" (p. 49).

The following section develops from the contributions discussed above and continues the process of shifting our focus forwards, to the future and the possibilities this research creates for democratic organizing, organizing, and further research.

9.4 Implications and recommendations

In this section I respond to my third sub-question:

- What are the implications of this research for growing and sustaining organizational democracy?

In doing this, I also consider the potential wider implications of my research. In the sub-section, 'Re-engaging with practice', I explain how I intend to render my research meaningful to practitioners and impactful on practice.

The central implication of my research for democratic organizing is the appreciation of nuance and imperfection in exploring, understanding, and practising democratic organizing over time and scale. It is not binary, it is not simply saying structure is bad, structurelessness is good, or vice versa. Organizations cannot remain close to the 'Goldilocks zone' without moving between and through more-or-less 'cooperative' practice. Democratic organizing inevitably involves making mistakes. Sustaining cooperation, or democracy more generally, therefore entails having the personal and collective strength to be aware of the ongoing 'creaking' and attentive to 'slipping'. Cultivating 'relevance' is a never-ending dance of engaging, aligning, and (re)imagining in the pursuit of an ever-evolving goal.

My thesis calls for those facilitating and participating in democratic organizing to reflect on why and how 'parts' are relevant to the 'whole-a-making', and to find ways

to render these 'relevant' both to the individual and the organization. It finds that structuredness or structurelessness are more-or-less 'democratic' or 'undemocratic', as opposed to one or the other. The quality of democracy is determined by the balancing of these through focusing on a prefigurative point of integration conceptualised as the 'Goldilocks zone'. I argue that democratic organizations and organizing are perpetually 'creaking', for better or worse. Attuning to the sounds of 'creaking' enables responsiveness and reduces the potential for 'slipping', as 'slipping' is inherently detrimental to the quality of democratic organizing. However, it is not always immediately clear how practices and structures that are 'slipping' from the landscape are detrimental. While the deteriorating practices of brokers as facilitators of two-way communication offers a clear and identifiable point of 'slipping', the quiet decline of appraisal systems provides a less obvious example. Indeed, the consequences of not attending to 'slipping' may only manifest further down the line when, in a time a crisis, members begin to feel neglected and 'irrelevant'.

Losing focus on the individual is an error that can have serious consequences. Individuals are the building blocks of democracy and their sense of bi/multi-directional 'relevance' determines the quality of the overall system. Therefore, their journeys through the landscape and their available 'headspace' to engage with the 'whole-a-making' are critical factors in sustaining democratic organizing. Functional reorientation away from total collective decision-making toward decentralising decision-making into CoPs is seemingly an inevitability of growth. However, these communities must continue to primarily serve as vehicles for the integrative processes of 'individual-collective alignment' that sustain the bi/multi-directional 'relevance' of the individual to the 'whole a-making'.

Four key recommendations for democratic organizing stand out from the main findings across each of the levels of analysis. Democratic organizations should consider:

1. *Individual level:* Attend to the extent of integration present in the design of the individual experience of 'becoming a member', the proactive 'making of space' (both literally and psychosocially), the consistency of 'member identity' in working practices, the acceptance of ongoing 'unlearning and learning', and how this is combined with other means of sustaining 'relevance'.

2. *Cultural level:* Prioritise the creation and protection of 'space' for members to engage in, and align with, the organization as well as to imagine possibilities

beyond day-to-day operations. Despite the inevitable and increasing resource costs, this 'headspace' and the opportunities for identification it provides are viewed as an essential, as opposed to an additional, ingredient in sustaining democratic organizing. It is an investment in the future of democratic integrity.

3. *Structural level:* Strive to sustain the 'relevance' of brokering roles, be this through obligatory direct engagement or other means of integration, while remaining conscious of the need to maintain a balance between necessary stability and degenerative ossification as well as the autonomy of members and the needs of the collective.

4. *Decision-making level:* Proactively engage in 'constructive conflict' whilst acknowledging the need to integrate the legitimate perspectives emergent in increasingly diverse organizing.

The concept of 'relevance' is particularly potent in WCs because of the primacy of the individual in formal collectivist-democratic organizing. By 'formal' I mean that, unlike in looser collectivist structures or social movements, through contractual employment and shared financial risk members and the WC are bound together; regardless of the extent of interest, understanding, or engagement. Other forms of cooperative may be bound by the cooperative values and principles (ICA, 2019), yet collectivist-democratic WCs are virtually alone amongst other formalised organizational structures in their commitment and exposure to the power of individual autonomy. While it is in these organizations that I believe 'relevance' is most demonstrably potent, my research has valuable implications for other democratic organizations.

