Collaborative public procurement: Institutional explanations of legitimised resistance

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the barriers to regional collaborative procurement developed from an action research study of five UK public authorities in the emergency services sector. Despite political pressure to procure collaboratively, strategic avoidance responses of institutional logics and symbolic tick boxing legitimise stakeholder resistance to isomorphic forces and entrench operational barriers. The prevailing institutional logics are that regional collaborative procurement is unsuitable and risky, derived from procurement's lack of status and the emotive nature of the emergency services. Symbolic tick boxing is seen through collaboration that is limited to high profile spend categories, enabling organisations to demonstrate compliance while simultaneously retaining local decision-making for less visible, but larger areas of spend. The findings expose choice mechanisms in public procurement by exploring tensions arising from collaborative procurement strategies within, and between, organisations. Multiple stakeholders' perspectives add to current thinking on how organisations create institutional logics to avoid institutional pressure to procure collaboratively and how stakeholders legitimise their actions.

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1. Introduction

The UK public sector spent £109billion on the procurement of goods and services in 2013 (HM Treasury, 2013b). Major external events such as the global financial crisis and subsequent shifts in institutional configurations have caused significant effects on the environment for public procurement, including austerity, changes to financial governance and the need to generate large scale efficiency savings (Prowle and Harradine, 2014). The 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review saw the UK government embark on a reduction of public sector spend and the implementation of a period of austerity that underlined the centrality of financial resources in the public sector (Kioko et al., 2011). Public sector collaboration is seen as an imperative to deliver value for money (HM Treasury, 2013a) but gaps exist in understanding its origins, prevalence and impact on organisational performance (Dunleavy et al., 2006; Wright and Pandey, 2010). Collaborative procurement is increasingly on the public policy agenda (Walker et al., 2013) as it can deliver savings, promote financial transparency, rationalise specifications and simplify evaluation processes (Gobbi and Hsuan,

2015). Despite the government rhetoric of the benefits and importance of collaborative procurement, uptake across the public sector is low, exacerbated by a lack of quality, consistent spend data (HM Treasury, 2009a). A number of studies have explored collaboration with public service providers (c.f, Kioko et al., 2011; Hefetz and Warner, 2012; Lamothe and Lamothe, 2012) but there remains a paucity of research on the barriers and enablers of collaborative public procurement within member organisations (Walker et al., 2013).

The paper presents an exploration of how public procurement organisations respond to institutional pressures (Oliver, 1991; Pache and Santos, 2010). Institutional theory explains how the institutional environment influences and establishes an organisation's structures, norms and rules, and how these become resilient, legitimatised guidelines for social behaviour (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Zucker, 1987). Institutional theory is a useful lens to explore the challenges of implementing collaborative procurement in practice because it highlights the tensions between achieving legitimacy and achieving efficiency (Ashworth et al., 2009). Collaborative procurement policies create tensions between cost, compliance and quality considerations across intra-organisational stakeholder groups, and between inter-organisational collaborating authorities, where different social values, rules and rationalities may exist. For example, collaborative regional procurement may provide scale economy benefits (Gobbi

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and Hsuan, 2015) but reduce devolved decision-making control or compromise the delivery of locally-appropriate solutions (CLGC, 2014). Institutional theory provides a deeper understanding of why, and how, internal decision makers can resist external pressures to implement collaborative public procurement.

There have been calls for public procurement research to focus on behavioural aspects of collaboration (Hefetz and Warner, 2012; Lamothe and Lamothe, 2012; Walker et al., 2013). Research centred on behaviours and resistance is relevant given the apparent low uptake of collaborative public procurement strategies (HM Treasury, 2009a), despite potential commercial benefits that these can deliver (Schotanus et al., 2011). Using a longitudinal (2 year) action research study of five public authorities in the UK's emergency services sector we build on work that suggests that full compliance with institutional demands is neither realistic nor possible and in some cases pressure is ignored by decision-makers (Pache and Santos, 2010). Action research provides a method for deep understanding of the actors, interactions and behaviours over time (Woodside and Wilson, 2003), and reveals issues on which action can be taken (Coughlan and Coghlan, 2002).

The iterative nature of the action research study developed two core research questions:

1) What are the barriers preventing collaborative procurement in the emergency services of the UK public sector?
2) How is resistance to collaborative procurement legitimised in the emergency services of the UK public sector?

The results are expected to provide a deeper understanding of how internal stakeholders resist and legitimise pressures to collaborate through exposing the underlying determinants of strategic responses to institutional pressures. Covert strategic responses (Oliver, 1991) entrench overt operational barriers through the use of institutional logics and symbolic tick boxing. Strategic responses to collaborative procurement requests need to display external legitimacy whilst simultaneously protecting autonomous decision-making at local levels. The focus on stakeholder resistance in this study is a response to a call by institutional researchers to further explore the role of people and how they make sense of their decision-making relative to their contexts (Hallett and Ventresca, 2006). The multi-stakeholder perspective supports the move in the institutional literature from research focused on unitary views of organisations towards a consideration of heterogeneous functions within an organisation (Greenwood and Hinings, 1996; Pache and Santos, 2010).

A new model is presented in the paper that identifies the barriers, pressures and resistance in collaborative public procurement. The model focuses on and extends one component of resistance presented by Oliver (1991): avoidance. The results show how the interactions of external institutional demands and internal stakeholder responses result in a legitimised avoidance of collaborative procurement. We identify symbolic tick boxing and institutional logics as two legitimised avoidance tactics to collaborative procurement. Through an exploration of the dimensions of these avoidance tactics we explain the conditions for resistance to collaborative procurement against other more powerful political groups (such as national Government), showing how stakeholders maintain legitimacy for their avoidance even against a prevailing discourse of austerity, value for money, and public sector reform. The results contribute to public procurement research and practice through a deeper understanding of how stakeholders resist external forces to procure collaboratively.

2. UK public procurement

The UK public procurement landscape is fragmented with approximately 50 professional procurement organisations as well as individual public bodies operating framework agreements for goods and services (National Audit Office, 2010). Framework agreements are subject to EU procurement rules and they set out terms and conditions under which specific purchases (call-offs) can be made throughout the term of the agreement (OGC, 2008). In the UK emergency services, individual authorities are responsible for their own procurement and they use some framework agreements at sector, regional or national levels with call-off ordering from these contracts locally retained. Collaborative procurement between authorities can bring significant operational benefits through lower prices, reducing transaction costs, exchange of knowledge, quality management and improvement to procurement processes (Schotanus et al., 2011) and can reduce the duplicated hierarchies of procurement functions (Dunleavy et al., 2006).

