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**REFRAMING GOVERNANCE: COMPETITION, FATALISM AND AUTONOMY  
IN CENTRAL-LOCAL RELATIONS**

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# **REFRAMING GOVERNANCE: COMPETITION, FATALISM AND AUTONOMY IN CENTRAL-LOCAL RELATIONS**

## **ABSTRACT**

Much of the work on contemporary governance points either to a strong central government that continues to operate hierarchically or else to a relatively weak centre which relies on network forms of coordination. In place of the choice between hierarchy and networks, the cultural theory pioneered by Mary Douglas draws our attention to five distinctive ‘social environments’ characterised in terms of hierarchy, individualism, egalitarianism, fatalism and autonomy. Based on an analysis of survey data collected from 488 local government managers across England, Scotland and Wales, this paper uses the Douglas framework to understand patterns of governance. While the data lend support to the strong centre theorists in revealing little evidence of a central-local partnership and continuing reliance on regulatory type instruments, we find this more a recipe for competition and fatalism than hierarchy. Our data also point to significant differences in governance style both across services and between countries.

## **INTRODUCTION**

There are increasing signs of a backlash against the predominant account of contemporary governance which charts a shift from a hierarchical system based on authoritative decision making and controlled implementation to networks galvanised by voluntarism and diplomacy. Commentators argue variously that hierarchy never stopped being important, or indeed that it has become more important over time (Bang 2011; Davies 2012; 6 2015). While some rebalancing of scholarship away from the new governance orthodoxy is helpful, the strong versus weak centre debate, as Laffin (2013) describes it, highlights a more profound problem in our understanding of governance. The key problem here is not whether governments use hard or soft instruments to advance their aims – clearly they use both – but whether we can hope to understand the complexity of governance in the binary and in some cases zero-sum terms suggested by this debate.

The cultural theory pioneered by Mary Douglas (1970; 1982; 1996) and increasingly adopted in the policy and political sciences (Swedlow 2011; 2014), provides us with one way of reframing our understanding of governance. Douglas acknowledges the central importance of authority and affinity in the organisation of social life but rather than envisaging these as opposite poles of a

continuum, she combines them as an intersection to generate five forms of organisation rather than two (Swedlow 2011). This arrangement has two main theoretical advantages. First it provides a more nuanced account of hierarchical and network forms of governance recognising, for example, that hierarchy – properly understood – requires a combination of both authoritative rules and subordinate participation. Second, in addition to the usual organisational categories, Douglas suggests three others – individualism, fatalism and autonomy – which promise new perspectives on the nature of contemporary governance.

We need a better understanding of the new governance first, if we are to know who we should hold to account. A hierarchical style of governance implies a very different set of accountability arrangements to a network form. Second, we need to be clear about how the new governance works if we are going to evaluate its effectiveness and efficiency. The rise of the new governance is attributable, in large measure, to a prospectus which claims an efficiency advantage over traditional bureaucratic structures. While it seems unlikely that there is, or could be, a simple answer to efficiency and effectiveness questions of this sort (although see Hood and Dixon 2015), the starting point for any systematic inquiry must be to understand the terrain as it currently lies.

Based on an analysis of survey data collected from 488 local government managers at the turn of 2012/13 across England, Scotland and Wales, this paper uses insights from Douglas's work to describe and better understand the relationships between central and local government. To that end we ask four questions. First, does the central-local relationship, as perceived by managers, look more like a hierarchy or a partnership? Second, to the extent that this is not the case, do the new categories suggested by Douglas – fatalism, individualism and autonomy – provide a better characterisation? Third, to what extent can variations in governance style be attributed to a country effect in which (for example) Scotland is governed rather differently to England? Or finally, does governance style vary across service areas such that managers in social care, for example, have a different relationship with their government to managers in sport, or other non-statutory functions?

The paper is organised into four parts. First, against the backdrop of the traditional models of contemporary governance we use cultural theory to identify five accounts of the relationship between central and local government. Second, we describe our survey of local government managers and make the case for an analysis pitched at both service and country level. Third, we present the results of that survey in the form of service and country means for each of our different

accounts of central-local relations. Fourth and finally, we discuss our findings and explore their implications for research and practice.

## **FROM TWO TO FIVE WAYS OF GOVERNING**

Commentators largely agree that decades of public sector reform – embracing marketisation, agencification and devolution – have led, certainly in Europe but perhaps less so in the US (Peters and Pierre 1998), to a more fragmented and diverse network of public service providers far removed from the archetypal, and perhaps apocryphal bureaucratic model of the post war period. Stoker (1998, p.19) describes the new structure of government as ‘fragmented with a maze of institutions and organizations’. Rhodes (1988, p.412) characterises the landscape in terms of ‘disaggregation, differentiation, interdependence’. Sorensen and Torfing (2009, p.235) talk of ‘increasingly complex, fragmented and multi-layered societies’. There is fundamental disagreement, however, about what these changes tell us about the way in which we are governed. Laffin (2013) suggests that two main accounts can be distinguished.

The first – weak centre account – maintains that processes of fragmentation and hollowing out have disempowered central governments and forced them to resort to a new set of policy tools or instruments (Jordan *et al.* 2005). Rhodes (1988) describes governance as negotiated in, and defined by, a series of professional networks in which recognising their interdependence, different stakeholders voluntarily come together to negotiate a common set of priorities. He argues that the ‘keys to effective network management’ lie in ‘facilitating, accommodating and bargaining’ (Rhodes 1996, p.665). Fragmentation and hollowing out have, according to Bevir and Rhodes (2003, p.58) ‘undermined the ability of the core-executive to act effectively, making it increasingly reliant on diplomacy’. Without ‘the knowledge and resource capacity to tackle problems unilaterally’ the interactive processes of the new governance rely, according to Stoker (1998, p.22) on ‘various forms of partnership’ in which actors ‘exchange resources and negotiate common purposes’. Peters and Pierre (1998, p. 226) describe a process in which the state ‘loses the capacity for direct control and replaces that faculty with a capacity for influence.’

