Double Bind in the Public Service: Competing Paradigms in the Australian Public Sector

Abstract

A dramatic transformation has taken place in the public sector worldwide as many governments have privatised many of their organisations and agencies. As a result, public sector employees worldwide have been exposed to contradictory pressures as their senior executive managers demand adherence to the traditional bureaucratic mechanisms for which they have always been known while concurrently attempting to conform to the economic reductionist principles of their private sector competitors. We argue that this has led to many staff, as well as the organisations in which they work, experiencing situations of double bind. Through the lens of autoethnography, this paper examines the double bind with which I, as an Australian public sector worker, am faced and some of the effects.

Key Words: public service, double bind, organisational change, autoethnography

Introduction

In this paper I present an autoethnographic account of my thirty-year career in the Australian public sector. I concentrate on my emotional reactions as I have experienced various phases of the gradual introduction of New Public Management (NPM) principles. I contrast my experiences with the content of some of the more popular, but stylised, models of emotional reactions during times of change which have appeared in the literature. In particular, I draw attention to the confining scenario of double-bind entrapment and the consequences of this for the trajectory of my emotional reactions to the advancement of NPM in the public sector over my thirty-year career.

The paper is structured as follows. Following this brief introduction I present a literature review of NPM, double-bind theory, and emotional reactions to change. This is followed by a brief account of the methodology of autoethnography and a justification for the use of this approach in this paper. I then present the findings of my emotional journey. The paper concludes with a discussion of how this paper has contributed to the literature and some suggestions for further research.

Literature review

(i) New public management (NPM)

The traditional Weberian concept of public administration has come to be viewed as being synonymous with inefficiency (Sadler, 1999) and belonging to an era when life and the pace of change was slower and bureaucratic administration sufficed for society's needs (Osborne & Gaebler, 1993). This produced big, centralised, inflexible (Erakovic & Wilson, 2005) and mechanistic organisations with only restricted responsiveness to change. This caused them to be described as being "like ocean liners in an age of supersonic jets: big, cumbersome, expensive, and extremely difficult to turn around" (Osborne & Gaebler, 1993). Consequently, the public sector worldwide has undergone a transformation since the 1980s with many government organisations either privatising or corporatising.

NPM mandates a paradigm shift in public sector organisations with the traditional role of public administration being replaced by a culture viewing the public more as customers or consumers (Osborne & Brown, 2005) rather than citizens to be administered. Effectively, employees are now required to view themselves as customer service managers rather than omnipotent public administrators (Arbouw, 1997), necessitating many government organisations to be more responsive to public demand (Cope, Leishman & Starie, 1997). Supporters of this paradigm advance the argument that privatisation (or corporatisation) incorporates the notions of financial parsimony, efficiency, competition, benchmarking and best practice (Osborne & Gaebler, 1993). Commensurate with this new culture many public sector administrators are now more accountable for results than for adherence to prescribed processes (Aucion, 1990; Halligan & Power, 1992; Kernaghan, 1993; Sadler, 1999). To facilitate this there is also now an emphasis on entrepreneurialism based on the (debatable) belief that private sector practices are inherently better than those in the public sector (Mulgan, 1997).

Privatisation has resulted in many government organisations worldwide competing with businesses in the private sector or being disaggregated (Considine & Painter, 1997; Corbett, 1996; Hood, 1991; Laffin, 1996; Ramamurti, 2000) to facilitate their customer responsiveness. Disaggregation involves

the breaking up of monolithic organisations into smaller, more organic organisations intended to be more adaptable to the vicissitudes of the marketplace in which they are expected to compete.

However, it could be argued that this paradigm of the inherent superiority of private sector practices over public sector practices fails to take into account the different reasons for which each sector exists. The unique role of many public sector organisations means that private sector practices are incompatible with the types of goods and services provided by the public sector (Considine & Painter, 1997; Mintzberg, 1996; Sinclair, 1991; Yeatman, 1987). Many government organisations are natural monopolies and are the only national organisations performing a particular function. Due to lack of competition there is less incentive to adopt the private sector practices used by those organisations competing with private businesses. This has allowed these organisations to maintain their bureaucratic methodologies as they seek to maintain their traditional roles as the bastions of good order, safeguarding the public from risk (Dobell, 1989), as well as being protectors of the weak (Trosa, 1997).