I view this research as being of value to smaller instances of formal, aspirationally collectivist-democratic organizing wherein the membership is growing, organically or intentionally, and/or perhaps where, over time, the founder-members have moved on. The applicability of this research to scaling is clearer: it could provide a framework for organizational development that engenders a consistent relational approach before it is necessarily 'needed' in a remedial sense. However, my understanding of the influence of founder-members is more limited; and was not a feature of this research. My sense is that the metaphorical 'baton' of shared purpose and worldview can only be 'passed on' so many times without the need for members to intentionally start creating 'space' to (re)imagine their collective possibilities. These conditions are by no means prerequisites for taking the four heuristics and integrating them into organizational

practice. Smaller WCs may be more readily able to maintain their 'individual-collective alignment', but the contradictions and challenges of democratic organizing are ever-present (Kokkinidis, 2015; Langmead, 2016, 2018; Ng & Ng, 2009).

I also consider this research pertinent to more representative-bureaucratic democratic organizing (Rothschild-Whitt, 1979; Rothschild, 2016) with a view to resisting oligarchic ossification and nurturing identification through engagement, alignment, and imagination (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). Such organizations are still prefigurative when held up against more conventional forms. For these organizations I would encourage a pragmatic tempering of radical participatory expectations. There needs to be coherence between the extent of structuration and anticipated aspirational practice; the 'Goldilocks zone' is not and cannot be the same across different models of democratic organizing. To take a multi-stakeholder cooperative, or even a consumer cooperative, and hold it to the prefigurative standards of collectivist-democratic organizing is not only misguided, it is also a potential source of degenerative disintegration.

I believe this work also has value for wider organizing, beyond the realms of either full democratic control and/or collective ownership. I suggest that an interesting area of application is the interface between public organizations/initiatives and communities with respect to developing and maintaining aspirational, even prefigurative, shared visions and projects (for example Bartels, 2017). Ultimately, what my contributions lend themselves to is the maintenance of empowered relationships that seek to create a sense of ownership and control. Unfortunately, or fortunately, this will inevitably pose difficult questions for those holding the reins of power or occupying positions of authority. A further interesting application would be in institutions where major drivers or elements of core missions are pulling in contradictory directions. An example of this is universities, where it is increasingly evident that their 'relevance' as learning institutions is being challenged by the incoherent priorities of marketisation and managerial oligarchy (for example Levin & Greenwood, 2016). Again, while this process would raise difficult questions, the potential for an academic institution to rediscover its 'Goldilocks zone' and seek to differentiate itself through prefiguration, as opposed to over-extended capital expenditure and generic expansionist strategies, has the potential to create meaningfully beneficial outcomes for academics and learners alike.

9.4.1 Re-engaging with practice

In this sub-section I consider how to render my research 'relevant' to practitioners and practice, the need for which I reflected upon in Section 3.6.

One of the recurring themes of this thesis has been the heuristics it offers for organizations and members. Consolidating and setting these heuristics out in Table 9.1 is my first step towards taking them forward into practice and possible future research. The first set of questions are derived from the work of Follett, the second set are drawn from the literature around LoPs, the third set are taken from my CMA interviews, while the final set are developed from my own findings.

Table 9.1 Heuristics for practice

QUESTION	FOCUS	AREA(S)	ORIGIN
What is the situation?	Situation	Consenting to authority, Cutting the knot	Follett
What are the laws of this situation?	Situation	Consenting to authority, Cutting the knot	Follett
Where is there diversity or division?	Diversity	Cutting the knot, Keeping it together	Follett
Am I / are we engaging in constructive conflict?	Diversity	Cutting the knot, Keeping it together	Follett
Am I / are they / are we engaging with it?	Engagement	Keeping it together, The cooperative journey	LoPs
Am I / are they aligning with it?	Alignment	Keeping it together, The cooperative journey	LoPs
Am I / are they (re)imagining it?	Imagination	Keeping it together, The cooperative journey	LoPs
Who are we?	Identity	Keeping it together	CMAs
Why are we here?	Purpose	Keeping it together	CMAs

QUESTION	FOCUS	AREA(S)	ORIGIN
How do we want to interact with each other?	Interaction	Keeping it together, Cutting the knot, The cooperative journey	CMAs
Where can I / we hear / see / feel creaking?	Creaking	The cooperative journey, Keeping it together, Consenting to authority, Cutting the knot,	Findings
Why is this 'part' creaking?	Creaking	The cooperative journey, Keeping it together, Consenting to authority, Cutting the knot,	Findings
What is the relevance of this creaking?	Creaking	The cooperative journey, Keeping it together, Consenting to authority, Cutting the knot,	Findings
Where can I / we identify slipping?	Slipping	The cooperative journey, Keeping it together, Consenting to authority, Cutting the knot,	Findings
Why is this 'part' slipping?	Slipping	The cooperative journey, Keeping it together, Consenting to authority, Cutting the knot,	Findings
What is the relevance of this slipping?	Slipping	The cooperative journey, Keeping it together, Consenting to authority, Cutting the knot,	Findings