In contrast, Laffin’s (2013) strong centre account, suggests that the hollowing out and fragmentation of service providers has served to maintain or even increase central government power, giving it greater control over service delivery than hitherto. Far from a government having to rely on the soft instruments of diplomacy, partnership and trust, the governance critics describe the centre as increasingly capable of exercising regulatory control. Marsh (2008, p.251) points to

‘the continued importance’ of hierarchy arguing indeed that it ‘remains a, perhaps the, dominant mode of governance’ (Marsh 2011, p.80). Taylor (1997, p.442) suggests that ‘complex networks may increase central control as the centre sheds costly and time consuming implementation tasks to concentrate on core functions of policy determination, monitoring and evaluation’. Davies (2002, p.316) describes the new partnerships to emerge from this landscape as little more than ‘the bureaucratic conduits of government policy’. Laffin *et al* (2014, p.772) point to the ‘persistence of bureaucratic and hierarchical structures’.

While these two positions represent the poles of an argument which has many shades, Laffin’s characterisation of them serves to make two important points. The first is a tendency, in some quarters, to see the business of government in binary and zero sum terms. While straightforward, flipping between command and control, on the one hand, and networks and diplomacy on the other, leaves us with a rather narrow lexicon which does not do justice to the varied ways in which governance is negotiated. The second, related point, stems from a tendency to conflate the instruments of intervention and the institutional structures which result. Just because governments adopt a panoply of regulatory arrangements does not mean that they have constructed a hierarchy properly understood. While a number of scholars point to alternative modes of governance (Bell *et al.* 2010; Knill and Tosun 2009), the interdependence of hierarchies and networks (Scharpf 1994; Grote 2012) and the agency of formally subordinate actors (Griggs and Sullivan 2014), there is, as Considine and Lewis (2003, p.132) observe, ‘no agreement at all about what is really replacing, or should replace, the administrative theory and model that has underpinned systems of governance in most advanced capitalist countries for almost 200 years.’

In distinguishing between ‘social integration’ through bonds of community and, ‘social regulation’ through the authoritative allocation of rules (group and grid respectively) Douglas’s theory (1982, p.201; 6, 2014, p.4) starts on familiar ground. Low group occurs, according to Douglas (1982, p.201), when ‘a person finds himself the centre of a network of his own making which has no recognisable boundaries. He knows people, they know people, and the social horizon is entirely indefinite’. A situation very close to the fragmented issue networks described by Hecló (1978, p.102) which ‘comprise a large number of participants with quite variable degrees of mutual commitment’ such that it is ‘almost impossible to say where a network leaves off and its environment begins.’ At the other end of the scale, high group, according to Douglas (1982, p.202), ‘incorporates a person with the rest by implicating them together in common residence, shared work, shared resources and recreation’ a definition which has strong parallels, with policy

communities characterized by ‘stability of relationships, continuity of a highly restrictive relationship . . . and insulation from other networks’ (Rhodes 1988, p.78).

Similarly, Douglas’s description of grid – as ‘the cross hatch of rules’ (1982, p.192) which at its strongest leaves ‘minimum scope for personal choice, providing instead a set of railway lines with remote control of points for interaction’ (Douglas 1982, p.202) – fits with the arguments of strong centre theorists. ‘No other country’, as Goldsmith (2002, p.109) explains, ‘has anything like the plethora of initiatives, special grants, powers over taxing and spending and regional oversight as does Britain.’ Lower levels of grid, by contrast, create ‘a competitive individualist environment’ (Douglas 1982, p.203) a condition consistent with Hoggett’s (1991, p.250) diagnosis of the ‘abandonment of control by hierarchy and its replacement with control by contract.’ The complete absence of grid suggests, as Swedlow (2014, p.468) puts it, a situation in which individuals (or organisations) ‘free from regulation’ and ‘free to act they please’ enjoy some autonomy, personal power or efficacy.

But whereas the strong/weak centre debate asks us to choose between these different approaches to government, the Douglas framework combines them. Rather than ‘plumping for one or the other’ of these forms of organisation, Douglas (1982, p.190) explains that both grid and group are ‘always present as possibilities’. In such a way Douglas (1982, p.190) plots group on the X axis and grid on the Y axis to generate five types of ‘social structure’. Drawing on the representation in Douglas (1982), figure 1 identifies the hierarchical form as both high grid, and high group; the egalitarian (or partnership) form as high group but low grid; the individualist (or competitive) form is low grid, low group; and the fatalist form high grid and low group. The autonomy form – located according to Douglas ‘off our map of social control’ (1982, p.204) – with neither the push of grid nor the pull of group is found at the origin of the graph.

#### FIGURE 1 THE FIVE SOCIAL STRUCTURES OF CULTURAL THEORY

The Douglas 2 by 2 plus 1 arrangement promises a number of advantages. It suggests first a more nuanced understanding of the two established accounts of the new governance (Entwistle 2010). The simple application of grid through issuing and policing rules of behaviour is not according to Douglas a sufficient condition for true hierarchy. Rather, Douglas draws a parallel with the Weberian account of the bureaucratic form of management (1970, p.87; 1999, p.411) and ‘the monastic life or military society’ (Douglas 1970, p.87). All of these hierarchical communities

require so much more than the simple issuance of rules. As Douglas (1970, p.80) explains, any control system has to be made reasonable to those subject to it; it must 'be justified, validated or legitimated as Weber put it'. Focused on exactly this issue, Du Gay (2008) describes the huge organisational effort required to ensure that bureaucrats are inculcated in the spirit of the office through technical training, salaries, pensions, promotion and so forth. Governments which make the mistake of thinking that their goals can be realised by authoritative decisions and precise prescription, but without the broader institutional traits of a bureaucracy, are according Marsh and Rhodes (1992, pp. 186-7), condemned to serial policy failure.