Maintaining integrity in decision-making is a fundamental pillar of public procurement (Schooner, 2002), and in some jurisdictions is viewed as the primary goal of competitive bidding (Dekel, 2008). The achievement of value for money is at the heart of UK public procurement policy (House of Commons, 2014). Value does not necessarily suggest the cheapest price, and the government define value for money as "securing the best mix of quality and effectiveness for the least outlay over the period of use of the goods or services bought" (HM Treasury, 2013a, A4.6). To ensure value for money as defined, procurement require life cycle assessments of costs, quality and performance of goods and services purchased. Despite the clear mandate to deliver value for money in its widest sense over a product/service life cycle, the need for public bodies to comply with the European Union Public Procurement Directives can result in propriety and transparency requirements taking precedence over more commercial goals (Erridge, 2007). In the case of the emergency services, the concept of value for money ensures (low) cost considerations do not override operational responsiveness and resilience of the products and services procured.

2.1. Collaborative public procurement

Public procurement's role is to ensure regulatory compliance, prudent use of the public purse, and third-party delivery of contracted goods and services (Russell and Meehan, 2014). The centralisation of public procurement is a growing worldwide trend to achieve efficiencies (Albano and Sparro, 2010; Walker et al., 2013) and requires a level of collaboration between authorities. We define collaborative procurement as two or more buying organisations working together, pooling knowledge and purchasing power, to increase buyer-side leverage in the market and/or to deliver other economies. Economies of scale provide commercial benefit through combining purchase volumes (Gobbi and Hsuan, 2015) coupled with product rationalisation and standardisation (Joyce, 2006). Economies of process reduce duplications in tendering and provide supplier management efficiencies (Trautmann et al., 2009). Knowledge sharing between collaborators provides economies of information through the development of purchasing expertise (McCue and Pitzer, 2000).

In the UK, public sector organisations share similar goals, regulatory environments, structures and procurement needs, all of which arguably increase their potential for collaborative procurement (Schotanus et al., 2011; Walker et al., 2013). In the emergency services, operational co-operation between authorities is essential particularly for front-line cross-border incidents and despite operational challenges, organisations can work together effectively at the local level without higher-order legal harmonisation (Princen et al., 2014). Unfortunately, collaboration can be notoriously conflict-ridden and challenging to manage (Amirkhanyan, 2009). The specific challenges of collaborative public

procurement are identified in empirical research from the UK's public healthcare sector and include; the lack of standardised product coding, a lack of strategic buying, resistance from suppliers, reliance on suppliers' data and a lack of market consideration (Walker et al., 2013). Despite the political rhetoric there is currently no mandatory commitment for public procurement collaboration in the UK. The government bodies charged with promoting collaborative procurement recognise the complexities of enforcing compulsion and the potential negative side-effects of collaborative that can compromise the delivery of locally-appropriate and locally-accountable solutions are recognised (CLGC, 2014).

2.2. Institutional theory and legitimacy

Institutional theory is one of the most dominant approaches to understanding organisations across disciplines (Greenwood et al., 2008) and has been applied at micro-level to macro and global levels (Scott, 2005). Institutional theory stresses that organisations are influenced not just by their activities but by their environmental context seen through rules or myths representing social values and ideas (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). The importance of cultural and situational norms shows how higher-level factors regulate and shape patterns of individual and collective behaviour (Schneiberg and Clemens, 2006). These institutionalised practices are typically taken-for granted, widely accepted and resistant to change (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Practices and behaviours are considered institutionalised by three indicators: that they are widely followed, accepted without debate and exhibit permanence (Tolbert and Zucker, 1983).

By conforming to institutional norms, organisations gain legitimacy and improve their prospects of survival (Powell, 1991). Legitimacy can insulate an organisation from external pressures such as scrutiny or questioning of its conduct (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). Conforming to shared norms enhances the perceived legitimacy of organisations, protects them from external pressure and scrutiny, and enhances their potential for survival (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Suchman, 1995). Legitimate activities resonate with the shared understanding among stakeholder groups of acceptable standards of performance, and in regulated environments legitimacy can take a more dominant role than enhancing economic performance (Zucker, 1987; Deephouse, 1996).

To acquire or maintain legitimacy, organisations respond isomorphically to their institutional environments (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Isomorphism refers to the degree of homogeneity between organisations caused by the internalisation of external influences (Frumkin and Galaskiewicz, 2004; Ashworth et al., 2009) and much of the extant organisational research focuses on the propensity for conformity and similitude (Young et al., 2000; Frumkin and Galaskiewicz, 2004; Irvine, 2007). Isomorphic responses are classified as: coercive, referring to convergence of responses driven by compliance or legislation; normative, seen through adherence to professional standards; or mimetic, where an organisation copies the structures and/or practices of others that are seemingly successful (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983).

Strategic responses to institutional pressures have been classified on a passive-active scale of resistance from acquiescence, compromise, avoiding, defying, through to manipulation (Oliver, 1991). Acquiescence and compromise represent passive responses to external forces for change and compliance, whereas avoidance, defiance and manipulation represent active forms of resistance. Strategic resistance is set against conditions that may elicit one form of resistance over another, but these strategies should not be divorced from the extreme external environment that many organisations operate in Pache and Santos (2010).

Rather than taking for granted that institutional pressures will result in isomorphism, individuals have the ability to create change, even when institutional constraints persist. Organisations, and decision-makers within organisations, are active rather than passive in their responses (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) enabling the exercise of strategic choice (Clemens and Cook, 1999; Seo and Creed, 2002; Dorado, 2005). The austere economic climate may change the desire for regional procurement collaboration if organisational or personal positions are threatened. Individual organisations are unlikely to seek collaborative solutions if a consequence might involve the loss of their own resource (Flynn, 2007), creating dilemmas for collaborative procurement between optimising outcomes for individuals, departments, organisations, service users and taxpayers.

Resistance to collaboration can arise across institutions and at the institution-individual interface leading to legitimising behaviours that portray goal congruence yet conceal incompatible goals (Oliver, 1991; Vangen and Huxham, 2011). The effects of legitimacy tend to be classified as pragmatic, moral or cognitive forms (Suchman, 1995), acknowledging which processes dominate legitimacy-seeking behaviour (be they stakeholder, norm or cognitively derived). A sense of legitimacy forms through social processes between individual and group activities that promote goals and shared norms The socially constructed patterns of practice, and the assumptions, beliefs and values that underpin the meaning of legitimate practices are referred to as institutional logics (Thornton and Ocasio, 1999). Individuals can gain access to and mobilise key resources to enable divergent change (cf. Aldrich, 2011) through institutional logics. Institutional logics are important as they provide mechanisms to drive change, and crucially, also enable changes to be resisted through sustaining the legitimacy of current practice and shared values (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005).