QUESTION	FOCUS	AREA(S)	ORIGIN
Do I / we feel relevant to the whole?	Relevance	The cooperative journey, Keeping it together, Consenting to authority, Cutting the knot,	Findings
How is the whole relevant to me / us?	Relevance	Keeping it together, Consenting to authority, Cutting the knot,	Findings
How are we relevant to each other?	Relevance	Keeping it together	Findings
How do I make myself more relevant to the whole?	Relevance	The cooperative journey	Findings
How do I / we make this more relevant to others?	Relevance	Keeping it together, Consenting to authority, Cutting the knot	Findings

Reflecting on the debate surrounding critical performativity, explored in Section 3.6, these heuristics are one example of how I can move toward making my research 'relevant' and impactful. I also intend to create a practice-oriented, less academic, synthesis of my findings, concepts, and conclusions for dissemination. This will take the form of a small pamphlet I will develop in collaboration with a print and design cooperative. However, I feel it is important to acknowledge that both these activities could be construed as imposing what I think or believe is needed and necessary on practitioners for whom cooperation is a lived experience. As such, my intention is to return to my case WCs, provide an overview of what I found, and ask them to tell me how I can make it most meaningful and beneficial to them; be this through workshops, videos, or perhaps even re-engaging with them in a more performative and active capacity based on the knowledge and understanding I have gained from their collective participation.

9.5 Limitations and research recommendations

In this section I reflect on the limitations of this research project and possibilities for future research.

Although I wholeheartedly believe in the strength, credibility, and value of this research, I acknowledge that despite my approach to data collection and analysis; this falls somewhat short of true grounded theory. Grounded theory ideally involves an iterative process of data collection and analysis, wherein the researcher returns to the field over multiple instances. Access issues meant that I collected the bulk of the data in single visits and with limited time in between cases. This was true of both Phase 1 and of Phase 2. These limitations meant I had to undertake all the analysis after collection was complete and work through a mountain of data. My response to this challenge was to use memo-writing as a means of breaking-up long periods of coding. Ultimately, I feel this approach enabled me to engage in an iterative process of coding and writing that gradually built towards concepts and theory. Nevertheless, it would have been preferable to return to the field and ask emergent questions of participants as well as iteratively interrogating data.

Limited by access and with opportunity for only single interviews, I decided to keep my interviews as open as possible. General interview guides meant that while I maintained an openness to insights, I was unable to 'drill down' on issues over time. Although I was still able to ask multiple members of most WCs about issues that emerged, the lack of analysis and reflection between interviews meant that I was unable to 'catch everything'. The benefits of this approach were only realised when I found I could keep tapping into this very broad interview data to ask questions that were emerging from my creation of analytic memos. Had I narrowed the focus of my interviews, I doubt it would have been possible to develop the iterative pattern that ultimately facilitated the findings and conclusions of this project.

Reflecting on the work of Langmead (2018), I would have liked to conduct a more comprehensive ethnographic study. I believe such a study would be valuable and would generate further insights. However, due to access limitations this was not possible. I also question whether in the time available such in-depth ethnographic research across three or four larger WCs would actually have enabled the depth of integration and insight desirable when committing to a more ethnographic, participatory approach. This

feeds into my reflections on my role as researcher and my engagement with these organizations. My approach lent itself to maintaining a degree of distance from the participants and communities I was studying. However, in the brief time I was in situ at WC3 and, to a lesser extent, WC2, I felt myself developing a greater sense of 'relevance' as I engaged informally with members and observed them communicate and work together.

In parallel with these considerations, it is worthwhile reflecting on my positionality as a researcher in terms of the time I had already spent around the cooperative movement, and specifically UK WCs, through Co-operatives UK's 'Worker Co-op Weekend'. Despite having not met most of my participants, I was received as something of an 'ally'. In very few of the interviews did I feel there was any question as to my implicit support for worker cooperation and sharing of many similar values. After all, I had the 'recommendation' of the organizational gatekeepers and when I explained I had spoken with certain CMAs, this added further credibility to my position. However, I do not feel my role or personal ideology negatively affected my research quality. Indeed, I admit that somewhere in the midst of my analysis I doubted the sustainability of worker cooperation and of democracy itself. Perhaps this project was part deep-dive into some of my more radical and unexplored assumptions about the world but coming out the other side I find myself still 'radical' but more tempered and level-headed with regards to how organizing can move closer to the prefigurative 'Goldilocks zone'.