The Douglas framework further suggests that the important qualities of network governance do not reside in structural characteristics – like network centrality or density – but rather in the cultural bonds of community that bind individuals into a common enterprise. If governments really want to govern through partnerships, they need to foster the communal bonds that Douglas describes as high group. Crucially though, according to Douglas, this can only be possible in the absence of the strong directives and status differences of high grid. In high group, she explains, the members of a community, or in our terms a partnership or network, 'are not conscious of remote control' (Douglas 1970, p.88). The suggestion that partnerships cannot be directed and controlled without turning them into hierarchies chimes with one prominent account of network effectiveness. Scholars focussed on the behavioural qualities of partnership type structures (Huxham and Vangen 2004) emphasise the importance of common goals and trust while pointing to evidence that the voluntary negotiation of coordinated action – particularly across the still lively siloes of hierarchical governance – can be halting to say the least (Teisman and Klijn 2002; although 6 *et al.* (2006) provide an alternative view).

Alongside refinements of our understanding of two well established accounts of governance, the Douglas framework draws our attention to three other organisational possibilities. Fitting into the bottom left hand quadrant – dubbed individualism – of low grid and low group is 'a social context dominated by strongly competitive conditions' (Douglas 1982, p.207). In the context of central local relations, this would mean that local governments would find themselves competing both amongst themselves but also with other service providers in the public, non-profit and private sectors. Competition might manifest itself in a number of different ways. Local governments may compete for access and influence over government such that policy may reflect the balance of power between competing interests rather as Dunleavy and O'Leary (1987, pp.43-44) put it, a weathervane reflects the direction of the wind. Competition for reputation – so called 'yardstick

competition’ – might manifest itself in column inches in the local government press, relative position in performance league tables or representation in award schemes of one form or another (Benz 2012). Finally, local governments may compete for grants and contracts. An approach to government designed, according to John *et al* (2004, p. 406), to ensure ‘that bidders make promises to improve public services in order to get ahead of their rivals.’ Although high in political salience, this competitive or rivalrous account of public management is surprisingly under theorised (although for exceptions see Considine and Lewis, 2003; Knill and Tosun 2009; and most importantly, Benz 2007; 2012).

As we have already seen, Douglas sees the combination of high grid and low group as fostering, not bureaucratic compliance, but fatalist resignation. Fatalists, according to Douglas (1970, p.90), ‘wander through a forest of regulations, imponderable forces are represented by forms to complete in triplicate, parking meters, inexorable laws’. ‘High levels of prescription’ but ‘minimal collective participation’ (Dake 1992, p. 29) will incline subjects to comply reluctantly with edicts which they feel little investment in. Managers will perceive themselves, as Thompson *et al* (1999, p.5) put it, ‘subject to binding prescriptions . . . but excluded from membership of the solidarities that are responsible for making decisions’. Although an intriguing notion, the idea that a regulatory mode of governance without subordinate participation may foster fatalism has been used little in the public management literature. Hood (2000) and Stoker (2002) suggest that governments may deliberately foster fatalism through contrived randomness (job rotation, unannounced inspection and lotteries) in a bid to keep public managers on their toes. But little has been said about the way in which fatalism may emerge more by accident than design (although see 6 *et al* 2002). Hood (2000) comes close to considering this position with his category of sceptical resignation, which sees the folly of grand ambition and unintended consequences as recurrent themes of government. But in this, Hood (2000) seems to see fatalism as rooted more in the human condition than the specific combination of high grid and low group. Others do attribute fatalism to specific organisational contingencies. Lipsky’s (1980, p.82) classic account of the coping mechanisms adopted by street level bureaucrats is explained by the fact that the job ‘is impossible to do in ideal terms’. There is though, little consensus on the coping mechanisms likely to emerge under fatalist conditions. Street level bureaucrats, or indeed managers more broadly, may react to the conflicts inherent in their position in a number of different ways. “‘Why bother?’” is the rational risk management strategy’, according to Dake (1992, p.30), but muddling through, tossing a coin, copying fashionable solutions, symbolism, gaming and even sabotage are all possible responses (Douglas 1996, p.94; 6 *et al* 2002, p.73).

Last, but certainly not least, Douglas's early work recognised a fifth mode of organisation which is, as she puts it, 'off our map of social control' (Douglas 1982, p.204). Describing the autonomy position as that of the hermit or voluntary recluse, perhaps it is not surprising that commentators have found little use for this category. It is clear, however, that the idea of granting organisations the autonomy to perform particular functions – deliberately removing them from the distortive influences of grid and group – is a recurrent theme of constitutional design. Federal systems endow lower levels of government with the autonomy to develop distinctive solutions to the problems facing their area (Hooghe and Marks 2013). 'Indeed, it is', as Pratchett (2004, p.358) explains, 'almost impossible to discuss the relationship between central and local government, or the political context of local government more generally, without substantial reference to concepts of local autonomy.' But the relevance of autonomy is not restricted to constitutional design. In rolling back the bureaucratic-professional structures of traditional public service delivery, the new governance promises to unleash a new entrepreneurialism (Osborne and Gaebler 1992; Thynne and Wettenhall 2004). As in our other categories, we apply the autonomy idea only to the relationship between local and central government. We make no claim about the individual autonomy of particular managers nor indeed of the relationship between a particular service and its local stakeholders. Just as Douglas's hermit, free from grid and group, may feel heavily constrained by the cave she inhabits, our service managers may enjoy considerable autonomy from central government but be heavily constrained by other forces.

In theoretical terms the Douglas framework fits with existing accounts of governance at the same time as it provides new lines of inquiry. It suggests caution in the identification of hierarchical and network forms of governance and it directs our attention towards three other forms of organisation – in terms of individualism, fatalism and autonomy – which have not perhaps received the attention they deserve. Just as importantly, it switches our attention from the modes of intervention adopted by governments (expressed in terms of the kind of instruments they deploy) to the institutional arrangements they wittingly or unwittingly create. Whereas some scholarship conflates the modes and styles of governance on the assumption that the instruments of command will deliver control, Douglas explicitly distinguishes between modes of coordination and the broader institutional structures which result. Governments may draw on the rhetoric of partnership in some areas and put in place the instruments of command and control in others, but neither will guarantee the realisation of partnership or hierarchy in practice. In the next section we

describe our data and the way we have analysed it, before considering how well these lines of inquiry work in an empirical setting.