Although there is no mandatory requirement to collaborate, there is government pressure to move public authorities towards collaborative procurement (Walker et al., 2013). Under this pressure, and in a tough environment of severe budget cuts that may directly (and adversely) affect the quality of key services, public organisations could find it difficult to enact strategies of resistance particularly as the government reports stress the potential cost savings to be gained through collaboration (HM Treasury, 2009a; Roots, 2009). Conflicting demands restrict compliance as satisfying one pressure can defy the competing other(s); this situation is more likely to result in avoidance tactics (Pache and Santos, 2010). Avoidance attempts to dampen the perceived need to change by symbolic compliance, decoupling activities to buffer against the pressures or by leaving the environment that exerts the pressure (Oliver, 1991; Pache and Santos, 2010).

Institutionally-adept organisations are able to meet, or least placate, pluralistic demands (Kraatz and Block, 2008). The emotive nature of emergency service organisations may provide isomorphic-resistant qualities as the general public accepts the uniqueness of the service provided in vulnerable and dangerous situations (Guy et al., 2014). The legitimacy of public sector collaboration reflected in the extant literature rests on its commitment to public justification through open, inclusive and credible processes of wide stakeholder engagement (Johnston et al., 2011), yet there is little known to date of the legitimacy of *not* collaborating and how such resistance is normalised within an organisation. The governance of collaboration rests on principles of stakeholder inclusion in the decision-making (Ansell and Gash, 2008) although resistance to collaboration lacks the same transparency and scrutiny as it is internally retained if not pursued.

3. Empirical context

This research is set in the emergency services sector and covers five neighbouring authorities (anonymised) in the UK. Each authority has a separate procurement team and different organisational structures. One authority outsources procurement and another outsources their accounts payable function. Regional and national collaborative structures exist and a regional management board was tasked with delivering integrated collaborative procurement services. A National Procurement Board (NPB) provides a forum to promote collaborative benefits nationally and at regional/sub-regional levels.

Collaborative procurement was a key strand of the UK government's 2008–9 Operational Efficiency Programme (OEP) (HM Treasury, 2009b). The second National Procurement Strategy (2009–12) specifically focused on collaboration. The OEP recommended that 80% of common central government spend and 50% of all available wider public sector spend should be channelled through collaborative frameworks. Authorities were strongly encouraged, but not mandated, to coordinate requirements through the NPB. Other collaborative mechanisms existed through a regional working group consisting of the heads of procurement and numerous technical collaborative groups at a regional level. Despite high-level support for collaborative procurement, in all five organisations the uptake was low.

3.1. Methods

The research team was commissioned by the regional management board to complete the two-year action research project and were granted unique access across all five authorities that allowed for deep understanding of the actors, interactions and behaviours over time (Woodside and Wilson, 2003). The project design required the research team to develop and agree with the five organisations joint goals and outputs for the action-based research project. Team-based approaches are important in action research projects (Näslund et al., 2010) and the research team was contracted explicitly to act as change agents (Gummesson, 2000) to deliver regional collaborative procurement. Project coordinators were appointed in each of the five organisations, and at a regional level an overall project lead and an executive project sponsor were appointed. An action research case study of the geographical region was the focus of the analyses. Case research displays the "duality criterion" (Ketokivi and Choi, 2014, p. 234) by being grounded in the empirical context and also seeking broader theoretical generality. The complex management and operational issues inherent in collaborative procurement make case research appropriate (Voss et al., 2002). There is a growing call for more action research in the supply chain field to increase practical relevance (Näslund, 2002) through exploring real-world institutional and managerial problems (Gummesson, 2000; Coughlan and Coghlan, 2002; Näslund et al., 2010).

Action research is a powerful method for revealing deep issues on which action can be taken (Coughlan and Coghlan, 2002). The iterative nature of action research is particularly appropriate to explore responses over time to an unfolding series of actions (Coghlan and Brannick, 2001). The initial starting point of the project was to provide consultative research on standardising procurement processes to facilitate regional collaborative procurement. The driver for change was the UK Government's 2010 Comprehensive Spending Review that led to significant budget cuts for the authorities and collaborative procurement was seen as a solution to achieving the cost savings demanded. As discussed later, the iterative nature of the action research project saw this project change from process standardisation to deliver regional collaborative procurement, to an identification of the barriers to
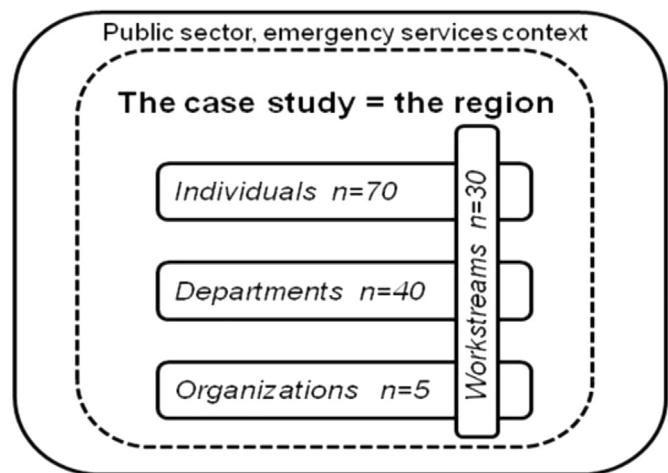

Fig. 1. Units of analysis.

collaborative procurement, through to a much deeper exploration to uncover how resistance to collaborative procurement was being legitimised.

One researcher was seconded to work fulltime with each of the five authorities for the project's duration. Researchers were given open access to individuals and internal information providing contextually-rich data (Barratt et al., 2011). The access gave opportunities to attend operational meetings, observe, map and explore decision-making processes, engage with key decision-makers and influencers and interrogate supporting documentary evidence of spend data, strategy documents and internal communications. The multi-stakeholder approach addresses the risk of homogeneity of responses noted in previous studies that only gathered data from procurement staff (Walker et al., 2013). As illustrated in Fig. 1, the overarching unit of analysis was the region with multiple embedded units of assessment at organisational, departmental, individual and workstream level (Barratt et al., 2011). The strategies and structures for regional collaborative procurement are broadly consistent across the five organisations but they have diverse operational considerations as some service metropolitan areas while others are predominantly rural.