The issue with organisations such as this is that they are obliged to provide goods or services to communities regardless of their economic viability (Markowski & Hall, 1996; Nwankwo, 1996). This can be detrimental to bottom lines and runs contrary to the stated aims of NPM which promote, inter alia, financial accountability (Soltani, Lai & Mahmoudi, 2007). Private sector organisations have some degree of discretion as to whether they provide these goods or services and, where this is determined to not be economically viable, they are at liberty to decline. Public sector organisations often have little discretion to make economic rationalist decisions, being required to provide goods or services for the good of the public (Forster, Graham & Wanna, 1996; Sadler, 1999). This can preclude efficient practices (Osborne & Gaebler, 1993) and may result in the obligation to undertake their provision regardless of the detriment to financial accountability.

By contrast, government organisations are still required to demonstrate economic rationalism (Vickers & Kouzmin, 2001). Due to the nature of the goods and services they are required to provide cost-cutting erroneously viewed as financial efficiency necessarily results in a reduction in the provision of goods and services or a reduction in their quality and flies in the face of the notion of community service obligations

(Markowski & Hall, 1996). The challenge lies in finding the balance between fiscal parsimony and satisfying the greater public good (Lansdown, 1990; Wettenhall, 1988).

Public sector managers are under pressure to act entrepreneurially commensurate with NPM (Forster, Graham & Wanna, 1996; Hughes, 1998; Osborne & Gaebler, 1993; Painter, 1988; Sadler, 1999). This implies some measure of risk. Where public monies are involved there is tremendous pressure to avoid risk. A high requirement for transparency and public scrutiny results in many public sector managers becoming risk averse lest they be accused of mishandling public funds. Consequently, they often prefer to play safe and impose rigid governance measures to eliminate error. The public sector still labours under what is known as the 98/2 rule where a success rate of 98 percent goes unnoticed while the remainder attracts disproportionate attention and criticism (Harrow, 1997; Stowe, 1996; Weller & Davis, 1996) leading public sector managers to maintain or even increase their reliance on governance protocols. Strict auditing regimes ensure rigid adherence to procedures. Failure to follow procedures results in increased auditing attention and the governance burden snowballs. “Bureaux are piled on bureaux and the bureaucracy grows on” (Perlman, 1976, p. 76).

This places public sector managers in the invidious position of being required to fulfil legislatively mandated but mutually exclusive requirements: to adopt private sector practices while under intense public scrutiny to deliver goods and services in an efficient and cost effective manner, and also to maintain their organisational status as bastions of good order. But the entrepreneurial behaviour NPM requires necessarily carries with it the risk in that some initiatives will fail or be less successful that required. Where public goods are concerned public and legislative scrutiny demands that they get it right all the time. However, delivering cost-effective, market-based initiatives carries an increased risk of failure – an intolerable notion for government organisations. This leaves public sector managers between a rock and a hard place. The public sector culture has traditionally been based on a process oriented and bureaucratic methodology. It is now required to act in a commercial manner. This requires a change of culture but this does not happen overnight. The old guard, many of whom form the large body of middle management in large hierarchies, have become change resistant leading Morgan and Murgatroyd (1994) to describe them as ‘contrapreneurs’.

These factors leave many lower level public sector employees, whom Lipsky (1980) describes as street-level public bureaucrats, to fall victim to contradictory sets of requirements. Effectively, employees are now required to serve two different masters. This has been variously described by a number of authors as decoupling (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), co-existing institutional logics (Bjerregaard, 2011), "layering" of "Institutional logics" (Seo & Creed, 2002, p. 228), pluralistic entities (Kraatz & Block, 2008), an "uncomfortable" mix of traditional practices along with new performance-based practices" (O'Neill & Hughes, 1998, p.36, cited in Brunetto & Farr-Wharton, 2005) and dichotomous isomorphism (Bilney, 2013).