## **METHODS**

We use the Douglas framework to understand the relationship between central and local government in the constituent nations of the UK. Local government provides a good case for our inquiry because it accounts for about a third of total public expenditure over a broad range of different services. Furthermore, the study of the relationship between central and local government provided the empirical foundation for Rhodes' development of the governance idea (Rhodes 1988). With their own local democratic mandate, tendencies towards 'disaggregation, differentiation, interdependence' (Rhodes 1988, p.412) should be stronger in local government services than in other more centralised parts of the public sector.

Following the tradition of other recent studies of inter-governmental relations (McAteer and Bennett, 2005) we adopted an actor-centred approach focused on the perceptions of senior managers working in local government. The constitutional position as laid out in formal laws and documents may not provide a very good guide to the reality of intergovernmental relations (Fleurke and Willemse 2006). Senior managers, by contrast, are well placed to report on the perhaps informal reality of the relationship with central government because they spend all their professional lives at the coal face of public service delivery. We captured the views of our managers by sending electronic and paper surveys to the population of 2348 heads of service in 110 unitary authorities (56 England, 32 Scotland and 22 Wales) identified in a commercial database. The sample was made up of 14 heads of a range of frontline and back office functions, manual and white collar services, and statutory and discretionary activities in local authorities. When we closed the survey in February 2013, 21% of the sample had returned useable surveys (200/1149 England; 92/567 Scotland; 196/632 Wales).

The managers we surveyed were asked to respond to a series of separate statements (figure 2) on seven point Likert scales ranging from 'strongly disagree' (coded 1) to 'strongly agree' (coded 7). With little earlier work to draw on, we designed statements to capture views on the five perspectives on central-local relations we have described. Drawing on a policy cycle approach (Parsons 1995), we asked managers about central government's role in the policy process, service delivery, performance management and resource allocation. Assuming that the tasks associated with these different stages of the policy cycle can be performed in different but functionally

comparable ways, we asked four questions for each function designed to capture grid and group but also the extent to which managers enjoyed autonomy or were subject to competition in their relationship with government.

### *Policy Making*

In high grid we would expect policy decisions to be made by those in elite positions such that local government managers will feel they have a very limited say in the policy process. In high group, central government will negotiate its policy with local government or its representatives believing itself to be dependent on local government's expertise and delivery capacity. Agranoff (2001, p.33) describes an 'ideal world of collaboration' where 'officials work together to develop policies and programs of mutual benefit.' The competitive style of organisation suggests that the policy process will take the form of a competition in which different interests both from inside and outside local government, fight for voice in and influence on, the authoritative decisions made by the state. Finally, in a world of high autonomy, local government managers will feel largely unaffected by central government policy.

### *Funding*

In high grid, local income and expenditure decisions will largely be determined at the centre. Local taxes will be tightly controlled through capping and complex rebalancing mechanisms. Resources will be channelled to local governments in the form of specific or earmarked grants which 'must be used according to orders' (Oulasvirta 1997, p.401). The high group account suggests that income and expenditure decisions will be negotiated between local and central government. Rather than channelling money to local authorities on the basis of negotiations or a centrally designed formula, competitive models of funding distribution will be characterised by a bidding process and a conditional, contract or reward type element which requires proof of delivery. Observing tendencies towards these forms of resource allocation in Germany, Benz (2007, p.429) explains that a 'considerable amount of federal money is no longer allocated to regions in need but to regions achieving performance standards or proving to be innovative'. Finally in conditions of high autonomy local governments will be free to allocate resources between different services as they see fit.

## FIGURE 2 MEASURES

### *Guiding Practice*

In high grid, central government will devote considerable effort to controlling the delivery processes and practices of local authorities. Elaborate arrangements for inspection or regulation ensure services are delivered to 'legally defined standards' (Page and Goldsmith 1985, p.179). In a group approach, good practice will be co-produced in joint conferences and workshops in which central government acts as a broker, voluntarily communicating knowledge through practitioner and professional networks and communities. The competitive model suggests that local service providers compete to innovate and develop best practice. With considerable autonomy, local managers will be free to organise their processes and practices as they see fit.

### *Managing Performance*

Following Hood (2012), high grid approaches to performance management require the collection of standardised performance information which can then be used to identify performance targets or floors. The high group approach suggests that performance indicators and targets are best negotiated between partners. Mark Friedman (2005, pp.12-13), the doyen of the network approach to performance management explains: 'By using common sense measures, we can be honest with ourselves about whether or not we are making progress'. The competition mode suggests that straightforward and comparable performance information – league tables, star ratings and so forth – can foster user choice and intra-service rivalry. Adab *et al* (2002, p. 96) explain, that the advocates of these approaches 'believe their publication stimulates competition, and that, as each provider adopts "best practice," the quality of services will improve'. In a world of high autonomy, local governments will be free to manage their performance in line with local requirements.

### *Fatalism*

With little agreement in the literature on the managerial response to fatalist conditions, we reasoned that fatalism could not be researched in quite the same way as our other modes of organisation. There is no consensus in the literature on what a fatalist perspective on policy, funding, practice and performance would look like. Although not clear on what fatalism means for management, cultural theory does provide a clear account of what the fatalist condition feels like. 'Excluded from the other ways of organizing social life' (Dake 1992, pp.29), Thompson, Ellis and Wildavsky (1990, p.224) characterise fatalism as a 'learned (and rational) response to a distant, capricious, and unresponsive power imposed from without'. Accordingly, we measured levels of fatalist sentiment by asking two questions focused: first on the restrictions imposed by government and second on their coherence. We take it that respondents who answered these questions positively feel heavily constrained by a capricious government.

