



Hastings, A. and Gannon, M. (2022) Absorbing the shock of austerity: the experience of local government workers at the front line. *Local Government Studies*, (doi: [10.1080/03003930.2021.1889516](https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2021.1889516)).

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Deposited on: 05 March 2021

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Absorbing the shock of austerity: the experience of local government workers at the front line

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Abstract

Whilst post-GFC austerity state retrenchment is widely studied, there is little research which focuses on the experiences of those who work at the front-line of austere public services. Drawing on qualitative evidence with front-line workers in four UK local authorities significantly impacted by austerity, this paper explores ‘coping mechanisms’ developed by workers to manage resource restriction. It argues that existing conceptualisations of coping mechanisms as either resistance or adaption are insufficient to understand how workers manage contemporary austerity. The paper proposes an additional mechanism – absorption – and explores analytically how workers cope with austerity in terms of resistance, adaption and

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absorption. The paper concludes that front-line local government workers are coping with austerity cuts, in large part, by acting as ‘shock absorbers’ of state retrenchment.

1. Introduction

The 2008 Global Financial Crisis (GFC) provided a rationale for a period of significant fiscal constraint in the Global North (Clarke and Newman, 2012; Newman, 2014) resulting in reductions in resources for public sector bodies and in cuts in staffing and in front-line services. (Hastings *et al*, 2015a, 2015b; Kim and Warner, 2016). The alignment between post-GFC austerity and broader, neo-liberal agendas focused on the transformation of state agencies is commonly noted (Clarke and Newman, 2012, Ward *et al*, 2015) particularly between those agendas that argue for the cost-effectiveness of a leaner state (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992). Since the late 1970s in Anglophone nations especially, public sector managerial ‘reforms’ – broadly captured by the term ‘New Public Management’ (NPM) – have been key to how transformation has been pursued (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2017).

NPM initially focused on inflecting public sector institutions with values and management techniques associated with the private sector: emphasising efficiency, competition, down-sizing institutions and the disciplining of performance targets (Greenwood *et al*, 2002). However, by the late 1990s - in developments variously termed ‘post-NPM’ or ‘New Public Governance’ - additional “layers” of transformation such as ‘inter-agency partnership’ and ‘joined-up government’ were considered necessary to extract synergies and develop services which met needs holistically (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2017:7-8). In the UK, the reforms of the 1997-2010 New Labour Governments combined these and other performance management reforms with financial investment (Durose, 2011) but, since 2010, Conservative (led) Governments have sought public sector reform while pursuing significant resource restriction. Indeed writing in 2017, Pollitt and Bouckaert argue that “fiscal austerity

has become, de facto, a guiding principle for public management reform” (25). While the connection between austerity and managerialism is uneven (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2017; 23), post-2010 austerity has been implemented on the basis that the effectiveness of public services can be maintained, and even increased, via a parsimonious policy regime, neatly captured by the trope: “doing more with less” (Johnston Miller and McTavish, 2014: 122).

International academic research on post-GFC austerity has tended to focus on its uneven impacts - whether on inequalities at regional or urban levels (Donald *et al*, 2014; Peck, 2012; Davies and Blanco, 2017) or on the impacts on poorer groups (Beatty and Fothergill, 2014; Hastings *et al*, 2017). It has been argued, however, that academic understandings of the impacts of austerity are rather “removed from every day, personal and lived experiences” (Hall, 2019: 771), and that attention should be paid to how fiscal constraint has affected lived experience within households, welfare offices or third-sector organisations. While studies are emerging which document the impacts of austerity on individuals (Kennett *et al*, 2015; Hall, 2019) and on how service-users experience retrenched services (Patrick, 2014; Hastings *et al*, 2017), an aspect which remains relatively under-researched is the experience of front-line staff working in austere public agencies (Clayton *et al*, 2014; Kaufman, 2020) – in other words, of the experience of the people required to maintain services with reduced resources, that is, to “do more with less”.

Local government in the UK provides a key context for exploring how austerity is experienced by front-line workers. Especially in England, it has been subjected to some of the most severe and rapid fiscal constraint of any part of the UK state – in the five years of the Conservative-led Coalition Government (2010-2015), the Department of Local Government and Communities lost almost half its budget (Gray and Barford, 2018: 542). In the same period, staffing reductions led to half a million job losses (Unison, 2016). As a result, the council workers remaining in post have experienced the double stressor of an increase in workloads to

compensate for job losses and a decrease in job security– that is, the intensification and precarisation of local government work noted by Standing (2016) afflicting public bodies internationally. Moreover, UK local government is also a context in which contemporary austerity intersects with pre-existing layers of managerialism – whether it is those that view collaboration and partnership as the route to effectiveness or those that valorise forms of performance management (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2017).