We argue that this scenario can leave staff in a 'damned if I do and damned if I don't' double-bind situation. This has implications for employee adaptation to change imperatives, especially in terms of emotional resilience. These concepts are examined below.

(ii) Double-bind theory

Double bind theory, introduced by Bateson, Jackson, Haley & Weakland (1956), relates to situations where individuals or groups are confronted by conflicting commands, each perceived to be mutually exclusive. Although originally related to the study of schizophrenic reactions (Åkerland & Norberg, 1985) in family situations (where individuals are faced with seemingly contradictory requirements that appear to invalidate the other), double bind theory has also come to be related to situations not actually involving a mental condition but which still produce schizophrenic-type reactions in those caught up in contradictory situations (Hennestad, 1990). Prolonged exposure to this type of situation can result in an inability to perceive circumstances in any other than a contradictory fashion, eventually resulting in pathogenic reactions.

A number of critical components need to be present before a situation can be described as a double bind. These are summarised below (Gibney, 2006) and, in total, encompass a situation where one party has power over another or possesses the ability to "define the operant context for another person" (p. 55).

- Two or more individuals must be involved, one of whom must be the 'victim', and who experiences apparently contradictory messages.
- The situation is not an individual one but, rather, is a series of events that form an expectation of further similar occurrences.
- A primary command designed to compel obedience by threatening punishment if the command is disobeyed. The command usually takes the form of instructing the victim to act or instructing the victim to avoid a certain action or actions.
- A secondary command that contradicts the primary command that, again, threatens punishment if not obeyed. Again, the command takes the form of either requiring or forbidding action.
- A tertiary negative injunction that prevents the victim from escaping the situation.
- The victim needs to be in an intense relationship in which they feel they must communicate right.
- No metacommunication is possible. In other words, the victim is has no opportunity to express their feelings regarding the apparent contradictions that may help to alleviate the situation.

A number of examples of contradictions of this nature have been identified in organisational contexts (Apker, 2003; Cheek & Miller, 1983; Luscher, Lewis & Ingram, 2006; Pérezts, Bouilloud & Gaulejac, 2011; Tracy, 2004).

Tracy (2004) identifies three methods by which responses to situations of this type were framed:

- *Simple contradictions* – where one is unable to satisfy two contradictory requirements simultaneously and, so, alternates between the two or consistently chooses only one.
- *Complementary dialectics* – where one views the contradictions as complementary or not mutually exclusive in order to reduce tension, and
- *Double bind* – a form of paradoxical situation where obeying one command means to disobey the other and vice versa.

Tracy (2004) noted that people reacted emotionally, experiencing confusion and anxiety when confronted with what were viewed as simple contradictions. This caused them to behave inconsistently and erratically.

When tensions are viewed as complementary dialectics job satisfaction increased and psychological dissonance reduced (Tracy, 2004). When situations were viewed as double binds behavioural paralysis, withdrawal, simplistic thought processes, paranoia and over-analysis often ensued (Tracy, 2004).

Dopson and Neumann (1998) place this situation in a middle management context across a range of industries, finding that there was a perceived difference between managers' psychological contracts and organisational expectations of the managers based on changed workplace situations. A significant difference between a psychological contract and actual roles can reduce motivation significantly and contribute to resistance to change. One consistent theme Dopson and Neumann (1998) found was an attitude of 'damned if I do and damned if I don't' to describe situations where managers perceived that no matter which course of action they took, they could not win.

Dopson and Neumann (1998) went on to describe a typology of three kinds of managers in increasing order of severity, defined by how the managers viewed their situation:

Uncertain managers – feel confused but are not certain how to react due to insufficient knowledge of the situation. This can result in annoyance at senior managers developing into frustration.

Contrary managers – feel anger, expressing opposition and practicing resistance towards senior managers. Senior managers are often viewed as the source of the problem due to a perception of their lack of ability to see the situations the middle managers are in, and

Double bind managers – feel restricted and forced to choose between two undesirable alternatives eliciting emotions such as cynicism and feelings of rejection, hopelessness, feeling unwanted, and uselessness. Reactions include passive resistance, occasional angry outbursts and apparent conformity and inertia. All this can result in depression and illness.