Six representative spend workstreams were selected as the empirical focus based on the significance of aggregated spend, potential for collaboration and potential impact of collaborative procurement. The workstreams selected were two revenue categories (operational equipment and maintenance spares) two capital categories (vehicles and ICT) and two service categories (consultancy and training). Collectively these six areas had a combined annual spend of circa £30M. Internal stakeholders (N=70) participated in interactive discursive workshops (one for every workstream in every authority; 30 in total) to collect primary data on the baseline operations through process mapping, capture embedded knowledge (Tuggle and Goldfinger, 2004), assess levels of collaboration and highlight opportunities, constraints and barriers.

Process maps were used at the start of the workshops, initially to explore process standardisation opportunities. The maps created subsequently provided a focus for discussion for participants. Workshops and process maps identify problem areas as the issues are visible and transparent (Klotz et al., 2008) and are suited to projects requiring cross-functional collaborations, tangible cost reduction (Wang et al., 2009) and change (Fenton, 2007). Stakeholders were classified generically as; Users (departmental heads, technical staff, requisitioners, budget holders, end users); Procurement (procurement officers, buyers, procurement managers, procurement directors); and Executives (finance executives,

accounts payable managers, finance heads).

Each workshop lasted two-three hours and typically comprised of a procurement manager, requisitioner, technical manager, budget holder, buying assistant, stores supervisor (if a stocked item), finance officer and systems manager. Process maps took 30–45 min and were constructed using colour-coded cards to signify activities, outputs and decision points. Participants wrote key activities on the cards and placed them on a large template, pre-printed with generic functional areas (horizontally zoned) and generic stages in the purchasing cycle (vertically zoned). Participants used their own wording to describe the stages of the activity (Powney, 1988). Participants 'walked through' completed maps as a group and they identified and discussed the barriers to collaborative procurement from different stakeholder perspectives. This holistic view of the procurement process facilitated interactions between individuals and allowed them to build on each others' responses (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990). The rest of the workshop consisted of traditional focus group discussions to explore broadly the issues and opportunities of collaborative procurement. The research team took extensive notes throughout the workshops and photographed the maps for reference. Process maps were input into Microsoft Visio process mapping software. Copies were circulated with the discussion notes to the participants for their sign off to ensure accuracy.

Workshop data were supplemented with forty 1:1 open interviews with key decision-makers (procurement heads, budget holders) who held specific regional roles related to collaboration and with influencers who did not necessarily interact directly with operational actions (for example, executives, departmental managers, standards and policy technicians). Interviews explored the barriers raised in the workshops capturing the strategic and political dimensions influencing collaborative procurement in addition to the rational and technical elements often prioritised in management literature (Hefetz and Warner, 2012). Interviews lasted between 30 min and two hours. Extensive internal sources were used iteratively over the two-year timeframe to provide challenge and documentary evidence for triangulation. Internal sources include observational participant data (Silverman, 1993) from 21 regional workstream and/or functional collaborative meetings, organisational documents, policy statements, internal communications, spend and contract databases, minutes and regional strategy review documents.

Interview data, documentary evidence, process maps and accompanying notes were systematically compared and analysed to inductively identify the relationships between activities, people, data and policies (Biazzo, 2002). The barriers to collaborative procurement identified were logged onto a stakeholder map and grouped by generic role. Barriers were clustered, sorted and coded to identify salient themes, patterns and concepts (Saldaña, 2012). A cyclical approach was used to theme the barriers into higher-level categories and explore linkages (Dey, 1999). The research team completed the coding analysis, both individually and collectively at various stages throughout the project to enable interpretative discussion, recoding, challenge, and organisation of the data and emergent categories. Disconfirmation examples were sought and considered to provide challenge to the emergent themes and to minimise researcher preconceptions (Glaser, 1992). Cyclical grounded analysis of the data was reviewed against institutional theories to locate the underpinning values, beliefs and behaviours related to the espoused barriers. The analysis identified operational-level barriers between stakeholder groups (see Table 1) and the isomorphic pressures and strategic resistant responses used (Fig. 2).

Table 1
Stakeholders' perceived barriers to regional collaborative procurement.

Barriers	Procurement	Executives	Users
Lack of supplier strategy	x		
Aggregated spend increases work	x		
Need for bespoke contract terms	x		
Lack of data	x		
Too many suppliers	x		
Too many frameworks	x		
Unsuitable frameworks	x		
Better deals for bespoke contracts	x		
Contract standing orders	x	x	
Approval sign-off procedure	x	x	
Different systems	x	x	
Protectionism	x	x	x
National sector specific frameworks	x	x	x
Local suppliers for fast response	x		x
Lack of supplier management	x		x
Different life cycles for products			x
Lack of standardised equipment			x
Stock condition surveys not aligned			x
High level plans not aligned		x	x
Supporting 'local' business		x	
Local members' objections		x	

4. Results and discussion

Results of the coding and analysis are presented, discussed and critiqued in light of the extant literature. Sections 4.1 and 4.2 discuss the isomorphic pressures and stakeholders' perceptions identified from initial data coding; the emergent categories and themes are explored in 4.2.1–4.2.4; and the iterative model development is presented in Sections 4.3–4.3.3.

4.1. Isomorphic pressures

Coercive pressures for collaborative procurement stem from a range of sources including most significantly, the UK government's value for money policy, strong political rhetoric on the wastefulness of public procurement across the press and media, and through formal policies and commissioned reports extoling the virtues of collaborative procurement (cf. Gershon, 2004; Roots, 2009; National Audit Office, 2010). Although not mandatory, these coercive pressures need to be viewed in the context of increasingly aggressive budget cuts in a period of austerity that created real fears for funding front-line service delivery. A problem in the government reports is the lack of evidence of savings, acknowledgements of data quality and a heavy reliance on rhetoric.

Normative pressure was evident through two sources, front-line operations and procurement. Professional codes of cross-border working in front-line operations capture cooperative behavioural expectations (Ashworth et al., 2009) and create normative forces to collaborate (Princen et al., 2014). Normative pressure in the technical professions encourages collaboration generally, but concerns arise for collaborative procurement specifically, as it is deemed to reduce local control. Procurement are generally pro-collaboration as it is viewed by buyers as best practice procurement and the savings it can generate align with their departmental targets and goals (Nollet and Beaulieu, 2003). Procurement's push for collaboration creates normative pressure on other stakeholders yet their lack of status compared to technical stakeholders minimises this pressure.