We analyse the data at two levels. First, following Griffith (1966), we presume that central local relations will vary by service area. The day to day business of British government is conducted in strongly delineated departments, 'silos' or 'chimneys' as officials refer to them, in which ministers and officials have a high degree of policy autonomy. Writing in 1966, Griffith's survey of UK central government departments distinguished between regulatory, laissez-faire, and promotional approaches to the relationship with local government. The Home Office, according to Griffith was, 'disciplinary and regulatory' (1966, p.520), 'concerned to see . . . that the statutory regulations are kept' (1966, p.519); the old Ministry of Health had a 'laissez-faire' attitude to local authorities, 'a positive philosophy' as Griffiths describes it 'of as little interference as possible' (1966, p.515); whereas 'no other department supervises and assists the work of local authorities to the same extent' as the 'promotional' Department of Education and Science (1966, pp.522-523). Although the names of departments have changed, we presume that the distinctiveness of different services remains.

Second, particularly since devolution, it is possible that different countries will exhibit important differences in policy style (Cairney 2009; 2011). There is, as McConnell puts it, a 'village life' (2006, p.79) quality in the devolved administrations in which policy elites have close personal connections and similarities in outlook. Writing about Scotland after the formation of the SNP minority government, Arnott and Ozga (2010, p.339) detect 'a shift in governing mode from close central surveillance to the setting of a direction through reference to a shared "project" that is constructed discursively'. Jeffery (2006, p.62) argues that: 'Shared experience, proximity, and interdependence have provided strong foundations for translating some of the predevolution aspirations on partnership into practice'. This is in stark contrast to England, where local government's representatives are, according to Laffin (2004), consistently held at arm's length. Accordingly, with a presumption that devolution will make a difference, we asked respondents to consider their relationship with their respective government whether it be in London, Edinburgh or Cardiff.

By calculating an average score for each of our 14 services in 3 countries we have a total of 42 service means. Together with three overall country means, our data set provides an insight into differences of governance both between service areas and across countries. We present these data in two scatter plots (figures 3 and 4) where the mid-point of the scale (4) is used as the intersection of the x and y axes. In such a way we took scores of less than 4 (on the disagree side of the line) as indicative of low grid and low group. Relatively small sample sizes mean that data points

(particularly at the service level) which are close to 4 are perhaps better interpreted as occupying a neutral or grey area between agree and disagree.

While our analysis is based on a large number of respondents from the whole population of service managers, the descriptive reliability of perceptual research is sometimes questioned particularly when all of the data are drawn from the same survey. Social desirability bias suggests that respondents may give higher ratings or a more positive assessment – particularly to things like partnership – which they take to be the desirable answers (Spector 2006). Response bias may however work the other way – through so called negative affectivity – where respondents might, for example, give an unduly pessimistic account of the nature of the central-local relationship (Spector 2006). Our respondents may, for example, have purposively exaggerated the extent to which they are controlled by their respective Government in a bid to increase their autonomy. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, common source bias can ‘either inflate or deflate observed relationships between constructs’ (Podsakoff *et al* 2003, p.880). As far as possible we countered these tendencies by framing our questions in neutral terms and sequencing them randomly through the survey.

## **FINDINGS**

The service and country averages for grid and group are reported in the scatter plot in figure 3. While the vast majority of our data points are located on the left hand side of the chart indicating low group scores, managers from four Scottish services and two Welsh ones agree, on average, with the group statements, although both country means are in disagree territory. The English respondents, by contrast, are much more sceptical in their assessment of our group statements. All of the English services are on the disagree part of the group scale with the country average markedly lower than that of Scotland or Wales. The service story on the group scale is harder to discern. Housing and education in Scotland and Wales have amongst the highest group scores, but education in England has the lowest score on the chart.

With the exception of a few Scottish and Welsh services – which point, albeit with some small numbers, to something of the negotiation and compromise that weak centre theorists suggest – the data contradict the suggestion that central governments work in partnership with local government. The central-local relationship – certainly in England and Wales – does not feel like a partnership for this sample of respondents. It should be said, however, that the group scale highlights marked differences in governance style between the three countries. Whether because

of their small size or a deliberate determination to do things differently, both Scotland and Wales have much higher group scores than England. But even in Scotland where the evidence of partnership is greatest, the country average is in the grey area between agree and disagree suggesting perhaps – as Scottish law puts it – that the case for partnership is not proven

### FIGURE 3 GRID AND GROUP

The arguments developed by strong centre theorists find more support in these data. Approximately half of the services we surveyed agreed – on average – with our grid statements, suggesting for some services at least, governments makes policy, direct practice and allocate funding in relatively grid like ways. At the country level, the English and Welsh service managers report a significantly greater dependence on the instruments of command and control than in Scotland but the country averages are all drawn to the mid point of the scale by two very different service accounts of central local relations.

Irrespective of their country, managers working in high profile and expensive services – education and social care specifically – report a greater dependence on grid type instruments than their counterparts working in sport, democratic and back office functions. Indeed differences of governance style between services appear large enough to over power differences of style between countries. In such a way the three different country grid scores for education, child and adult social care are all very close. While Scottish and Welsh managers enjoy more of a partnership with their respective governments, the extent of grid type regulation is perceived similarly either side of the border. But while there is evidence of grid, only three services: education (in Scotland and Wales) and housing (in Wales) meet the Douglas conditions – of high grid and high group – for a genuinely hierarchical relationship between central and local government. According to these data, while governments use grid type instruments, they fail to cultivate the sense of ownership or participation of truly hierarchical organisation.

With low group scores, these data suggest that UK central-local relations – in England, Scotland and Wales – are on the left hand side of the Douglas chart; a place where three interesting but largely undocumented things might be happening. The combination of low grid and low group creates, according to Douglas, conditions for individualism or competitive rivalry. The combination of high grid and low group – seen particularly in social care – should, according to

Douglas, translate into fatalism. Very low scores for both of these things – as seen in sport, democratic and back office services – might mean that the governance of these services may best be characterised in terms of their autonomy from central government. We consider these possibilities in reverse order.