The paper therefore explores how UK local government workers experienced resource restriction during the period of the 2010-2015 Coalition Government – a period characterised by sudden, significant change to the sector’s financial context (Lowndes and Gardner, 2016). Front-line workers are defined as those whose role is primarily focused outwards on service provision, rather than inwards on organisational management or strategy – so called “street-level bureaucrats” (Lipsky, 2010). The definition encompasses staff with professional status such as social workers and librarians, as well as those without - street sweepers or receptionists for example. This focus recognises that to understand fully the reach and significance of austerity, it is important to appreciate how it has inflected the everyday, workaday lives of those at the front-line.

The paper is structured as follows. First, a literature review considers what we know about how front-line workers have experienced both managerial reforms and post-GFC austerity. The review develops a framework for understanding practices characteristic of “coping mechanisms’ developed to manage challenging circumstances (Lipsky, 2010). It proposes that the mechanism of *absorption* is added to the mechanisms of *resistance* and *adaptation* currently emphasised in the literature. The second part of the paper details the methods used to collect the experiences of front-line staff in four UK case-study councils; the third uses the framework to analyse these experiences. The conclusion argues that the experience of front-line workers is essential to understand fully the import of austerity.

2. Coping with “doing more with less”: the view from the literature

The literature which explores how workers manage the challenges of front-line service delivery builds in large part on the foundational work of Lipsky (2010 [1980]). Lipsky argued that these workers should be conceived of as “street level bureaucrats” (SLBs) who have a degree of discretion over how they manage the characteristic dilemma of public sector bodies and inherent to the SLB role – namely the tension between levels of need and demand for services and the inadequacy of the resources available to meet these. He argued that SLBs developed behaviours and practices or “coping mechanisms” to manage this tension – in particular, rationing resources in accordance to perceived desert (Lipsky, 2010: 105-116). He also argued that while they were motivated to perform “good work”, their capacity to achieve this was always conditioned, and indeed routinely imperilled, by the underlying inadequacy of resources.

The publication of Lipsky’s text coincided with emergence of NPM in Anglophone nations– indeed Lipsky suggested that “valid performance measures” would enhance public services (2010:166). This chronology has led to a significant focus of the social science research on SLBs centring on the consequences of managerial reforms (e.g. McDonald and Marston, 2005; Brodtkin, 2011; Durose, 2011; McDonagh *et al*, 2012; Kaufman, 2020). Much of the research from beyond the UK, implicitly at least, rejects the idea that reforms which require ‘more from less’ improve services (e.g. Brodtkin, 2016:447; Zacka, 2017:123) although writing about the UK New Labour Government, Durose (2011: 980-981) highlights how financial *investment* allows SLBs to “reconcile” reforms such as partnership or community engagement with those focused on targets and indicators. Generally, scholars have tended to characterise coping mechanisms for managerial reforms in terms of a binary: there are those that valiantly *resist* and there are those that *adapt* in ways that support and even collude with their logics, resulting in deleterious outcomes for services and clients. In what follows, we

suggest that the evidence of the literature in fact provides for a more complex account of such coping mechanisms than is captured by the categories of resistance and adaptation.

Looking in turn at each mechanism, it is notable that evidence on resistance to NPM-inspired reforms is relatively slight. Defined as “modifications or alternatives to, or rejections of, the intended processes and outcomes of policy delivery” (Prior and Barnes, 2011: 269), examples include: Hughes’ (2009) study of UK youth offending teams who resisted the imposition of targets by forming alliances with other agencies and actors; the highlighting of occasional, small scale resistances to meeting targets by caseworkers in Australian employment services (McDonald and Marston, 2005); and an account of a dynamic of “subversive moments” in intensive family support projects (Par and Nixon, 2009:102). And, while the stories told to Maynard-Moody and Musheno (2003) by front-line workers in the US of rules bent and discretion used are well known, it is nonetheless clear that the weight of evidence suggests that acts of resistance are not widely reported. Indeed, as Brodtkin (2015) argues, while there may be examples of “heroic efforts ... to bend the rules” (33), such strategies are occasional, rather than routine.

By contrast, the dominant narrative characterising how SLBs respond to NPM highlights adaptive mechanisms – that is, calculative forms of adjustment, complicit in supporting cultures and modes of work which offload inferior services to clients (Brodtkin, 2011; Zacka, 2017; Kaufman, 2020). Thus, Brodtkin’s work on US welfare offices argues that adaptations designed to meet performance targets: “shortchange ... clients, limit responsiveness to need, and avoid the more difficult cases” (Brodtkin, 2016: 447. see also Brodtkin, 2011; 2015; McDonald and Marston, 2005; Kaufman, 2020). In a review of the field, Brodtkin (2015:32, 39) lists numerous studies to catalogue how adaptive practices which limit engagement with clients or devalue learning about their needs, are “virtually robbing services of their substantive value” (Brodtkin, 2015: 32).