With respect to future research, I would argue that my findings call for further exploration in two directions. Firstly, future research could 'zoom in' further on the realities of established and scaled collectivist organizing by taking the concepts from this research and engaging with one or two cases over a longer period of fieldwork. This could be more ethnographic and participatory in the sense that researchers could embed themselves as a 'member'. Alternatively, it could be closer to action research in that researchers could regularly work with a cooperative over a period of months or years to integrate the findings into practice and explore their adoption/impact. Secondly, future research could zoom out from the messy realities of specific cooperatives and try to develop a more positivist quantitative approach that enables analysis of relevance, creaking, slipping, and the Goldilocks zone across a larger sample. This latter option would likely have to relax the selection criteria or expand the study beyond the UK in order to be feasible. As mentioned in the previous section, a third appealing avenue of

exploration using the findings of this research would be to investigate how my heuristic constructs might support the scaling of a currently small collectivist-democratic democratic organization over a much longer timeframe (20+ years). The difficulty with this would be finding a WC that has the pre-determined ambition to force itself into permanence and scale.

9.6 Final remarks

The future for research into worker cooperation and democratic organizing lies in advancing the processual and relational understandings I have developed upon. Finding ways of bringing this into practice without unnecessarily burdening members is critical to sustaining worker cooperation over time and scale. The work of Follett still has much to offer in terms of creating more integrative unity in the literature and in practice. Somewhere between paradox and process there lies a 'Goldilocks zone' of unity and of hope.

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Appendices

Appendix 3.1: Interview guide (CMA)

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW GUIDE
COOPERATIVE MOVEMENT ACTORS (CMA)

INTRODUCTION		
CODE	PART	ITEMS
INT.01	Explain...	– **Interview purpose and process** – **Reason for recording and how recording will be used** – **Anonymity etc.**
INT.02	Check...	– **Has the participant read and understood the participant information sheet (have copy present)?** – **Has the participant read and signed the consent to interview and record form?** – **Does the participant have any questions before we begin the interview?**

CORE INTERVIEW			
CODE	PART	MAIN QUESTIONS	PROBES
CMA.01	'Locating involvement'	– **How did you become involved with the cooperative movement?** – **How are you currently engaged with the cooperative movement?** – **How and in what capacities have you worked with WCs?**	– Member of cooperative(s) or worker cooperative? – Duration of engagement? – Formal administrative role? – Informal roles? – Inspirational? – Practical support? – Length of tenure? – Formal or informal capacity? – Previous membership? – Supportive capacity? – Nature of the WCs?
CMA.02	WC insights?	– **How have WCs developed over time?** – **Could you offer me a couple of examples of successful WCs?** – **Could you describe the means and/or processes by which they have developed and sustained?**	– Structures? – Sectors? – Membership? – Why do you consider them successful? – Resources (temporal, financial, human)? – Opportunities? – Support?
CMA.03	WC challenges	– **In your experiences, what kind of obstacles have you heard of them encountering?**	– Personal or second-hand? – Early years? – Beyond 5-years? – Character/nature? – Impact?

		– **How did the(se) WCs overcome such obstacles?**	– Resources (temporal, financial, human)? – Strategies? – Narratives?
		– **In your opinion, what are the obstacles currently facing WCs?**	– Nature of these challenges? – Perceived ability to overcome these challenges? – Relation to past challenges?
		– **And what about the future, do you foresee any new/different obstacles for WCs?**	– Nature of the challenges? – Perceived ability to overcome these challenges? – Relation to past challenges?
CMA.05	Additional commentary	– **In light of the questions I have asked, do you have any further comments or insights to share?**	– Ask about specific comments that were not expanded upon previously?

Appendix 3.2: Initial Project Brief

SENSEMAKING IN WORKER CO-OPERATIVES – PROJECT BRIEF

TIMESCALE

December 2017 to January 2019

BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION...

1. The findings of the study will offer important insights into the role sensemaking plays in enabling worker co-operatives to survive; **strengthening the co-operative movement both in the immediacy and in the future**
2. The study will **yield findings specific to each participating co-operative**; these will **highlight important aspects of the processes enabling your worker co-operative to survive**, insights that will hopefully be of benefit to your continued survival and success (outputs negotiable)

PARTICIPATION INVOLVES...

Individual interviews – One-to-one interviews lasting between 45 and 60 minutes

Observation – Day-to-day business activities and/or meetings (various levels)

THE ASK...

Bread and butter – Interviews with several members and observation of day-to-day activities

Cream – Interviews with several older/newer members, observation of day-to-day activities, and observation of team/circle level meetings

Dream – Interviews with several older/newer members, observation of day-to-day activities, observation of team/circle level meetings, and observation of a general meeting (any notes reviewable)

THE CRUX...