Mimetic pressure is seen through documents that signal the moves towards collaborative procurement in the wider public sector, ranging from housing to highways (Roots, 2009). The Roots review was carried out by a former chief executive of the UK's Westminster City Council on behalf of the government to examine
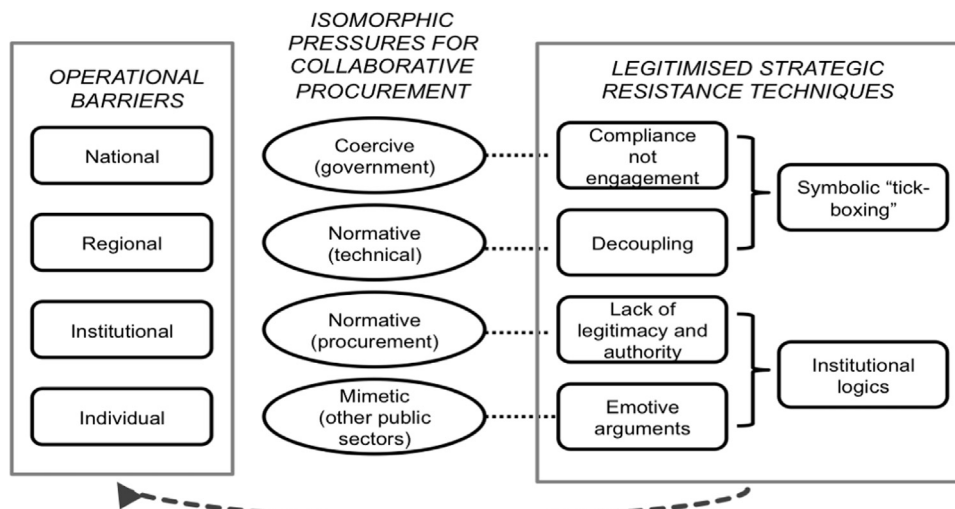
Fig. 2. Barriers, pressures and resistance in collaborative procurement.

councils' procurement. The clear message in the Roots Review is that collaborative procurement is becoming the norm in the wider public sector and that it delivers significant benefit, although beyond identifying a range of collaborative procurement strategies and rhetoric by various public departments, no tangible evidence that demonstrates the benefits are reported. The need to deliver commercial efficiencies, relative to the desire to retain local control of procurement decisions and operational impacts, creates conflicting institutional pressures that affect how authorities respond to collaborative procurement.

4.2. Stakeholder perceptions

Table 1 illustrates the range of collaborative procurement barriers identified by participants. There is some overlap in perceived barriers and also some clear differences between stakeholder groups. Procurement's concerns relate to the supply market and stem from their lack of strategic control over frameworks and management of the routes-to-market. Users echo concerns of local supplier management with other barriers relating predominantly to internal inconsistencies. Executives recognise the problems of misaligned strategic plans and identify threats to local relationships and community commitments. All stakeholder groups identify two barriers; inappropriate national sector specific frameworks and protectionism by individuals and departments.

The range of constraints identified represent four emerging themes of; national, regional, institutional and individual level barriers. Across all four themes, the barriers are operational in nature and overt. The four themes conceptually illustrate conflicts between protecting professional role authority and demonstrating compliance to coercive pressures. The tensions create conflicts between functions and between organisations and can prevent the delivery of best value for taxpayers. Goal conflict between stakeholders is more likely to result in avoidance or defiance strategies (Oliver, 1991; Pache and Santos, 2010). Adept organisations can manage pluralistic and competing demands (Kraatz and Block, 2008) although avoidance may not have long-term viability if visible stakeholder divergence can affect an organisation's legitimacy (Pache and Santos, 2010). Critically, decision-makers throughout the procurement process use various means to legitimise their resistance to numerous isomorphic forces, as detailed in Fig. 2 and discussed through the following sections. The legitimatisation of resistance, even against a prevailing discourse of austerity, value for money, and public sector reform, further heightens the operational barriers.

4.2.1. Theme 1: National-level operational barriers - inappropriate national solutions

All stakeholders feel existing national frameworks, particularly sector specific frameworks, frequently fail to provide optimal solutions and as expressed by one technical operations manager "… *for larger requirements, the proposed efficiencies do not materialise".* This view is common across all stakeholder groups, including procurement, and drives a perception that collaborative procurement is not beneficial. Users express concern that large-scale frameworks limit innovation resulting in supplier complacency, supporting the view that rewarding suppliers for volume not excellence can stagnate market innovation (Caldwell et al., 2005; Walker et al., 2013). Users raised concerns that highly leveraged frameworks have irreversibly damaged markets and some SMEs no longer traded as a direct consequence. Although frameworks are not mandatory, and despite the problems aired, counter-intuitively all authorities use these for major sector-specific requirements owing to significant political pressures to do so, and a perceived pressure "*to be seen to be using them".*

Executives believe national and even regional procurement conflicts with sustainable public procurement as it hinders the opportunity to use local SME suppliers in their immediate communities, thus supporting extant research in local government contexts (Walker et al., 2013). Users believe the removal of local suppliers damages relationships and affects service delivery, particularly for areas requiring regular on-site interaction. A cautious approach is evidenced through a lack of procurement collaboration. Not collaborating also reduces spend per contract and can often allow users to stay under EU regulation and contract standing order spend thresholds. Staying under threshold spend enables authorities to retain control of which suppliers are invited to bid and supports research on tensions between socioeconomic opportunities and cost savings (Knight et al., 2007).

4.2.2. Theme 2: regional-level operational barriers – the lack of intra-regional alignment

The outsourcing of most, or part, of procurement operations by some authorities has led to varying levels of control and difficulties in making regional decisions. Different structures create conflicts over whom to collaborate with, particularly for general goods and services (for example, stationery, travel, office equipment) with the choice of routes-to-market and potential collaborative partners described by one buyer as "*overwhelming".* The numerous frameworks available for items of common spend across the whole of the public sector can dilute volume-based benefits so they lose

their natural efficiencies. An added complication is the lack of detailed and regionally consistent procurement data. Different specifications, product coding and reporting systems prevent sharing of prices, as products are very difficult to compare. The culture within individual authorities is insular; thus, while collaborative procurement is acknowledged by most as *"potentially beneficial"*, as it is not mandatory the coordination of spend is not high on the agenda. Pressures to conform are ignored more easily when regulatory pressure is weak (Quirke, 2013). Collaborative procurement is viewed to add time to the process and the perception is that *"there's no way it would be delivered on time"*, adding to the reticence to align. For technical products that are emergency-service specific (for example, emergency vehicles, protective personal equipment), procurement's pre-tender design phase is extensive (12 months+) to consider specifications, locations and operational risk control. Adherence to operational performance standards is *"crucial"* in the design of these solutions and users deemed collaboration to be *"operationally too risky for complex products"*.