However, potential harms to workers as well as clients can also be discerned within the adaption narrative (Brodkin, 2015; Zacka, 2017). McDonagh *et al*'s (2012) study of workers' responses to the down-sizing of municipal government in Toronto is particularly instructive. It shows that manual workers adapted to new team structures designed to manage staffing cuts by consciously reducing how hard they worked, but noted also their reports of damage to "pride" and "respect". By contrast, professional librarians and social workers reported compensating for workforce cuts by working harder, by "going the extra mile". However, they also reported "extreme levels of stress and frustration" as they tried to minimise impacts on vulnerable clients (McDonagh *et al*, 2012 366-371. (Brunetto *et al* (2015) note similar emotional harms resulting from adaptations to staffing cuts in Australian and US local government contexts.) The idea that adaptation to such changes is uncomfortable and causes emotional harm is supported by wider literature on the relationship between work and wellbeing: Warr (2007), for example, catalogues the damaging health impacts of excessive workloads, insecurity and oppressive management cultures. Arguably then, the binary of resistance or adaptation may not fully capture workers' ways of coping, especially when the emotional strain or "cognitive dissonance" (Brodkin, 2011:i270) experienced by some who find they cannot help as they might want to is foregrounded. Adaptive coping mechanisms that involve working less hard may overlap with resistance, while those that involve workers taking on the strain of extra work could, arguably, be considered as a form of *absorption*.

So, what does the more limited literature on how street-level workers experience the resource restriction of the post-GFC austerity period add to our understanding of coping strategies?. Frontline workers within Gardner's (2017) UK case study differed between those that sought to resist, even subvert, austerity logics and those that perceived adjustment as an opportunity to re-think services (161-2). Similarly, Pill and Guarneros-Meza (2018) exploring the agency of 'frontline hybrid officers' working for third-sector organisations delivering a

council programme (414), highlight tension between officers' values and identities and austerity logics, but also suggest that austerity motivated partnership working and created the potential for innovation (421).

Such studies are important reminders that adjustment to constraint can potentially enhance services, most obviously if it motivates increased collaboration. However, they can be counterpointed with studies that are less optimistic. Thus, while the "resourcefulness" and "creativity" of workers in Clayton *et al*'s (2014) study of UK public sector organisations are noted, this is geared to resisting or modify the imperatives of austerity: diverting funding, using volunteers and "stretching the limits of roles" (30). The emphasis is on the harms to workers, and on the experience of "succumbing" to "a new normal" by "working harder" (28-29). The emotional toll is at the centre of the case study: staff report being "stressed and depressed... stretched like elastic" (27). Interestingly, there is no discussion of resistance, or indeed other responses to, performance targets. Owens *et al* (2019) detail the reluctance of UK healthcare staff to adapt to resource restriction, particularly because in this case it impacts on the collaborative and holistic ways of working they value. They report adjustments to working practices that diminish cooperation and require isolated lone-working, amplifying "individualist, competitive, defensive and self-orientated attitudes" (8). Moreover, increased workloads changed services by "crowding out" the more personal, holistic aspects of care (7), draining workers' "physical and psychological resources". And both Owens *et al* (2019) and Colley (2012) highlight the dissonance or sense of alienation that can be created by adopting survivalist, self-interested adaptations which conflict with values and identities; adding to our understanding of the emotional toll that adaption can incur. Indeed, a range of surveys highlight workers' reports of excessive workloads and the stress that these cause (Straightforward, 2015; McHardy 2015; Unison 2016). Importantly, such evidence also highlights how stress is compounded by dealing with the more complex caseloads, increased levels of individual

vulnerability and more “emotional customers” resulting from wider austerity (Straightforward 2015:6).

Taken together, the literatures on managerialism and post-GFC austerity suggest that resistance and adaptation do not, therefore, fully capture the coping mechanisms developed by workers. While the possibility of innovation should be noted, resistance in particular does not capture the extra work which such practices can entail; and adaption arguably focuses on harms to services rather than on the possibility of improvement, while also underplaying harms to workers. The potential for a third mechanism to be discerned from the literature is also indicated, one in which SLBs work in ways that *absorb* the extra work and emotional harms of “doing more with less”. The remainder of the paper explores the everyday experience of austerity in front-line local government in the UK, using the framework of resistance, adaption and absorption. Inso doing, it develops and defines the concept of absorption and considers how it relates to resistance and adaption.

3. Research Approach and Methods

The paper draws on a mixed-methods study of the impacts of austerity on local government (See Hastings et al, 2015a for methodological detail.) It analyses qualitative research with front-line staff in four case study councils, conducted in 2014-2015. The case studies were selected to achieve some regional spread and, given the greater rate of cuts experienced by deprived authorities compared to more affluent ones (Hastings et al, 2015a), included three deprived and one more affluent authority.

