Cooperatives in the UK

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1. The application:
This student thesis, based on a small amount of original fieldwork, uses the forms dimension of the Power Cube – the visible/hidden/invisible categories, based on Lukes' three 'faces' of power – to examine the lived experience of two small cooperatives in the UK - Magpie Recycling in Brighton and Brixon Cycles in London.

2. The case:
Workers' cooperatives are specific types of institutions which organise themselves deliberately in a way to negate the hierarchy and inequality that characterises other organisations. They seek to handle power in such a way that inequalities are reduced and the dynamics of those involved in the collective activity reflect their equal worth in that activity, rather than the different attributes they may carry as individuals. The question is, how far do the levelling effects of a cooperative organisational structure really go?

3. The analysis:
Visible power: Observable decision making is one dimension where the cooperatives have consciously set things up to handle power equitably. Decisions are taken in an open, collective space (usually in a meeting format) to which all members are invited. In this space, transparency is evident and good arguments which are presented soundly tend to prevail, suggesting that it is functioning well.

Hidden power: However, the meeting is not a level playing field in several respects.
- The timing of meetings – in the evenings after work - means that on any given occasion it is more difficult for some to attend than others, and certain members are systematically less likely to get to the table – for instance, those with child-care responsibilities;
- Members admit that it requires confidence to speak out in such a public space, and that there are clearly some who are more comfortable than others to do so. In part this relates to knowledge and experience, meaning that there is a natural bias towards more participation by longer-standing, more knowledgeable members (which other members may find reasonable, particularly as both Coops do take steps to build members' knowledge of the collective work over time) but it also relates to personal characteristics which are less attainable for some;
- Agenda-setting is done quite openly and through a process to which all members have access but, again, some feel more reticent than others to bring their concerns into such a public forum, meaning that they may never make it to the table. In particular, raising difficult, controversial, and personal issues might be very difficult in this format. Similarly, cooperative members may opt not to raise issues that they

perceive will not be well received. These types of issues then remain off the agenda even though they may be important.

Invisible power: Some of the biases and exclusions that are evident as expressions of hidden power may well relate to the exercise of invisible power (although the investigator of this case was rightly at pains to recognise the difficulty of exploring invisible power on the basis of limited field work and avoid drawing firm conclusions).

Even raising the question of invisible power means looking out for things that suggest the internalisation of a particular role, behaviour or capacity, even where this does not apparently serve the person concerned and/or perpetuates inequality. The concerns of those members who feel their personalities do not equip them to speak up in meetings or to handle controversy could be seen in this light.

Looking for invisible power also involves paying attention to belief systems, values and systematised understandings of the way things work, and in this case the cooperatives are rather interesting:

- There is a clear inculcation of members into cooperative values, which involves an ideology of equality and a collective ethic in place of rampant individualism. Members all seem to buy into this and find it a positive and motivating part of their experience. Sharing the values also contributes to a strong sense of belonging, which members value to the point that they are often prepared to incur personal cost – for instance working more hours than they need to, making extra effort to get the job done well – in order to benefit the whole enterprise. As they experience this in a positive way it is hard to equate it with 'false consciousness' in the sense of acquiescing to their own exploitation, but it is certainly an expression of beliefs outweighing personal interests;
- Members are conscious of the real-life inequalities that exist in the coop despite their rhetorical attachment to equality – for instance, members recognise that some people are more likely to get away with bending rules than others are, based on their authority or longevity within the cooperative. It is invisible power which prevents other members from seeking to resolve this, to close the gap between rhetoric and reality by insisting that everyone abide by the rules absolutely. The fact that this is recognised, though, means that the inequality is handled consciously, reducing its power to undermine the cooperative. Pragmatically, it is perhaps more important to belong and to maintain relationships within an equal-ish set-up than to achieve absolute equality in practice and challenge the invisible authority of those with more responsibility or experience.
- Members have developed coping mechanisms for dealing with any frustrations around these issues or other minor irritations within the cooperative – particularly the use of subversive humour and calls to solidarity. These could be seen as means of handling real life unfairness without feeling unduly dominated. This is not to say that the inequality might ultimately be damaging, but that invisible power

made visible is coped with and resisted in good humour in a way that perhaps makes it less likely to lead to oppression and exclusion.

4. Implications & significance
Just taking one side of the Power Cube, this analysis paints a much richer picture and raises much deeper questions than a conventional analysis based on decision-making structures, formal authority and agenda-setting practices might. Rather than viewing gaps between reality and rhetoric as straightforward organisational pathologies, analysing them through the lens of power gives us insight into people's behaviour and choices which give them more agency and perhaps more room to manoeuvre.

It also illustrates how using one dimension of the cube can stimulate questions about another dimension which would take the analysis even further – for instance in this case there is clearly something very interesting about the particular nature of the space in which decisions are (formally) taken which frames the way the cooperative functions and how far it is able to live up to its equalising intentions.

Potentially these features mean that a study like this could be a very useful starting point for organisational development – in these cooperatives or in other organisations in which power is ostensibly handled in a deliberately equalising way and yet still plays out unequally. It demonstrates how organisational structures can shape power relations significantly and yet not determine them entirely – individual behaviour, personality and circumstance are all also important, both for allowing or perpetuating inequality, and for finding ways to handle it constructively in pursuit of consciously espoused values. People's experience of work emerges as much more subtle than 'dominate or be dominated', and in a cooperative more complex than 'we're all equal' or 'there's no power here'.

This type of analysis would allow an organisation to have some very interesting and potentially transformative discussions about its organisational development, opening up avenues for change beyond rigid adherence to an ideal.