Hennestad (1990, p. 267) noted a reluctance among victims of double bind to discuss their situations in case they "could be placed in a bad light". This has repercussions in the workplace context where criticism and contradiction of organisational policies and practices run the risk of being viewed as inconsistent with groupthink (Janis, 1982), limiting career progression.

(iii) Emotional reactions to change

When employees experience change within an organisation they tend to respond to this by progressing through a series of various emotions as they attempt to cope with the different situation they are now confronted with (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Although these emotions are highly individualistic to different people, a number of models have become popular in the literature as stylistic representations of these emotional trajectories. Four popular models are shown in table 1.

Table 1

Emotional response to change: four popular models			
Carnell (2007)	**Kubler-Ross (1969)**	**Scott & Jaffe (1989)**	**Janssen (nd)**
Denial	Denial	Denial	Denial
Defence	Anger	Resistance	Confusion
Discarding	Bargaining	Exploration	Renewal
Adaptation	Depression	Commitment	Contentment
Internalization	Acceptance		

These different models display both similarities and differences. Notably, all of them commence the emotional cycle with '*denial*' that the change is real or will be lasting. The models then proceed to describe a series of negative emotions, before the impacted individual makes a *pact with reality* and eventually comes to terms with the new scenario of change. However, various differences can also be discerned between the four models. First, the terminology of the negative emotions varies from one model to the next; namely, '*defence*' (Carnell, 2007), '*anger, bargaining, and depression*' (Kubler-Ross, 1969), '*resistance*' (Scott & Jaffe, 1989), and '*confusion*' (Janssen, nd). Second, the 'pact with reality' can involve (variously named) intermediate stages, such as '*discarding and adaptation*' (Carnell, 2007), '*exploration*' (Scott & Jaffe, 1989), and '*renewal*' (Janssen, nd), before a final stage of acceptance of the new reality occurs; '*internalization*' (Carnell, 2007), '*acceptance*' (Kubler-Ross, 1969), '*commitment*' (Scott & Jaffe, 1989), and '*contentment*' (Janssen, nd). Third, note that in the

Kubler-Ross model (1969) there occurs no intermediate stage, and the impacted individual jumps straight from negative emotions '*depression*' to a stage of '*acceptance*' ("I'm ready now, I'll stop fighting it"), although it must be realised that this model deals with personal grief through imminent bereavement and not an organisational change.

Methodology

The research findings in this paper are autoethnographic in nature. Ellis (2004, p. 37) defines autoethnography as "writing about the personal and its relationship to culture. It is an autobiographical genre of writing". In this paper data is drawn from my own experiences during my long career in the Australian public sector, spanning over thirty years. I have collected this data through real-time diary and journal entries together with retrospective reflection. In this paper I concentrate on the emotions I have experienced during this time and the actions and reactions resulting from these emotions. Although my career has progressed during these years I still occupy a status position that Lipsky (1980) calls a *street-level bureaucrat*. My method of analysing the data has reflected the various stages of my career progression, and how my emotional reactions have increasingly reflected the entrapment of a double-bind situation.

The purpose of autoethnography is to employ personal experiences in a type of case study. The objective of this is to examine events with the benefit of hindsight with a view to extending or expanding extant theory (Blenkinsopp, 2007). Autoethnography benefits from hindsight in that it allows the researcher, as the focal point of the study, to apply theory to past events they have experienced. By considering theory in the present this can be applied to past experiences to interpret those events in a different light. Spry (2001) describes this in terms of being here and being there while Denzin (2001, p. 256) refers to it as "epiphany in hindsight". Another purpose of autoethnography is to produce a strong reaction in readers. Ellis and Bochner (2006) describe this as producing a gut reaction, not merely academic understanding, while Vickers (2007, p. 235) calls it "visceral". By drawing on my experiences and emotions this paper aims to describe how I felt when

faced with the contradictory pressures of maintaining standard bureaucratic practices whilst attempting to satisfy the competing demand to increase efficiency.