Reflecting the greater severity of budget cuts in England than elsewhere in the UK, three case studies were English: Coventry City Council in the West Midlands region, a council in the most deprived quintile in England (IMD, 2010); Newcastle City Council in the North-East and also in the most deprived quintile; and Milton Keynes, a more affluent city in the

South-East in the second least deprived quintile. Affording a counterpoint, a Scottish case study, the relatively deprived (SIMD, 2013) Renfrewshire Council was also selected. That the scale of cuts to council budgets were less severe in Scotland between 2011- 2015 is indicated by the fact that, while Renfrewshire lost 7% of its funding in the period, Newcastle lost 22%, and Coventry and Milton Keynes 14% and 13%, respectively (Hastings et al, 2015a). At the time of the research, all four councils were in the midst of managing budget cuts via substantial reductions to back-office administrative functions; front-line service redesigns, recommissions and reductions; closing local offices; and significant programmes of staffing reductions. In the two-year period prior to the research (2011-2013), the scale of the consequent workforce reduction was significantly greater in Newcastle - at 25% - than elsewhere. In Coventry it was 16%, and 12% and 11% in Milton Keynes and Renfrewshire respectively (Hastings et al, 2015a).

The fact that workforce reduction in Renfrewshire was similar in scale to two of the English councils meant that cross-border experiences were perhaps a little more similar than expected. However, a condition of the permission granted by councils for the study was that front-line workers participating should not be identified by their employing council. This agreement formed the basis of ethical approval granted by both universities involved in the study. This also stipulated that the anonymity of participants should be protected by referring to broad service areas rather than job titles. While this has limited the extent to which the study has been able to draw contrasts between council experiences, especially between the Scottish and English cases, it may have enhanced the ability of participants to speak freely about the impact of austerity.

Data were generated via a focus group in each council involving 41 participants and workplace “shadowing” with a further eight staff (two from each council). Focus group participants were invited to correspond directly with the research team if they wished to add

anything to the discussion (three did). Participants were purposively drawn from across council services: advice centres, children's services, community work, housing, libraries, leisure, parks maintenance, roads, social work, social care, street cleansing and youth work. The mix varied between focus groups, and so participants for shadowing were from services under-represented in the focus group for the case study. Each focus group lasted around 1.5 hours and was based on open questions covering: changes to roles and remits looking back over the austerity period; impacts of council savings plans on services and service users; impacts – both positive and negative - on staff and the nature of their work. Work-place shadowing involved a research team member spending half a day with the participant, observing their workplace, meeting colleagues and discussing the routines and content of typical working days as well as changes to their role or workplace context.

While this part of the study was concerned with how front-line staff experienced working in services affected by austerity, it did not set out explicitly to explore coping mechanisms. Initially the research team were struck by the nature and scale of negative emotion expressed by participants, and the data were coded to capture emotions such as “Insecurity” “Loss” or “Anxiety”. Via these codes, the idea that staff were acting as “shock absorbers” emerged inductively. Subsequently, the first author re-coded and analysed the data using the categories of resistance, adaption and absorption. Mechanisms of resistance and adaptation were defined as indicated above. At this point, absorption was defined broadly as relating to practices which caused workers extra work and/or harm.

4. Coping with austerity at the front-line – the view from the case studies

Resistance mechanisms

Participants in the four case study councils gave few examples of practices which explicitly resisted the logic of austerity. In fact, only three specific instances were offered. In

the first, a housing worker recounted that she had felt compelled to make a “safeguarding” referral to try to ensure that the needs of one of her tenants were met by her council’s social care department: effectively whistle-blowing by reporting her employer to an external regulator. In the second, a social worker disclosed how resource restrictions could be circumvented by redirecting funds for children’s activities to preventative interventions. The same social worker gave the third example: she had continued to accompany vulnerable clients to medical appointments in support of efforts to ‘join up’ different services and in contravention of an instruction to cease the practice to accommodate staff cuts. While framed by the participant as an act of defiance, such actions can also be understood as “going the extra mile” - as practices developed to modify rather than resist austerity, consistent with Prior and Barnes’ (2011) definition of resistance highlighted earlier. More generally, the research provoked discussion of participants’ capacity to conduct extra visits to vulnerable clients, make telephone calls to other services on their behalf and so on, with a consensus emerging that capacity was more constrained, but that such practices had not disappeared entirely: “I think most of us do still try to go that extra mile because we worry about our clients” (Social Care). Participants also highlighted that austerity meant more need for conscientious, altruistic practices – such as self-funding stationary to support work with children.

The discussion of the “extra mile” highlights that it may not be appropriate to characterise all practices developed to modify the impacts of austerity as straightforward examples of resistance. Even the few examples from the case studies demonstrate that the mechanism involves a range of practices - from using formal complaint channels to improve a service, through informally redirecting resources, to retaining holistic ways of working encouraged by previous management reforms. Arguably however, examples of taking on or retaining tasks beyond allocated workloads to fill funding gaps – “going the extra mile” to

modify austerity impacts – *absorbs* the consequences of austerity, at the same time as it resists the logic of state retrenchment.