The more extensive the participation/access within each worker co-operative, the more comprehensive the findings and the better the quality of the research output.

Appendix 3.3: Letter to members

Re: Sensemaking in worker cooperatives

Dear member(s) of [INSERT WORKER COOPERATIVE NAME],

I write to invite you to take part in a project exploring the process of challenge-driven sensemaking in worker cooperatives. I am a PhD student at Bangor Business School and have been researching cooperatives for the past three years. The study forms the basis of my PhD thesis, the fieldwork component of which runs from December 2017 to January 2019.

I am interested in worker cooperatives because I believe the model holds great potential for the development of a sustainable future wherein democracy is the cornerstone of both society and the economy. Based on the understanding that complex internal and external challenges are associated with sustaining worker cooperatives, my PhD project has two objectives. Firstly, to improve the ability of worker cooperatives to sustain and survive – through investigating the role of sensemaking in the survival and success of existing worker cooperatives. Secondly, to contribute to the theoretical literature on sensemaking by exploring how it manifests in democratic organizations – laying the foundations for further exploration.

I have selected you and your worker cooperative on the basis of your survival and success as a worker cooperative. Participation in this study may be on an individual basis, in one-to-one interviews, or as an organisation, using interviews as well as participant observation and other methods. Interviews normally last between 60-90 minutes, while the duration of site visits and observation depends on parameters set by you and your fellow members.

The benefits of participation in this research are twofold. Firstly, it is hoped the findings of the study will offer important insights into the role sensemaking plays in enabling worker cooperatives to survive; benefitting the cooperative movement both

in the immediacy and in the future. Secondly, the study will yield findings specific to each participating cooperative; these will highlight important aspects of the sensemaking processes which have enabled the worker cooperative to survive, insights that will hopefully be of benefit to continued survival and success.

Importantly, all data and information relating to this project will be treated as strictly confidential, both individual participants and organizations will be anonymised in the findings of this study.

If you are interested in participating in this study, have any questions, or would like to know more about this work, please contact me by telephone on REDACTED or email (REDACTED).

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter/email, I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours faithfully,

Owen Powell

Doctoral Researcher
Bangor University
e: REDACTED
m: REDACTED

Appendix 3.4: Interview guide (WCM)

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW GUIDE
WORKER COOPERATIVE MEMBERS (WCM)

INTRODUCTION		
CODE	PART	ITEMS
INT.01	Explain...	– **Interview purpose and process**
		– **Reason for recording and how recording will be used**
		– **Anonymity etc.**
INT.02	Check...	– **Has the participant read and understood the participant information sheet (have copy present)?**
		– **Has the participant read and signed the consent to interview and record form?**
		– **Does the participant have any questions before we begin the interview?**

CORE INTERVIEW			
CODE	PART	MAIN QUESTIONS	PROBES
WCM.01	'Personal cooperative journey'	– **How did you come to be a member of this WC?**	– Process of joining?
			– Length of tenure?
			– **Is this the first cooperative you have been a member of?**
			– Possible prior membership of non-WC cooperative?
			– Membership of other WCs?
			– Experiences of cooperatives prior to joining?
		– **How has your role in the WC evolved, developed, or changed over time?**	– Formal/informal roles?
			– Responsibilities involved?
			– Length of time spent in these various roles?
WCM.02	WC story	– **How has the WC developed over time?**	– Before your time?
			– Since you joined?
			– How do you perceive the purpose of the WC?
			– Initial purpose?
			– Development or changes in purpose?
		– **In your experience, what have been the key successes of the WC?**	– Purpose(s)?
			– Impact?
			– Function(s)?
			– Membership?
			– Financial?
WCM.03	WC challenges	– **In your experience obstacles has the WC had to overcome in its journey thus far?**	– Early years?
			– Beyond 5-years?
			– Character/nature?
			– Impact?
		– **How did the WC overcome these obstacles?**	– Resources (temporal, financial, human)?
			– Strategies?
			– Narratives?

WORKER COOPERATIVE MEMBERS (WCM)

		– **Are you aware of obstacles the WC overcame before you joined?**	– What were they? – How did you hear of them? – How were they handled? – Are they still talked of?
		– **What are the obstacles currently facing the WC?**	– Nature of the challenges? – Perceived ability to overcome these challenges? – Relation to past challenges?
		– **Can you think of any future challenges that might face the WC?**	– Nature of the challenges? – Perceived ability to overcome these challenges? – Relation to past challenges?
WCM.04	Development	– **Are there plans for future development of the WC?**	– Expansion? – Division? – Reasoning?
WCM.06	Additional commentary	– **In light of the questions I have asked, do you have any further comments or insights to share?**	– Ask about specific comments that were not expanded upon previously?