Findings: my emotional journey

My autoethnographic analysis of my career trajectory in the Australian public service shows a transition in emotional terms from hope to frustration to despair.

Hope: I entered the public service in the early 1980s and have been employed there ever since. I felt both hopeful and enthusiastic. What attracted me to the job at that time were the generous working conditions, stability of employment, and the opportunity for promotion within a very hierarchical organisation. I displayed unquestioning compliance and strong organisational citizenship. Since I was employed in a low-level job, I experienced low levels of stress, and revelled in what I at that time saw as opportunities to display initiative albeit it within strongly defined parameters. NPM was yet to make an appearance. Accordingly, there was little evidence of a double-bind situation occurring at my low hierarchical level. Even when NPM principles made their first appearance in my organisation (in the form of total quality management) I initially viewed this development with some enthusiasm. TQM postulated the examination and analysis of organisational processes and I found myself volunteering for the leadership of some of these initiatives in the belief that my commitment would be rewarded and also lead to better organisational practices and processes.

Frustration: However, with the passage of time the incorporation of NPM principles together with the retention of bureaucratic procedures commenced a period of enhanced feelings of frustration into my career. For me, this scenario was interpreted as increased organisational contradiction and loss of meaning. What did the public service stand for? NPM gradually introduced a series of ‘efficiencies’ (usually in the form of staff cuts) whilst the volume of bureaucratic requirements remained unchanged. Job advancement in the public service usually involves being moved around from one area to another, often involving displaying different forms of capabilities. I found myself becoming embroiled in this constant movement. Sometimes this took the form of being forced into positions for which I was unsuited and which I did not like. I sometimes perceived myself being bullied in this

process. I found my ability to take ownership of roles and responsibilities to be almost non-existent. I perceived the organisation to be becoming more intransigent in its attitude. Initiative was stifled and there occurred a lack of organisational facilitation and support of work. This scenario, together with the higher level jobs I was now moving into, served only to increase my levels of stress and reduction in organisational commitment. Dopson and Neumann's (1998) analysis of the uncertain manager (confused and annoyed) remains appropriate for this stage of my career, soon to degenerate to the stages of 'contrary' and 'double bind' managers in the next stage of despair

Despair: The latter stages of my career are now epitomised by a sense of despair as I perceive myself as embroiled within the grip of an organisational double bind. Exhortations by managers to think outside the square and act efficiently and effectively are countered with admonishment for not maintaining the bureaucratic practices required by legislation. Herein lies the double bind! This double bind situation provides endless opportunities for management sanctions, along the lines of "damned if you do and damned if you don't". My sense of despair seems closely linked with the state of organisational intransigence, which at times seems to reach oppressive levels. Personal initiatives seem to be too readily blocked, citing legislative imperatives. I now perceive that career opportunities are almost non-existent for me. I appear to have entered a state of badly reduced organisational fit as my career has progressively plateaued.

The consequences of this state of despair have negatively impacted my emotional and physical health. My sullen compliance and grudging organisational commitment have resulted in the onset of stress-related illness. All this sometimes leaves me feeling hopeless and prone to feelings of inertia. Despair has led me to a situation often illustrated by outbursts of ironic humour, but more generally to an end result of 'giving up' whereby my resistance has ceased and I attend work with the attitude of doing just enough to keep me out of trouble. My self-worth is now retained almost exclusively by means of reliance on external study. The realisation of career plateauing within a sense of helplessness can have a salutary effect on one's judgements and emotions. Counting down time until retirement is a depressing activity. So many good years going to waste! This is why I have turned to study as a coping mechanism to increase my perception of self-worth. This may be naïve. It may be that I would

experience something similar in another career. This does not bear thinking about. Thinking in this direction can only lead to greater despair. It is better that I enjoy the fresh challenges and feelings of accomplishment that my study has brought me.

I am no different from many people in that I need my job to meet living expenses such as mortgages, utility bills and grocery bills so it is difficult for me to risk leaving. This means I am unable to easily escape my situation. This is despite simplistic comments from others outside the situation that I am free to leave at any time. Risking one's financial well-being is not to be countenanced lightly.