Adaption mechanisms

The literature suggests that the alternative to resistance is adaption, with debate over whether adaption inevitably offloads an inferior service to clients or is also an opportunity for innovation. Across the case studies, participants described strategies for coping with austerity that resonated with the kinds of adaptations noted in this wider literature. These included the informal abandonment of service approaches and standards established as part of managerial reforms which had become impossible to meet. Thus an advice worker recalled: “it doesn’t seem too distant a memory where the phone had to be answered in so many rings”, while a housing worker described an angry, stressful process in which the abandonment of waiting time targets in a neighbourhood office had become normalised:

“We’ve always had SLAs [service level agreements] of being seen within 10 minutes ... and now there’s frequently now an hour and half’s wait ... The customers seem to be used to it now but at first everybody was kicking off and we’ve had five staff referred to occupational health from the pressure. We’re just having to get on with it really.”

(Housing)

Indeed, participants commonly admitted that they had to “get on with” implementing practices they knew to be sub-optimal or resulting in inappropriate or reduced services. A social worker, for example, told that her office had been relocated from a neighbourhood shopping centre to city centre open-plan office. The new location acted as a rationing mechanism – it “discouraged people from coming in”, and its open plan design meant it was “not an appropriate place” to

discuss sensitive issues. To manage this, she had adjusted by carrying out consultations by phone. Similarly, a homecare worker explained that staff cuts and time pressures meant she was no longer able to provide “a holistic approach to care, like person-centred care, where you gave the care, you did the shopping, you did the domestic tasks as well which was always looked at as the best form of care.”

While there was evidence that some collaborations had been maintained – and become more necessary – in the context of resource constraint, participants also suggested that adaption had reduced collaboration and increased demarcation between services : ironically a reversal of progress towards the more integrated partnership working valued by NPG. In two councils in particular, participants reported reduced inter-departmental “team” working and the reconstruction of “silos”, as well as the loss of personal contacts and relationships and an accompanying attrition of a sense of joint responsibility:

“it’s bumping through the dark to try and find the right person ... you used to know exactly where to go and get things done... But now...it’s a bloody nightmare.”

(Housing)

The loss of capacity to collaborate appeared to impact most significantly on those service areas that worked with vulnerable clients: a housing worker recounted an instance of trying to access social work services for a tenant with ‘severe community need’: “I got social work involved. (They said) that if housing are involved, they have to take a step back now.” Further, an interchange in a focus group suggested partnership approaches were threatened by shared strategies for passing responsibilities for difficult cases to other departments:

Social Care: You’ve got all the key words to refer to somebody else.

Housing: Yeah, to be honest, that’s what I do now.

It was clear that the participants valued joined-up working and lamented its demise: the discussion revealed strong concerns about the impacts of demarcation on clients: “(We’re) not filling in the gaps.... People know about vulnerable individuals ... they’re left, , and then you find them six months later or a year later” (Housing).

As noted, by definition SLBs have some discretion over how they allocate limited resources. However, paradoxically, while austerity cuts had increased the necessity for service rationing at an organisational level, at the street level, discretionary capacity appeared eroded. Thus, some participants described how instructions to prioritise vulnerable clients over “the everyday person who hasn’t got a social worker” (Advice Centre worker) effectively limited their ability to work with “everyday” people. Emotive framing indicated discomfort: “it’s like: ‘wait until you are dying and then we’ll support you’” (Housing Worker). However, participants disposed towards prioritising vulnerable clients also suggested that their ability to properly address needs had been compromised. A children’s worker described:

“I think that there’s only so many adjustments you can make. I worry you can’t provide the same level of quality. You certainly can’t provide the same level of quantity, ... and I worry that certainly if cuts just keep chipping away, it’s going to take some awful horrible disaster for everybody to realise that actually you can’t manage on so, so few resources.”

A small minority of participants were able to identify how they had adapted to resource constraint creatively in ways that they were comfortable with – one example offered was the delivery of family outreach services in a park rather than in a costly indoor venue. Others working in new generic roles in local ‘hubs’ – created to reduce the estate costs of, for example, housing and library services - identified the potential to provide more integrated advice. A few

justified those adjustments that they knew had reduced service quality, by suggesting that clients had “got used to” inferior standards. However, most participants framed adaption not as an opportunity to innovate but as problematic. In some cases, this framing revealed concern for clients – for example, the “awful, horrible disaster” waiting to happen noted above. In others, it revealed concern for colleagues or themselves:

“people tend to adapt to the most difficult circumstances... (but) are being stretched, there is a limit” (Children’s Services)

The evidence of the case studies suggests that adaptive mechanisms are not necessarily successful as a means of coping with austerity, and risk undoing some previous improvements. With the exceptions noted above, it also confirms that adaptations do not result in “more being done with less”, but rather in harm to services, clients and, potentially, workers. Moreover, the evidence on resistance suggested that, in rejecting austerity, workers can feel compelled to take on extra work to compensate for state retrenchment and, indeed, may achieve more with less, but only in ways that can cause them harm. In the next section, further evidence that local government workers respond to the logic of austerity by absorbing its harmful consequences is explored. This allows the distinctiveness of, as well as the overlaps between, the concepts of resistance, adaption and absorption to be clarified.