The autonomy story is relatively straight forward and consistent with expectations. The Douglas framework suggests that where service managers perceive themselves to be free from grid or group type mechanisms of control, they will enjoy a relatively autonomous position. We tested this hypothesis with our separate autonomy statements (appendix 1). Seven services – sport (in all three countries), democratic services and transport (in Scotland) and housing and back office functions like HR and ICT (in Wales) – had autonomy scores equal to, or greater than 4, suggesting that in these areas, managers perceive themselves as enjoying autonomy from their governments. As suggested by Douglas, services at the lowest end of our grid and group scales seem, to all intents and purposes, to be ‘off the map’ of central-local relations with a relationship with their respective government better characterised in terms of detachment or autonomy, than grid or group like constraint. That is not to say, of course, that service managers feel free from all disciplining forces. While enjoying autonomy from their respective central government, they may still feel tightly bound at the European or local level or even more broadly still by the financial constraints of the post-crash fiscal environment.

Results for competition and fatalism are plotted in figure 4 with competition on the x axis and fatalism on the y axis. Overall – and contrary to the relationship suggested by cultural theory – the two sets of measures are positively correlated. At one extreme some managers report both competition and fatalism while others reject both descriptions. These data contradict the suggestion that competition between services is a default mode which emerges in low grid and group. Rather, we find a number of high grid services – education, regeneration, waste – agreeing with our competition statements whereas the low grid services (democratic services and sport) disagree. Governments seem to throw the kitchen sink at some services – directing them with high grid instruments – but also encouraging them to compete for their money, performance, influence and reputation. Unfortunately, however, the more their respective central governments throw at them, the more inclined are managers to view their governments in fatalist terms.

FIGURE 4 COMPETITION / FATALISM

At the country level service managers in England and Wales are considerably more inclined to a fatalist view of their governments than are the Scots. Both country averages are in unequivocally fatalist terrain in comparison to the neutral Scottish position. Perceived levels of competition, like grid, vary considerably between services with the highest levels reported in education and regeneration. Overall, the Scottish and English country averages indicate disagreement with the competition statements whereas the Welsh country average falls narrowly into the agree part of the competition scale.

## **CONCLUSION**

Based on a survey of 488 service managers working in local governments across England, Scotland and Wales, this paper has used the Douglas framework to understand the way in which local managers perceive their relationship with their respective government. Taken together, the analysis suggests two new perspectives on the nature of contemporary governance.

First, the data do not sit comfortably with the weak centre theorists who suggest that the new governance is characterised by interdependence, diplomacy and partnership. None of our country scores were consistent with these terms. Devolution does though make a difference. Perceptions of central-local partnership vary markedly between the three countries. Although none of the country averages are located within the partnership quadrant, our Scottish respondents gave significantly higher rating to our group statements than did their counterparts in England and Wales. Similarly, the Scottish respondents gave a lower rating to competition and fatalism and a higher score to autonomy than their counterparts in England and Wales. As suggested in parts of the devolution literature (McAteer and Bennett 2005; Cairney 2011), central-local relations does genuinely seem to be rather different north of the border.

Second, perceptions of central-local relations differ between service areas. High profile and expensive services – like education and social care – report heavy dependence on regulatory instruments coexisting with conditions of competitive rivalry. Furthermore, and contrary to cultural theory, we find that fatalist sentiment is strongest amongst these high grid, high competition services. At the other end of the scale, managers working in sport, democratic and back office functions – by contrast but perhaps not surprisingly – disagreed with this characterisation of their relationship with government. Respondents in these service areas report neither regulation nor competitive rivalry. Occupying, or close to, neutral territory on the fatalism scale, our autonomy questions seem to come closest to capturing the experience of managers in

these service areas. In place of the regulatory relationship described by the high priority services, the low profile and back office functions of local government just do not have a relationship with central government. They are, as Douglas might have put it, off the map of central-local control.

The practical significance of these findings depends upon presumptions about the organisation of inter-governmental relations. A strong normative argument suggests that the autonomy of democratically elected local governments should be respected in a partnership type relationship with central government. From this perspective, evidence that governments depend more on the instruments of regulation and competition than partnership style negotiations, could be seen as an affront to local democracy, and in Wales at least, evidence of 'regional centralism' where the 'newly established regional governments tend to grasp powers from the local governments in their jurisdictions' (Laffin 2004, p.214). Others may ask, in purely instrumental terms, which mode of governance works best? The conventional wisdom in public management suggests that excessively top-down or regulatory forms of governance are doomed to implementation failure (Rhodes and Marsh 1992). The evidence presented in this paper indeed suggests that the harder central government's push – in terms of regulation and competition – the more inclined are managers to perceive their actions in fatalist terms. The implications of that fatalism are not clear. Existing work suggests that a fatalist disposition may prompt a number of different responses from gaming to sabotage (6 *et al* 2002, p.73). If fatalist sentiment is as widespread as these data suggest, there is a pressing need for research into its causes and consequences.

Theoretically, parts of these data sit comfortably with the Douglas framework. The intersecting measures of grid and group allow us to distinguish between services and countries in an insightful way. Although some of our data points are on the boundaries between grid and group – the 'grey mish-mash' as Thompson (2008, p.139) describes it – our questions flushed out large and important differences of perception both between countries and service areas. Some of the flip sides of grid and group also find support in these data. High grid and low group does indeed seem to translate into fatalism whereas, as suggested by the theory, services with the lowest grid and group scores agree with our autonomy statements. The data do, however, raise questions about the application of the Douglas framework to the analysis of inter-governmental relations.