The work relationship should not be viewed flippantly. It is an intense relationship where my career prospects or even my ability to retain my position depends on my performance. In the face of increasing workloads caused by staffing reductions this creates an intense situation. Given the inherent risk of contradicting organisational groupthink there is little avenue for me to express dissatisfaction with the situation lest I be branded a troublemaker, not a team player, or as possessing the wrong attitude. This is despite my organisation nominally encouraging employees to suggest improvements. The complex business cases that are required to support even the most simple of suggestions usually acts as sufficient deterrent.

Conclusion

Research on the effects of NPM on staff in public sector organisations, particularly those at lower levels, is relatively sparse. Much of the extant literature is either reductionist in nature or concentrates on senior executives. This paper contributes to the literature by combining double-bind theory with the emotional reactions to NPM change scenarios by utilising the perspective of a longitudinal autoethnographic methodology.

The extant models of employees' emotional reactions to change (for example, Carnell, 2007; Kubler-Ross, 1969; Scott & Jaffe, 1989; Janssen, nd) share a number of common characteristics (although employ varied terminology in so doing). For instance, the initial stylised reaction to an unexpected change is invariably in the form of denial, followed by various negative emotional consequences, before a process is commenced of slowly adapting to the change, until complete acceptance is finally achieved

at the end stage. However, my experience bears significant differences to this progression, in the form of a series of emotions that cascaded from hope to frustration to despair.

First, I had been employed in the public sector for many years before aspects of NPM began to be introduced. I remained in an emotional state of 'hope' for many years after the commencement of my employment, and this stayed unchanged in the early stages of NPM. I saw this development not in terms of denial but as an opportunity for initiative, reward, and career advancement on my part and embraced early developments with some alacrity. Emotional and behaviourally I displayed elements of hopefulness, enthusiasm, and compliance.

Second, with the passage of time I came to perceive the juxtaposition of bureaucracy and efficiency, not in terms of 'organisational release' but rather in terms of 'organisational shackles'. Increasingly, my role was concerned with coming to terms with the inherent contradictions of the situation for which there was little or no managerial guidance or facilitation. Emotionally I was 'frustrated' and this expressed itself in terms of confusion and annoyance. I experienced a stifling of initiative, an increase in stress, and a growing sense of being bullied by the organisation.

Third, as the double-bind entrapment tightened its grip I increasingly felt a sense of 'despair' as I came to realise that the situation was unlikely to change and that my career had not only plateaued but that I was now counting down the days to retirement. Poor leadership, inadequate facilitation and support, and contradictory organisational demands give certain managers a strong hand to exercise managerial sanctions. A double-bind scenario of 'damned if you do and damned if you don't' acts to keep impacted employees in an almost constant state of anxiety. In consequence, I have been no stranger to stress-related illnesses in recent times as I have acted out organisational behaviours of sullen compliance and grudging commitment. Emotions of hopelessness and helplessness have given rise to a sense of inertia characterised by 'giving up', ceasing resistance, and working to minimal standards required to keep me out of trouble. Self-worth is now not achieved through my organisational career but through my extraneous activities (such as academic study).

The findings of this paper open up possibilities for further research. First, the paper concludes that any emotional resolution of the change journey in terms of 'internalisation', 'acceptance', 'commitment', or 'contentment' (as hypothesised in popular change models) is highly unlikely when negative emotional reactions (such as 'despair') are experienced as a result of a double-bind entrapment. Strategies for escaping the grip of such entrapment could be explored in further studies whether autoethnographic or not. Second, the paper opens up fields of theoretical and practical investigation other than the emotional impact on employees (such as productivity) of double bind situations on lower level public sector workers. Third, the findings of the paper are strongly related to the development of double bind situations caused by inadequate leadership that offers little or no facilitation and support. Further studies could concentrate on methods whereby organisational contradictions can be viewed as complementary rather than contradictory through the institution of more informed and inspiring managerial interventions

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Stream 13. Public Sector Management and Not-for-Profit
Competitive session

Double Bind in the Public Service: Competing Paradigms in the Australian Public Sector

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