Absorption mechanisms

The imperative of austerity to “do more with less” means staff will have increased workloads and will face insecurity as staff numbers are cut. Participants reported absorbing “more responsibilities, mopping up redundancies, (having their) job descriptions widened” (Children) or being ‘constantly told you have to step up, do more’ (Roads). As a result they were working more intensively: “a damn sight harder” (Libraries) and in a state of high alert:

“fire-fighting rather than working in a pro-active manner” (Housing). They also reported increased workloads from growing demand for services caused by wider austerity policy, particularly welfare cuts. While it was striking that this testimony was prevalent across a range of services, those working with vulnerable clients with complex problems presented as the most severely affected. For example, demand for parent-support services within childrens’ centres was reported to have “doubled”, while an Advice worker told:

“people are coming to us at the end of their tethers ... I don’t think we’ve ever had people quite as bad as we have at the moment...this last year in particular has been really, really hard on people, we are inundated with people coming in now.” (Advice)

Participants reported coping with this extra work not just by working harder in official time, but by working outside paid hours, often at home. A parks worker explained how she absorbed extra work by coming in early: “I’m in at seven, finish at half four, five o’clock” and a social worker described routinely working evenings at home “so I can relax”. An email from a housing officer explained how he had “tried to have a ‘couldn’t care less attitude’ and finish at a reasonable time” but found this impossible, disclosing relationship problems as family life was disrupted by working late or at home.

Participants also reported “doing more” as a result of cuts to back-office staff such as office managers, finance and IT specialists with front-line staff expected to take on aspects of these roles. De-professionalisation had similar consequences. In one council, library assistants reported they were “now doing the work that qualified, chartered librarians were doing in the past [who were] being paid maybe three or four grades more.” In this case study, redundancies among professional librarians left assistants to take on librarians’ work in addition to their other responsibilities. That de-professionalisation could impact on the quality of services was evident

from a housing officer, who told of how the replacement of professional staff with assistants with only basic training, meant more work for the remaining professionals: they felt compelled to provide support and “back up” in order to protect tenants who they felt were in danger of being given erroneous advice. All of these practices facilitate the absorption of additional work, often partially hidden from view.

Insecurity also led participants strategically to take on extra roles and tasks: forms of adaption which were unwelcome and did not enhance services. Thus, a parks worker explained the importance of “adding strings to your harp... the more we do, the harder it will be to get rid of us”, a strategy recognised by a housing worker: “it’s just been adding and adding and adding to our job role... ‘We’ll do that. We’ll take that job on’, so that you know, when the cuts come, it’s not us.” A librarian indicated that such practices constitute a coping mechanism “(We’d) rather have a job that sends us home frazzled than not have a job.” However - as “frazzled” implies – there are costs in the form of harms to staff. Indeed, a number of examples were given of people “taking on more and more of a role to the point where people are going off with stress and serious amounts of illness” (Housing). A roads worker described feeling “battered and bruised” while an advice worker lamented “Nobody ever says “you look well””. In an email, a parks worker revealed the consequences for her mental health of being charged with identifying staff for redundancy: disrupted sleep, being “tearful and unhappy... drinking and eating more and exercising less”. Finally, precaritisation resulted in participants absorbing economic as well as emotional harms such as pay cuts or the loss of an essential car user’s allowance. A number of participants reported being required to re-apply for their current roles but at lower grades, leading to a pay cut of around 10% for staff in one council’s children’s centres.

As well as stress and economic hardship, precaritisation and intensification created conflict and division, underdoing camaraderie, co-operation and partnership. Some managers

instrumentalised insecurity to generate compliance with excessive workloads. As a housing worker explained: “You always somehow feel because there aren’t any jobs out there, they’re thinking that we’ll put up with anything really, whatever we’re asked to do.” As well as conflict between managers and workers, and the examples of emerging conflict between service providers and users and between workers and their families noted above, participants also indicated the potential for conflict to emerge between front-line workers. Defensive demarcation as a means of adapting to workload pressure has already been highlighted. Relatedly, a library worker reported refusing to process another library’s books, and a youth worker told of how another service had taken the credit for a funding bid she had developed. More generally, it seems that cost cutting strategies such as ‘hot-desking’ and lone-working isolated workers and were a means by which they internalised the effects of austerity. Participants reported feeling out of “the hub of things” (Advice) and being left without “camaraderie or support” (Libraries). Again, insecurity appeared to amplify conflict and competition and revealed how absorption mechanisms can isolate and individualise. For example, strategies requiring staff to re-apply for their jobs disrupted empathetic relationships and were:

“Exceptionally divisive... Instead of working together in teams you spent 6 months ... eyeing each other up thinking ‘Who’s got more experience than me, what do I need to do, who’s got more sick leave?’” (Advice)

The analysis therefore indicates that a retreat from the collective, shared endeavour which may have characterised pre-austerity public service reform towards individualisation is a feature of the everyday experience of front-line work under austerity, alongside precarisation and intensification. This idea is returned to in the Conclusion.