For capital workstreams procurement derives from an integrated risk management plan, typically covering a 6–10 year period. While these tend towards emergency service-specific products, other high spend areas including IT, are also included in these plans. Operational requirements are embedded within each authority's integrated risk management plans limiting collaborative flexibility. Integration relates to internal consistency of operational planning rather than being indicative of regional collaboration. Authorities have different timeframes and different review points in these budgetary cycles that limit operational alignment. Although the various review points are known across the region and users could align these, there is no compelling reason or pressure to do so. Procurement provides normative pressure to collaborate but they are generally excluded from operational planning decisions and meetings limiting the reach of their pressure. Plans are continuously reviewed but users are reluctant to align these – *"It would mean more complications, more delays, extra committees and meetings, and we'd end up with a compromised solution for everyone"*.

The regional barriers are not insurmountable and there are pockets of successful collaborative procurement across the region. Numerous stakeholders referred to a regional personal protective equipment contract as *"best practice collaborative procurement"*. A regional solution was deemed *"better value for money"* than either individual or national agreements and was subsequently adopted. Operational plans were aligned and different authorities came online to the new contract at various stages. Interestingly, the driver for this regional collaboration was in response to coercive pressure to align to a national framework.

4.2.3. Theme 3: Institutional-level operational barriers – perceived need for bespoke solutions

Operational autonomy has led to a lack of standardised equipment across the different authorities in the region. The specifications of products purchased are dependent on usage patterns of urban/rural locations making regional standardisation a low priority over safety and operational effectiveness. The operational safety priorities are understandable in front-line operational products used in emergency situations. However, a lack of standardisation persists even in less emotive workstreams (e.g. ICT) where operational risks are negligible. As an example, across the five authorities, 20 fast-moving generic common consumable stores items were analysed; the data identified 56 'main' suppliers and 94 different prices despite all suppliers being available to all authorities, demonstrating a lack of collaborative knowledge sharing. Information is shared across technical collaborative forums but procurement is not involved in many of the technical

forums, and technical staff are not involved in regional procurement meetings, limiting opportunities for collaborative procurement options in the exploration phases. While consensus on complex products and services is not necessarily achievable or desirable, procurement's lack of involvement in the working groups reduces the commercial challenge in procurement processes.

4.2.4. Theme 4: individual-level operational barriers - resource pressures

The fragmented procurement options via national, regional and sector level tendering portals result in numerous potential routes-to-market. Where the 'best' deal sits is largely untested and buyers do not focus on providing a comparative analysis of these, making the decisions malleable to changing political pressures and partner allegiances. The increased time commitments needed to run Official Journal of the European Union (OJEU) tenders are perceived to cause operational issues in fast-paced supply environments where the products may be changing faster than the procurement cycle. Budgetary constraints are stretching resources making it increasingly difficult to invest time in commercial assessments of frameworks and markets. As pointed out by a buyer, *"frameworks are a quick route to market – we use them when the timescales are tight"*.

There is a strong view that scale alone does not always provide the best outcomes and that single source contracts with nationally consolidated volumes damage supply chain innovation, particularly for workstreams with safety implications. Users spoke of their *"moral obligation"* and *"guardian role"* to get the best technical products often with minimal commercial attention. Users considered it *"inappropriate"* and *"dangerous"* to pass this accountability to other authorities or central buying groups that lack local context-specific knowledge. This strong professional core of operational staff is valued internally within authorities but is an area for tension and competition between authorities. The locally-grounded expertise provides unique attributes enabling isomorphic pressure for regional standardisation to be resisted (Hefetz and Warner, 2007).

4.3. Iterative model development

The four thematic barriers provide operational-level explanations for the lack of progress in implementing a regional collaborative procurement strategy. Yet, from an action research perspective, it was deemed that these barriers alone were not sufficiently powerful to counter the institutional forces pressing for collaborative procurement and that deeper resistance strategies were also at play. The ability to show counter examples that overcome the barriers, as seen in the regional personal protective equipment contract, adds further weight to this position. A model is developed (see Fig. 2) that focuses on and extends one component of strategic resistance presented by Oliver (1991): avoidance. The two micro-processes at play in resistance to collaborative procurement are symbolic tick-boxing and institutional logics. These explain the conditions for avoidance against other more powerful groups (such as national government) that enable stakeholders' resistance to maintain legitimacy even against a prevailing discourse of austerity, value for money, and public sector reform.

4.3.1. Legitimised strategic resistance

The nature and length of the action research project inductively exposed the strategic defensive routines employed and demonstrated how these techniques gain legitimacy. As the four operational barriers are more rationally orientated, the participants refer only to these barriers and do not openly discuss their actions in

terms of 'resistance'. Interestingly, strategic resistance by stakeholders is in direct response to the isomorphic pressures encountered, rather than a response to the more overt operational barriers that they themselves identify. This is explained as the operational barriers, whilst significant, are not insurmountable. The legitimised resistance heightens the operational barriers, or at least ensures they persist, and there is little positive action to remove these. Fig. 2 illustrates the operational barriers, isomorphic pressures and strategic responses.

4.3.2. Institutional logics

Institutional logics focus decision-makers attention on issues and solutions consistent with their views (Ocasio, 1997; Thornton and Ocasio, 1999). In this case, the institutional logics that prevail across the organisations are that regional collaborative procurement is unsuitable and too risky to implement. These logics are evidenced as avoidance strategies to counter normative and mimetic pressures to conform. For collaborative procurement, these logics derive from the interplay of two elements, 1) procurement's lack of status relative to other stakeholders and 2) the emotive nature of the emergency services.

Lack of authority is evidenced when procurement decisions fall to operational or financial roles (Schiele and McCue, 2006). The process maps highlight that of all decisions taken in the procurement process, 60% were by users, 19% by executives and only 21% by procurement. For complex workstreams procurement's role is limited further to solely checking process compliance. Key activities including sourcing and interfacing with suppliers are dispersed to functional areas, particularly in technical workstreams. Only exceptionally did supplier management become the responsibility of procurement. The majority of stakeholders, including procurement themselves, predominantly see procurement's value in *"ensuring process compliance"*, supporting previous research on legitimacy in decision-making (Erridge, 2007). One user referred to procurement as the *"process police"*. The largely administrative role of procurement provides insight into how pressures for collaborative procurement are strategically resisted. At an organisational level, procurement builds normative pressures to collaborate, yet their hierarchical position leads to a low degree of internal social legitimacy that increases other functions' ability to resist these changes (Townley, 1997), who are deemed more powerful and legitimate (Dhalla and Oliver, 2013). Legitimacy embeds at the start of the user-led procurement process, and elected members who oversee the governance of procurement decisions exert authority at the end of the process. Procurement joins mid-process once the decisions to collaborate (or not) are made.