Appendix 3.5: Codebook

CODE	DESCRIPTION	PARTS.	REFS.
Misc.	Top-level grouping for miscellaneous but potentially interesting insights?	0	0
Co-op development activities	The role and activities of Co-op Development Agents	5	28
Exemplary WCs	WCs noted by participants as doing X, Y, Z particularly well	2	8
Fitting (the glove)	Matching / Suitability / Alignment of some types of sectors / businesses / professions / individuals and the worker cooperative model.	4	9
Multiple involvements	The involvement/engagement of participants in multiple levels/roles of the cooperative movement. Will this extend to engagement at/in multiple levels/roles within specific cooperatives?	4	10
The co-op(erator) 'default'	How the perceptions and expectations of cooperation were / are and have changed / are changing	4	20
Nurturing	Top-level grouping for individual-level codes broadly re. development of members.	0	0
Making space, moving on	The relationship between more established members and newer members, spec. the need to find ways of creating space for newer members to engage with the organization	30	65
Pathways	Sub-grouping for codes re. the progression of members through WCs	0	0
Multi-skilling (v. Specialisation)	Extant/emergent tension between multi-skilling and specialisation (moved from Workers incorporated)	35	108
Evolving	The development of individual roles and responsibilities over time	30	65
Recruiting	Approaches to identifying and on-boarding new members	38	107
Becoming (a cooperator)	The stories of how participants became worker cooperators and their early experiences etc.	45	69
Unlearning and learning	Initially a code, developed into sub-grouping re. the development of members as cooperators (and the challenges associated with this	4	16
Appraising (keeping check)	Individual appraisals, some team-level evaluation, also something about celebrating the achievements of the WC (evaluating, recognizing success, in the absence of performance management this is difficult…)	30	67

Guiding	How members (new members in particular) are led by others through their cooperative journey re. practices and behaviours of the coop and cooperation	36	99
Sharing (the load)	Re. the mutual responsibility and solidarity of cooperation, particularly the tensions emergent around the	37	102
Wellbeing (Protecting)	Individuals taking care of themselves and the WC taking care of individuals. (i.e. headspace, stress, work-life balance)	18	41
Reconciling power	Top-level grouping for codes around tensions, strains, and solutions regarding power (dynamics)	0	0
Avoiding	Re. the apparent avoidance of direct conflict, tendency toward passive-aggression, and the tensions/issues this produces	19	50
Consenting (to authority)	The process or result of WCs consenting to an individual or group being given some amount of functional authority in order to respond to an ongoing functional requirement or resolve a particular issue (developed into sub-grouping)	5	34
Group authority	Re. tensions and strains associated with group authority and power dynamics	36	116
Individual authority	Re. tensions and strains associated with individual authority and power dynamics	0	0
Autonomy (individual)	Individual autonomy and self-management, the extent to which this is/is not infringed upon or limited, and the reasons why is may or may not be limited	35	112
Entrusting keepers (Functional authority)	Linking with 'Individual authority' but more focused on issues around the empowerment of those in positions of (functional) authority	36	118
Disciplining	Emergence of authority in the keeping of order and discipline in WCs	12	27
Structuredness	Issues associated with the frameworks and structures of authority, including formal and informal roles as well as policies and procedures	39	188
Cutting (the knot)	Top-level grouping emerged around issues associated with decision-making (captured in notion of 'cutting' the proverbial 'knot')	4	14
Flow (information)	Re. availability and movement of information and communication in WCs	27	66
How (mechanism, process)	Mechanisms and processes of decision-making in WCs, along with potential alternative approaches	29	76

Knots (difficulties, problems)	Problematic and/or complex decisions in WCs (past, present, future?)	31	104
Quality (pace, meaning)	Insights re. the 'quality' of decision-making and communication	26	79
Responsibility (inc. engagement)	Re. engagement and participation of members in decision-making and associated systems/processes	29	63
What (content)	Descriptive insights re. kinds of decisions made (or not made) in WCs	23	44
Where (locus, structure)	Re. the positions and levels at which decisions are made or supposed to be made (along with reflections on this issue)	33	88
Scaffolding	Top-level grouping emergent from Phase 1 of project (CMAs) re. the role of the external environment in promoting and supporting the development of WCs AND precipitating the decline of cooperatives in the UK	4	26
Following the dog	Debate around whether structural cooperative development in the 1970s preceded or was preceded by emergent interest and engagement with cooperation (and worker cooperation more specifically)	3	5
1970s (Scaffolding)	Narratives re. rise of scaffolding for cooperation in 1970s and its decline in the 1990s following shift of attention toward 'social enterprise' models	1	1
Dismantled (Scaffolding)	Focusing on the dismantling of scaffolding, namely demise of cooperative development agencies	1	3
Financing	Re. extent of availability of external finance for cooperative projects and how this finance was structured	5	17
Future (Scaffolding the)	Lessons to be learned for future scaffolding. Focus on need to ensure sustainability and resilience of orgs created (assume scaffolding will disappear again and possibility of 'hostile environment')	3	5
Quietly co-operative	Emergent thread re. practice of WCs either reducing or not advertising their cooperative structure/identity due to external perceptions, trends, etc.	1	2
Shifting priorities	Narrower focus on the changing policies of UK government etc. away from cooperative model and its associated values	2	6
The bigger picture	Connecting worker cooperation to wider issues re. class, nationality, globalisation, etc.	4	6