More generally, the analysis suggests that absorption mechanisms are not necessarily motivated by altruism or, indeed, by a desire to shield service users. Some ways of coping are motivated by self-interest: keeping a job or surviving in a changing environment. Arguably absorption mechanisms are a form of acquiescence to neo-liberal logic as they involve “doing more with less”. However, as the discussion of ‘going the extra mile’ as an aspect of resistance also suggested, participants were also motivated to go beyond their remits and stretch themselves to their limit in order to avoid offloading harm to clients. This was most clearly articulated in shared concern for the “safety” of vulnerable people and families, amplified by concern that workers’ capacity to maintain safety was fragile. Thus, an advice worker described how he had recently interviewed “three people who were discussing suicide” and how he required “support to cope”. And a children’s centre worker, who was in the process of re-applying for her job, revealed the strain of managing her own stress while working with vulnerable families:

“All that stress hanging over you And for us working with families with young children where it’s like happy smiley faces all day long, that’s an added pressure ..., because you don’t want the families to experience what’s going on in the office, so you’re having to try double.”

Whether doing more with less is motivated by altruism or self-interest, whether it is an act of defiance or of acquiescence, it is evident that front-line staff are effectively acting as *shock absorbers* of austerity by internalising and therefore dampening its damaging effects.

Thus, to summarise, the analysis has clarified mechanisms developed by UK council workers to cope with post-GFC austerity, and argued that these can be captured by the categories of Resistance, Adaption and Absorption. It has also suggested that these categories overlap, as Figure 1 illustrates.

Figure 1.

The everyday experience of workers attempting to cope with austerity suggests that Resistance can be defined as practices that reject and disrupt the logic of state retrenchment – examples here are whistleblowing and diverting resources to reflect alternative priorities. A rejection of austerity and the desire to shield service users, may also drive SLBs to adopt Absorption mechanisms, but such practices ultimately support austerity by internalising additional, insecure, often harmful work required to achieve this. The placement of “the extra mile” mechanism at the intersection between absorption and resistance is however intended to capture that “working harder” in the context of public services designed to serve the needs of vulnerable groups, is a practice that can also entail conscious defiance of the logic of state retrenchment.

Adaption captures those mechanisms that result in negative consequences for services, rendering them retrenched, rationed and sub-optimal. While SLBs may experience discomfort as they deploy such strategies, they nonetheless externalise the consequences of austerity to service users rather than internalise them. Firefighting – where SLBs feel compelled to work more intensively, but in a sub-optimal way – lies in the intersection between adaption and absorption. So too do practices which result from more competitive, less empathetic relationships at the front-line. Conflict and demarcation both internalise damaging outcomes, but also externalise these by undermining the extent to which services are joined up. Finally, there are mechanisms which are inflected by all three categories which have been placed at the intersection of the figure. These are innovations and creative responses such as the example of outreach work transferred to a park setting, or efforts to maintain collaborative and holistic services despite constraint. While these examples are adaptive and motivated by defiance of the logic of state retrenchment, they also require SLBs to absorb some harms – inclement

weather, extra work or fear of sanction. This suggests that creating alternatives can also involve hidden costs.

5. Concluding Reflections

This paper aimed to understand the “everyday experience” of front-line work in austere local government services – an element of the austerity story underemphasised in the literature – an aim achieved by way of analysis of coping mechanisms developed by SLBs. By locating the paper within the ‘street level’ literature, the analysis draws attention to (constrained) agency and discretion at the front-line while also, crucially, reminding us that SLBs effectively make policy through their practices (Lipsky, 2010). Thus the means by which workers resist, adapt to or absorb the effects of austerity, make austerity what it *is* – they determine how it is experienced by service users, as well as by service providers, and how its consequences are evaluated by policy makers, researchers, the media and the public. Research which captures the experience of front-line workers is therefore necessary to fully comprehend the significance of austerity. What such a focus does not facilitate however is exploration of the ideological drivers of austerity – SLBs may make policy, but not under circumstances of their own choosing.