It is extremely difficult for procurement to break the chain of compliance and provide challenge in the process, particularly when they perceive others' legitimacy (e.g. technical officers) to be high. The legitimacy of other stakeholders relative to procurement limits procurement's ability to add value to the process and provides window-dressing for transparency and compliance. Procurement's lack of status emanates from their hierarchical position. Structurally, procurement reports to a Finance Director/Executive that is perceived internally as a lack of status, influence and authority.

The emotive nature of the emergency services is the second element driving the institutional logics of the unsuitability of collaborative procurement in the emergency services. The dominant institutional logic from technical staff is that collaborative procurement requires standardised products that could dilute their professional, legitimised expertise and potentially compromise safety. Emotional arguments were observed in internal meetings to counter commercial challenges, with the inference from technical staff being 'procurement save money, but we save lives'. These logics provide a professional justification for bespoke solutions that non-technical staff including procurement and elected members find difficult to challenge, particularly given the sensitive nature of the emergency services. Technical personnel with backgrounds in front-line operations dominate user and executive groups that provide credibility and legitimacy to these institutional logics. Views are encoded in the deep-rooted mission and culture of the emergency services enabling defensive routines to resist change (Ocasio, 1997; Thornton, 2002). Over time local norms emerge relating to product specifications that limit options deemed acceptable (Ashworth et al., 2009).

Procurement teams have relevant business qualifications, but none have backgrounds in frontline operations. As one buyer stated, *"I have all the CIPS [Chartered Institute of Purchasing and Supply] qualifications and procurement experience but that's not enough if you're not [frontline] operational your voice isn't heard"*. Through creating and embedding a legitimate differentiation from other public sector contexts, stakeholders effectively resist mimetic isomorphic pressures to collaborate. The day-to-day culture is entrenched with emotive 'life-saving' logics. The institutional logics of 'we save lives' are understandable, and indeed desirable in workstreams directly responsible for frontline service delivery. Yet, these repertoires were frequently used, albeit more subtly, in non-frontline operations (for example IT) as a reason for non-collaboration, demonstrating their depth of acceptance across the organisations. To illustrate, the deep-rooted acceptance of a 'we're different' culture was evidenced through each Authority buying bespoke goods and services across all spend areas, which was not challenged by procurement, budget holders, executives or finance.

4.3.3. Symbolic tick boxing

Symbolic tick boxing represents strategic responses to resist coercive government pressures for collaborative procurement and normative forces of professional communities. The strategy is seen through selected use of collaboration in high profile, yet limited, spend categories, to demonstrate compliance, while simultaneously retaining local decision-making for other less visible, but larger areas of spend. Protectionism is inherent in this avoidance strategy demonstrating the tensions between resistance and conformity. Protectionism is displayed at multiple embedded levels – organisational, departmental and individual, and relates to a perceived threat that collaboration could make individual roles redundant through economies of process (Trautmann et al., 2009). When faced with job redundancy threats, people heighten operational barriers and downplay potential benefits. In regional collaborative meetings, people openly aired their concerns about their future job security, although this was often shrouded behind the emotive veil of compromising front-line operational resilience if jobs were centralised and numbers of staff reduced.

There was evidence that the lack of regional alignment is artificially retained in some instances, supporting the view that individual organisations are unlikely to seek collaborative solutions if this reduces their own resource (Flynn, 2007). One user stated, *"I'm happy to be involved as long as we lead and others align to us"*. People raised concerns of *"where would collaboration end?"* creating a climate of suspicion that regional collaboration could lead to, as one user stated *"super-regions with no geographic identity"* and further loss of control and impact on individuals' job security. When individuals sub-optimise overall performance because of these conflicts of interest at a personal versus organisational level, they legitimise their decisions by increasing the saliency of operational barriers (see Table 1) coupled with strategic responses that create additional barriers or sustain existing ones.

Using the active-passive resistance scale, there was no outright defiance rather low-level yet persistent avoidance and resistance (Oliver, 1991), that infused suspicion towards collaborative

procurement. Despite the concerns voiced over inappropriate national solutions these issues are not formally raised with the contracting bodies, which was viewed as *"a futile exercise"*, and the frameworks are still used, albeit reluctantly in many instances. There was a higher usage of collaborative contracts in sector-specific workstreams that were visible politically, for example specialist emergency vehicles. This echoes findings of other studies exploring isomorphic pressure in public organisations where actions were found to be pursued for political as well as technical reasons in high performance management environments (Ashworth et al., 2009). Symbolic tick boxing conveys legitimacy through complying with some coercive pressures for collaborative procurement while simultaneously retaining local decision-making for other less visible spend.

Institutional theory suggests that the inherent legitimacy of national procurement frameworks (as perceived by government stakeholders) ensures that their use is not questioned and it is in the best political interest of the organisation (and the individual) to demonstrate compliance. Indeed, when describing the benefit of collaborative frameworks, participants predominantly used the word *"compliant"* rather than identifying any commercial or technical benefits. The desire for organisational effectiveness and legitimacy sees a less confrontational resistance where change is promised but delayed (Townley, 1997). In workstreams with a degree of external control and regulatory monitoring the response is more likely to be strategic (Scott, 2005). Procurement felt similar coercive pressures to use existing frameworks as they are compliant processes, even though they felt they were commercially inferior. Procurement decision-making centres largely on ensuring procedural adherence that often obscures other commercial decisions and challenge. Consequently, while both users and procurement feel that existing collaborative frameworks are not meeting their needs, the legitimacy they provide through regulatory compliance drives their use but creates a vicious cycle through further damaging perceptions of the benefits of collaborative procurement.

Symbolic tick-boxing is evidenced through regional structures that buffer and shield internal practice from scrutiny through decoupling (Hefetz and Warner, 2012). Regional and national infrastructure facilitates collaborative procurement through technical and functional forums to share knowledge and forums are well attended. Most participants identified these groups as evidence of their support of collaboration. Despite espoused support, there is little tangible evidence of collaborative procurement attributed to the groups suggesting only lip service or resistant responses to normative pressure (Scott, 2005). The number of regional collaborative contracts registered highlights low levels of activity (see Table 2), mirroring the 'very low' (p. 23) uptake of collaborative procurement strategies in the wider public sector (HM Treasury, 2009a). Notwithstanding the lack of quality information of public procurement spend, much of which is unclassified and/or not centrally reported, estimates suggest only 13% of common spend across government departments is channelled through collaborative professional buying organisations (e.g. OGC Buying Solutions, NHS Purchasing and Supply Agency) (HM Treasury, 2009a).