Workers incorporated	Top-level grouping re. the duality of worker cooperation; how this tension/paradox manifest in the operational and strategic functionality of organizing	0	0
Adapting	Emergent sub-grouping re. how WCs change and modify themselves over time	5	26
Application	Tertiary (sub-sub) grouping separating Adaptations, Experimenting, and Sociocracy from Carrying (forward)	0	0
Adaptations	Changes and modifications to structures, processes, practices etc. suggested, identified, proposed, planned in case WCs or elsewhere	25	57
Experimenting	Re. engagement in more-or-less systematic testing of possible adjustments or changes in WCs	9	24
Sociocracy	Focused thread re. emergent popularity of Sociocratic model in WCs and democratic organizing more generally	12	54
Carrying (forward)	Re. issues and challenges in directing, implementing, coordinating, developing on changes and modifications; name came from notion that certain members have to 'carry' change forward creating potentially problematic issues re. democratic agency, power, etc.	33	125
Competing	Insight re. competitive practices of WCs and tensions around notion of being a 'competitive business' and a value-led collectivist organization (sub-grouped above Planning + Strategy)	39	150
Planning + Strategy	Insights re. engagement of some/all members in strategic thinking and forward planning for organization (sub-grouped under Competing), or lack thereof…	28	97
Creaking	Sub-grouping emergent from tensions and strains across levels of organization, developed further into project as a means of collating relevant material, thus overlap with several other codes	0	0
Acknowledging	Re. in/ability of members to identify and determine the need to address 'creaks' in individuals, groups, and organization (sometimes 'Identifying' in earlier analysis)	21	39

Connectedness	Tertiary (sub-sub) grouping of Creaking re. the connections and interconnections between groups, individuals, and systems; somewhat problematic due to emergent understanding re. 'relevance' but nevertheless useful for breaking-down large body of coded references and enabling focused analysis	0	0
Groups (Connected.)	Re. Creaking Connectedness within and between Groups (e.g. teams, departments, coordinators, divisions) in WCs	19	33
Individuals (Connected.)	Re. Creaking Connectedness of and between Individuals in WCs	27	59
Systems (Connected.)	Re. Creaking Connectedness of systems across org.	37	112
Headspace	Tensions and strains on the psychosocial capacity and capabilities of individual members	25	55
Physical space	Tensions and strains caused by limited or excessive proximity/distance (sometimes 'Space' in earlier analysis)	20	33
Functioning	Insights re. tensions around the functioning of WCs as businesses	39	167
Professionalising	Tensions associated with the emergence of semi or wholly professionalised roles in WCs (sub-grouped under Functioning)	16	57
Worldview	Top-level grouping re. the shared vision, principles, values, strategy, etc of WCs and in cooperation	0	0
Coming (together)	Re. why/how/where WCs are established (Phase 1 only)	3	6
Keeping (it together)	Tensions and strains associated with sustaining / holding on to a coherent worldview (became a sub-grouping in order to break-down large knot of codes, divided into set of codes around 'Binding' and set of codes around 'Straining')	43	255
Binding	Sub-grouping under Keeping, re. search of ways to sustain the connection or glue holding members together 'culturally'	37	160
Baking-in Holding on	Re. notion of building cooperation into the legal and policy 'fabric' or 'structure' of the WC (Binding)	8	13
Guardians and stewards	Re. role of established/existing members in facilitating the shared worldview and passing it on to newer/future members (Binding)	13	16