First should we measure the presence of hierarchy (together with egalitarianism, individualism and fatalism) or rather rely on the grid/group scales to do the job? While earlier attempts to operationalise cultural theory focused on the four ideal types, at least implicitly treating grid and

group as of theoretical but not empirical importance, we have followed more recent work in emphasising, and trying to measure, the presence of grid and group (for a review see Maleki and Hendriks 2014). Gauging the presence of hierarchy, for example, through the combination of high grid *and* high group does though present problems. While it is true that hierarchies need to give their members a sense of participation, work on hierarchical forms of organisation suggest that this is achieved in very different ways to those apparent in high group/low grid cultures. As Anderson and Brown (2010, p.75) explain, hierarchies motivate individuals to contribute to the group by offering, amongst other things, ‘high rank as a reward for self-sacrifice’. But status differences of this type are, of course, anathema to high group cultures. That is to say, while hierarchies may in theoretical terms be high group, the practical ways in which community is manifested and sustained in hierarchical communities may be fundamentally different to those apparent in high group/low grid cultures.

The second issue highlighted by these data is apparent in the hybrids uncovered by asking about the four or five cultural forms rather than just grid and group. That local governance may best represented as a hybrid of high-grid and high-competition is not perhaps surprising (Rippl 2002). Douglas and Wildavsky (1983, p.181) explain that: ‘Market and hierarchy make a formidably stable combination’, but while they describe a tendency to tip from one polarised position to another, our respondents report a combination of both high grid *and* high competition. Rather than competitive type conditions emerging by default as low levels of grid and group take us back to an economic state of nature in which everyone is in it for themselves, these data suggest that rivalry is consciously cultivated by governments through the deployment of distinctive instruments. As Benz (2012, p.253) suggests ‘Besides procedures and rules of fairness’, the cultivation of inter-governmental competition: requires a higher level of government to ‘define standards and provide for comparative “benchmarking” or rankings’ which pit one organisation against another. With only a snapshot of opinion – gathered at the dawn of the new austerity – we cannot know whether this apparently high grid (and often fatalist) competition points to a temporary and unstable hybrid position which will inevitably dissolve into some other arrangement, problems in the way we phrased our questions, difficulties in the theorisation of individualist environments or indeed the need for a third dimension of cultural theory (Maleki and Hendriks 2014).

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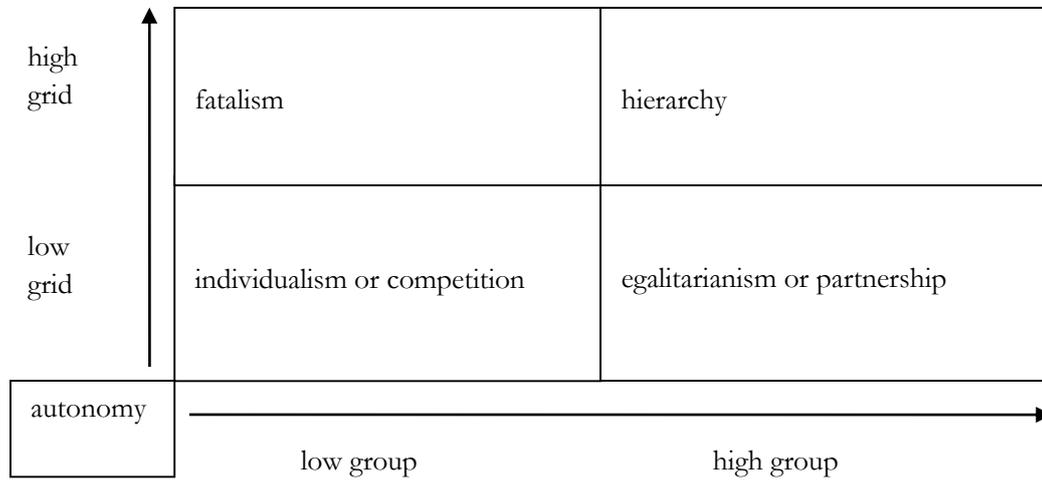
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**FIGURE 1 THE FIVE SOCIAL STRUCTURES OF CULTURAL THEORY**