The use of collaborative structures, separate to the decision-making processes, demonstrates this decoupling (Duimering and Safayeni, 1998). While there is infrastructure and some use of collaborative frameworks there is a persistent lack of engagement and support for these arrangements. All stakeholders frequently made distinctions between a *"tick box"* approach to collaborative procurement and *"effective"* collaborative procurement. The broad conceptualisation of collaborative procurement provides opportunities for organisations to maintain the pretence of conformity through loosely maintaining collaborative structures to provide sufficient ambiguity to evidence compliance to government, taxpayers and regulators.

5. Conclusions

In controlled and regulated fields, such as the public sector, a high degree of isomorphism between regional organisations should be expected (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; D'Aunno et al., 1991; Dacin, 1997; Frumkin and Galaskiewicz, 2004). Our results help our understanding of the problems of developing and implementing collaborative procurement strategies through exposing *how* stakeholders resist external forces to collaborate. The data suggests that the barriers to collaborative procurement are many, complex and deeply engrained. This study contributes to public procurement research by exploring where, and why, tensions and conflicts occur in collaborative public procurement strategies, both within internal supply chains, and between organisations.

The results show how managers reconcile conflicts to procure collaboratively and how they legitimise resistance through symbolic responses to coercive and normative pressures. Institutional theory enhances the paper's explanatory power, principally by way of framing our explanation of inter- and intra-organisational resistance to collaborative procurement. The results add to current institutional research that explore the flaws in the idea of a slow but certain structural isomorphism between organisations (Heugens and Lander, 2009). We counter the dominant view in the extant research that focuses on the propensity for conformity (Young et al., 2000; Frumkin and Galaskiewicz, 2004; Irvine, 2007) through identifying micro-processes of institutional logics and symbolic tick-boxing at play in resistance to normative pressure for collaborative procurement and exposing how these avoidance tactics are legitimised.

The results bring public procurement into institutional theory debates through identifying the social processes embedded in procurement decision-making processes. By focusing on different internal stakeholder perceptions and their motivations, we shed light on how public organisations legitimise avoidance to government pressure to collaborate through their use of institutional logics. The degree of institutional resistance indicates the strength of embedded agency, even when coercive pressures from economic austerity is present. Embedded agency, seen in this study through institutional logics of legitimised internal decision-makers, is a key feature in the contested shaping of institutional norms, as well as resistance to pressures towards conformity. Consequently, agency enforces resistance to institutional prerogatives even when the established order has legitimate grounds to expect conformity. The identification of collaborative procurement barriers and stakeholder avoidance tactics contribute to a deeper understanding of how national procurement policies impact public organisation's corporate agency and culture.

Operational barriers to collaborative procurement persist at national, regional, institutional and individual levels. Although these are not insurmountable, multiple stakeholders are able to create strategic responses to isomorphic pressure through institutional logics, protectionism and symbolic tick boxing. The identification of micro-processes of resistance adds supports to

Table 2
Contract classifications.

Type of contract	Number	% of Total
Individual Authority Agreement	128	80%
Regional Framework	13	8.1%
National/Government Framework	10	6.3%
Other Partner Framework	9	5.6%

studies that identify the role of individuals' rhetorical strategies in developing resistance as they help to construct counter-institutions that articulate opposition to prevailing norms of practice and disrupt institutional pressures (Symon et al., 2008). The results highlight that failure to provide sufficient evidence while applying pressure at a political level leads to tick box approaches to collaborative procurement risking long-term damage and sub-optimised performance. Given the tensions between regulatory, commercial and socio-economic goals (Erridge and McIlroy, 2002) the evidence for the benefits of collaborative procurement needs to be beyond dispute for institutional pressures to prevail.

Legitimacy in decision-making within public procurement reflects the political and strategic pressures to demonstrate rationality. In line with institutional theory, if particular courses of action enhance perceptions of legitimacy, norms of behaviour emerge that limit choices available (Ashworth et al., 2009), even in the face of considerable pressure to reduce costs. A challenge for policy makers and individual authorities is the lack of consistent procurement data (Cox et al., 2005; Walker et al., 2013). The evidence base and spend data used in public procurement demands urgent attention both from policy makers and academics.

Institutional theory is usually applied to organisations operating in competitive markets, where isomorphic forces have an inherent motivation; replication of 'successful' practices minimises risk and contributes to organisational survival, stability or growth. Whilst this might lead to a homogenised 'iron cage' (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), this is at a field level rather than targeted at individual decision-makers so the consequences are diffused and take time to impact. In public sector contexts there is little motivation to comply with isomorphic pressures and indeed many disincentives. The consequence of collaboration is not risk minimisation but a contraction of resource required therefore the threat of redundancy increases. While operational barriers are used overtly as a 'rational' defence, covert strategic responses of institutional logics and symbolic tick boxing protect individual positions, legitimise decisions made, and further entrench operational barriers. The iron cage of homogeny (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) still emerges but around individual organisations and at a micro level around departments. Thus, this research highlights the criticality of understanding underpinning motivation in behaviour in institutional theory and the links between operational and strategic processes in public procurement policy. From an applied perspective, for purchasing managers and public policy makers the results highlight the impact of legitimised resistance to operational outcomes, adding insight into the challenges of delivering collaborative procurement for reducing the UK's financial deficit.

As a final reflection, the action research method combined with the lens of institutional theory provided opportunities to unpick and challenge the barriers related to collaborative procurement to enable implementable solutions to be sought, and to distinguish degrees of resistance. The method was iterative, immersive and stakeholder-engaged and uncovered deep nuances and dynamic interactions between beliefs and behaviour over time (Woodside and Wilson, 2003). Interestingly, throughout the project participants revealed that they had not previously questioned their behaviours, institutional logics, thought processes and assumptions, and the methods allowed these to be surfaced, allowing them to see and hear their own behaviours (Christensen and Olson, 2002), and those of others, from which they were able to begin a process of sensemaking (Weick, 1995). The use of engaged action methods have a broader application to a range of procurement and organisational research situations where the contexts are complex or behaviours seemingly irrational. The weight of political and cultural influence in public procurement is a potentially fruitful area of future research using similar approaches and institutional theory, particularly around the relational landscape with suppliers.

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