The analysis also contributes to our understanding of post-GFC austerity by demonstrating that more *can* be done with less, but only when front-line staff act as “shock absorbers”. It also suggests that overwork, stress and, in particular, insecurity may have replaced the performance targets previously used to discipline the achievement of more “productive” public services. Moreover, by foregrounding the voices of front-line workers, the analysis has revealed that, in addition to intensification and precaritisation, acquiescence with austerity is achieved through the *individualisation* of front-line public sector work: a retreat by staff and services into more isolated, competitive, instrumental spaces – which, paradoxically,

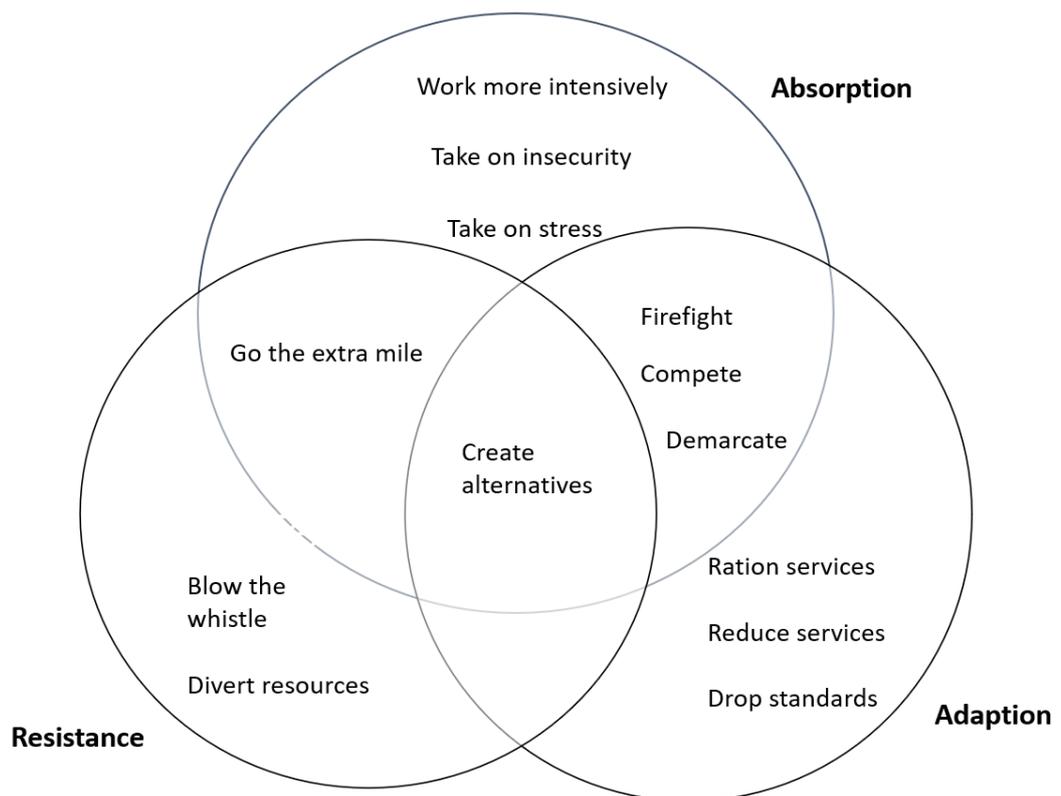
undermines the partnership agenda of NPG and is itself a powerful form of state retrenchment and deterioration. In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the crucial role of front-line public sector workers to life and quality of life, but also the extent to which SLBs involved in health, care and sectors as diverse as teaching, refuse and transport have been expected to absorb some of the shocks of the pandemic. The extent to which the impacts of the pandemic for such workers have been compounded by the preceding austerity is an important issue for further research (see ANON, forthcoming 2021).

Finally, the paper contributes a more nuanced interpretation to the literature of the coping mechanisms developed by SLBs to manage the central dilemma of their work – the mismatch between resources and needs. It suggests that the challenges experienced by front-line workers in UK councils are managed in ways beyond resistance or adaption, demonstrating the importance of absorption, and the overlapping boundaries between these. Given the origin of the literature in the Anglophone world, it is a framework that could be developed to take account of front-line experience beyond UK local government and by research designed explicitly to understand coping mechanisms. However, the evidence of the emotional harm that front-line working entails has implications for the sustainability of the coping mechanisms explored in the paper. Absorption mechanisms, in particular, seem fragile: SLBs may only be able to absorb the shock of austerity for a time-limited period, allowing neo-liberal state retrenchment to proceed unmitigated thereafter. Further, if, as Peck (2012) argues, disinvestment creates a path dependency by which it makes sense to question the value of state agencies, if public services are invariably staffed by stressed, frazzled people performing sub-optimally, then they will only be used by the desperate; fuelling middle class withdrawal, disaffiliation and further disinvestment. The front-line experience of post-GFC austerity therefore demonstrates how this latest stage of neo-liberal state retrenchment is realised and embedded.

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation for funding the research on which this paper is based. They are also appreciative of insightful feedback on an earlier draft from Professor Mhairi Mackenzie, Urban Studies, University of Glasgow.

Figure 1: Coping with austerity: mechanisms of resistance, adaption and absorption



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