Relationships (Building and trusting)	Importance of investing time/energy in relationships between members (Binding)	10	16
Reviewing (Renewing)	Re. processes and practices of engaging members in reflecting/thinking about the WC and its worldview, exploring possibilities and planning ways forward (Binding)	28	68
Turning (outwards)	Looking externally, both to the movement and the market, also strategic concerns w/ link to internal development implications of external engagement (Binding)	17	47
Straining	Sub-grouping under Keeping, re. strains on Worldview	31	85
External assumptions	Re. new members (in particular) bringing ideas, concepts, understanding, worldviews from the outside into the WC, and how these are incoherent with and/or problematic for the worldview etc. of cooperation (Straining)	6	10
Growing apart	Created late, started to grow but was not sufficiently unique so as to warrant additional development or re-analysis of extant codes. Intended to focus on how members worldviews can diverge over time (Straining)	10	13
Lack of understanding	Re. failures in competencies or capabilities undermining the sense of shared worldview between individuals and teams/departments (Straining)	19	30
Values Ethics Opinions Attitudes	How the strength of values, ethics, opinions, and attitudes in WCs creates problems in terms of coherence and ongoing development, e.g. vegetarianism, veganism, environmental sustainability, etc. (Straining)	21	32
Dilution of rationale	Re. decline of agreement on the 'reason for being a worker cooperative', linked to individual and shared understandings of purpose, values, and how these connect to operational and strategic considerations (Straining)	8	10
Uniqueness (sense of)	Re. tension between sense of being something special and valuable OR being something exceptional and thus above or beyond or outside the normal rules or ways of functioning and behaving	24	56

Appendix 3.6: Memo Template

Memo X –

Modifications:

Concept(s):

Codes:

Introduction

Analysis

Thread X

Summary

Thread Y

Summary

Thread Z

Summary

Overall summary

Points of interest

Appendix 3.7: Participant information sheet

Sensemaking in worker cooperatives

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Introduction

You are invited to take part in a project exploring sensemaking in worker cooperatives. Before you decide whether or not to participate, it is important for you to understand why the project is being undertaken and what it will involve for you. Please take the time to read the following information, if you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact me (o.powell@bangor.ac.uk).

What is the purpose of the study?

This study seeks to:

Improve the ability of worker cooperatives to sustain and survive, both economically and in terms of the quality of organizational democracy

Contribute to the field of sensemaking by exploring how it manifests in democratic organizations

Why have I been selected?

The researcher, Owen Powell, has identified you as a potential source of valuable insights into the process of sensemaking in worker cooperatives because of your direct involvement in a worker cooperative and/or involvement in/with the cooperative movement.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part.

What will happen if I decide to take part?

You are invited to participate in a one-to-one interview to talk about your experiences of the challenges faced by your worker cooperative (or worker cooperatives in general) and explore how these challenges have been overcome. The length of the interview varies but normally lasts between 15-60 minutes. A further interview can be scheduled if necessary. Please remember, in such interviews there are no right or wrong answers.

Where invited/agreed, the research may involve participant observation – instances where the researcher may, for example, visit the worker cooperative, observe day-to-day operations, attend meetings, and/or be present for group discussions. These instances will only take place with the explicit agreement of all participants and specifics regarding note taking, audio recordings, or transcript-review may be negotiated on an instance-by-instance basis.

Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?

Yes. Your contact details and the recorded interview will be stored on a confidential database. The information you share will be treated in confidence. You will not be identified by your name or job title in any reports or publications.

What will happen if I don't want to carry on with the study?

You are free to withdraw from the study at any time without giving a reason.

What will happen to the results of the study?

The findings of this study will form part of the researcher's PhD thesis, may also be used in academic publications, and potentially form the basis for reports, workshops, and other methods for informing stakeholders about challenges and sensemaking in worker cooperatives.

Who is organizing and funding the research?

The project is organized by the researcher, Owen Powell, a PhD student at Bangor University. The project is not funded by any external organization.

Contact for further information:

If you would like more information, please contact Owen Powell by email (o.powell@bangor.ac.uk).

What happens if I have any concerns about this project?

If you are concerned about any aspect of this project and would like to speak to someone other than the researcher please contact the research supervisor, Dr Koen Bartels, by email (k.bartels@bangor.ac.uk).

Next steps:

If you decide that you would like to take part, please complete and return the attached consent form to Owen Powell, either by email (o.powell@bangor.ac.uk) or in person.

Thank you for kindly taking the time to read this information, please retain a copy for future reference.

Appendix 3.8: Consent to interview and record

Coleg Busnes, y Gyfraith, Addysg a Gwyddorau Cymdeithas, Prifysgol Bangor
College of Business, Law, Education and Social Sciences, Bangor University

Gwynedd LL57 2DG
Ffon/Tel: (01248) 388 220
Elusen Gofrestrig Rhif/Registered charity 1141565

Sensemaking in worker cooperatives

CONSENT TO INTERVIEW & RECORDING

Please tick the boxes that apply to you.

I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet provided ☐

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason ☐

I agree for this research interview to be recorded and for the recording to be used for the purposes that have been explained to me ☐

I understand that my details and any associated recording(s) will be stored on a confidential database in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998 ☐

Name: _____

Organisation: _____

E-mail: _____

Signature: _____

(Electronic signatures accepted)

Date: _____

Please return this form via the e-mail address provided (o.powell@bangor.ac.uk).