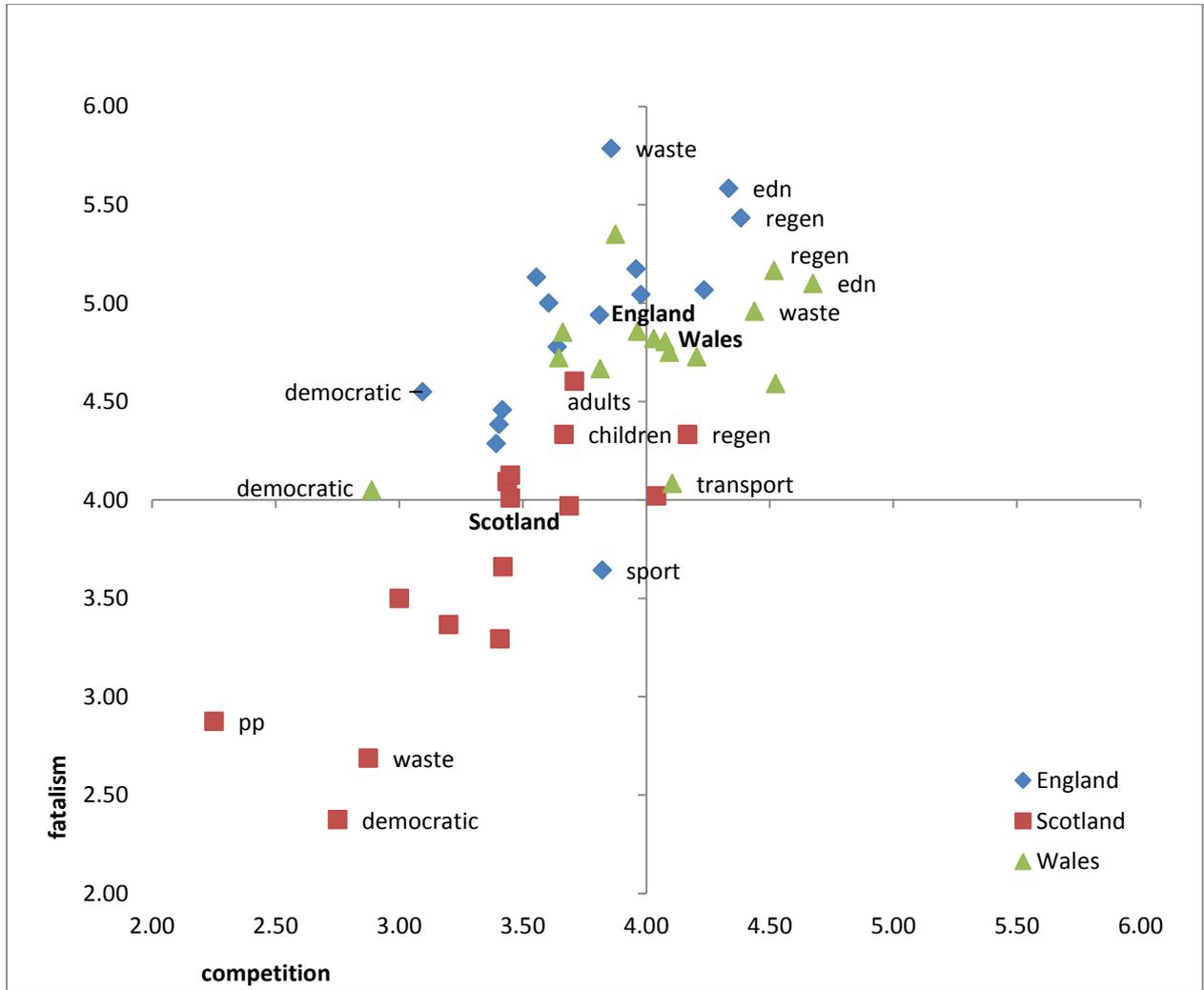


**FIGURE 2 MEASURES**

<b>category</b>	<b>Question</b> ('strongly disagree' coded 1 to 'strongly agree' coded 7)
Group	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The Government usually develops policies in partnership with my service</li> <li>2. The Government helps my service to tackle practical problems</li> <li>3. The funding which my service receives is decided through negotiation with the Government</li> <li>4. Performance indicators in my service reflect a balance of national and local priorities</li> </ol>
Grid	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The Government makes policy in my service area without proper consultation</li> <li>2. External inspections have a very significant impact on my service</li> <li>3. My service benefits from specific and/or ring fenced grants provided by the Government</li> <li>4. The Government's performance management frameworks lead my service to focus on national priorities rather than local ones</li> </ol>
Competition	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. My service has to compete to ensure that its voice is heard in the Government's policy process</li> <li>2. The Government uses performance indicators in my service to encourage competition between authorities</li> <li>3. The funding that my service receives is allocated through bids we make in competition with other authorities</li> <li>4. The Government encourages my service to compete with others for recognition as an example of best practice</li> </ol>
Autonomy	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The Government has no direct policy influence on my service</li> <li>2. The Government allows my service to work out the best way to deliver policies at local level</li> <li>3. The Government doesn't have a major say in the allocation of funding between services</li> <li>4. Performance indicators in my service are determined locally</li> </ol>
Fatalism	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The government places a lot of restrictions on my service</li> <li>2. Different Government departments seem to have conflicting policies for my service</li> </ol>



**FIGURE 4 COMPETITION AND FATALISM**



## Appendix 1 Mean Scores

	England Group	England Grid	England Autonomy	England Comp	England Fatalism	Scotland Group	Scotland Grid	Scotland Autonomy	Scotland Comp.	Scotland Fatalism	Wales Group	Wales Grid	Wales Autonomy	Wales Comp.	Wales Fatalism
<b>country</b>	2.78	4.15	3.32	3.81	4.94	3.92	3.83	3.70	3.45	4.01	3.53	4.4	3.54	4.03	4.82
<b>corporate</b>	2.82	4.54	3.34	3.98	5.04	4.02	3.79	3.73	3.42	3.66	3.41	4.45	3.44	3.88	5.35
<b>democratic</b>	2.33	3.60	3.50	3.09	4.55	3.67	3.08	4.00	2.75	2.38	2.65	3.25	3.58	2.89	4.05
<b>education</b>	2.25	5.08	2.25	4.33	5.58	4.34	4.42	3.52	3.41	3.29	4.01	4.88	3.59	4.68	5.10
<b>finance</b>	2.56	4.14	3.50	3.60	5.00	3.97	3.47	3.67	3.20	3.37	3.35	4.24	3.80	3.81	4.67
<b>housing</b>	2.96	3.18	2.89	3.39	4.29	4.46	3.94	3.75	3.69	3.97	4.09	4.77	4.25	4.52	4.59
<b>back office</b>	3.06	3.65	3.37	3.40	4.38	3.33	3.00	2.88	3.00	3.50	3.19	3.75	4.35	3.65	4.72
<b>planning</b>	2.73	3.51	3.15	3.55	5.13	4.67	3.25	3.83	4.04	4.02	3.44	4.03	3.69	4.09	4.75
<b>protection</b>	2.60	4.13	3.27	3.42	4.46	3.63	3.67	3.25	2.25	2.88	3.27	4.32	3.36	3.96	4.86
<b>regeneration</b>	3.22	4.35	3.17	4.38	5.43	3.71	3.88	2.88	4.17	4.33	3.21	4.67	3.75	4.52	5.17
<b>adults</b>	2.77	4.63	3.10	3.96	5.17	3.54	4.67	2.75	3.71	4.60	3.88	4.61	3.20	4.08	4.80
<b>children</b>	2.95	4.91	3.30	4.23	5.07	3.42	4.83	3.25	3.67	4.33	3.62	5.01	3.01	3.66	4.85
<b>sport</b>	2.32	2.86	4.36	3.82	3.64	3.38	3.56	4.38	3.44	4.09	3.55	3.70	4.00	4.20	4.73
<b>transport</b>	3.14	3.42	3.72	3.64	4.78	4.00	3.55	4.35	3.45	4.13	3.67	4.15	3.79	4.10	4.08
<b>waste</b>	2.50	3.36	3.14	3.86	5.79	3.25	3.50	3.88	2.88	2.69	3.50	4.75	2.88	4.44	4.96