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**Negotiating inequality regimes in political  
work: an institutional ethnography of English  
local government**

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requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in  
Sociology**

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## **Declaration**

The contents of this thesis are my own work, and no material from the thesis has been submitted for a degree at any other university.

## Abstract

This thesis examines the work that local political representatives (councillors) do in English local authorities. I draw on a workplace perspective to study political institutions as inequality regimes, where practising politics is understood as a form of work (Acker, 2006). I use Dorothy Smith's (2005) institutional ethnography (IE) approach to investigate three councils in England.

The landscape of local representation is regarded as one of the most 'pale, male and stale' levels of government in UK politics (Allen, 2012; Thrasher *et al.*, 2013). Councillor work is also strange work; councillors' everyday activities span different regimes and rationalities of work *and* politics. This strangeness complicates how councillors experience and negotiate inequalities; some people can flourish, others cannot.

I studied three councils over a year: an urban council led by Labour; a post-industrial city council also led by Labour; and a rural county council led by the Conservatives. I interviewed 56 councillors, conducted observations at meetings and events, and shadowed 5 councillors.

My thesis is structured around several important layers: I explore the work councillors do; the inequalities of that work; and how wider regimes of inequality shape and are shaped by councillor work. I focus on the complex ways in which councillors negotiate political and professional discourses and practices, and navigate institutional continuity and change. Beyond the immediate inequalities among councillors, wider inequalities and conditions of work are changing alongside dramatic changes in politics and the representational relationship. This thesis offers a timely contribution to contemporary sociological analyses of changes in politics and work.

Using IE enabled me to interrogate different layers of inequality whilst illuminating the paradoxes and contradictions of political life. In particular, it enabled me to see how institutions that are openly concerned with equality can be the most difficult for minorities to negotiate. My thesis contends that feminist IE enables researchers to evaluate the everyday and ongoing ways in which institutional inequalities are (re)produced, whilst respecting the obdurate nature of many institutions, even as they (and the social actors constituting them) encounter wider social and political changes.

## **Introduction: Local English politics in shifting times**

How can we, as individuals and communities, negotiate the changes and continuities, possibilities and barriers we experience as part of everyday life? And how, as sociologists, can we understand, and write cogently and with care, about everyday life, in a way that can support ‘the struggle [to value and bring about] different ways of living individually, collectively, and with the other beings with which we share the planet’ (Cornell and Seely, 2016, p. 14)? These are questions which have troubled sociologists for generations. They are likely to continue doing so as new forms of inequalities arise, new political, cultural and economic moments pose threats and opportunities to everyday life, and new possibilities of being and moving through the world emerge. My ethnography shows how one particular group of people negotiate contemporary continuities and changes to work, politics and identity.

With the upsurge of far-right politics, new political discourses such as ‘fake news’, and increasing instability within political parties worldwide, we are living through times of dramatic political change. Questions about how politicians behave, what they do, and who they are, are being fiercely and widely debated. Alongside these phenomena, we are witnessing a striking rise in the amount of abuse women and Black and minority ethnic (hereafter BME) politicians face. Global movements like #MeToo and #TimesUp aim to tackle abuse and harassment in workplaces, and increasing attention is now being paid to harassment of politicians (Krook and Sanín, 2019; Krook, 2018b, 2018a; Kuperberg, 2018). My research confronts these issues, turning a sociological lens on some of the most significant contemporary political concerns.

Like every ethnography, mine is shaped by the particular context in which it was produced. This socio-political context is more than a backdrop; it shaped some of the experiences and encounters my participants had, living as they were through times of dramatic change. It also formed the conditions of academic knowledge production through which I came to produce this ethnography. The changing worlds of work and politics, and how we conceptualise both, shape this study, as well as my relation to it as a feminist PhD researcher. I expand on the latter in more detail in my methodology chapter, but for now I wish to briefly outline the need to examine English local politics in the current moment of dramatic political upheaval.

## What's so special about the local?

Local government in England, though it may not carry the prestige associated with Westminster, plays a key role in English social and political life. Local authorities provide a range of services as well as holding a representative function; in England, these services include adult and child social care, housing, youth work, arts and leisure services, and town planning (Monro and Richardson, 2010, p. 100). Though local government has endured the impact of austerity measures, it still occupies a significant position as a site of political power, accounting for around one quarter of all public spending and retaining responsibility for delivering vital public services, with further decentralisation set to continue. It has historically occupied an important site addressing forms of inequality (Van Donk, 2000). In particular, as the site for the provision of many publicly funded care services, local government is crucial to transforming many women's lives, and as such is an important site of feminist political strategy (Conley and Page, 2010, 2017). During the 1980s, for example, specific units and initiatives were created to tackle gender equality; these gained the moniker of 'municipal feminism' (Johnson Ross, 2018a). In her research on the practices of local government gender equality workers, Johnson Ross complicates the traditional separation between feminist social movements and state actors. She shows how paid local government equality workers in the 1980s and 1990s challenged their institutions in important ways; acting as 'professional feminists' neither fully inside nor outside the state but straddling a position between the two (Johnson Ross, 2018b).

Similarly, I understand local political representatives as straddling different rationalities and regimes in relation to politics and work. An important dimension of their distinctive work is how the notion of the 'local' is understood and embodied. Candidates' degrees of 'localness' has been thought to influence voters at election time, where being local is understood as comprising a combination of characteristics, like familial ties to an area, but also physical proximity to voters (Arzheimer and Evans, 2014; Evans *et al.*, 2017). Expressing the preference for a 'local' candidate is also mobilised as a proxy reason for selecting a man over a woman, especially in the context of Labour 'imposing' a policy of all-women shortlists on local constituencies (Childs and Krook, 2012; Charles and Jones, 2013). Being 'local', then, is connected to notions of place, gender, inclusion and exclusion. What counts as 'local' is contested; being *legitimately* 'local' is often limited to certain characteristics and women and BME residents do not always fall within these boundaries (Childs and Cowley, 2011; Jones, 2014a; Collins, 2017). Statistics on local government give us a glimpse of who has historically been counted as 'legitimately

local'. In terms of representation, the National Census of Local Authority Councillors (2013) revealed that 96% of councillors were white, with the average age of councillors increasing from 55 in 1977 to 60 in 2013. 68% of councillors were male and 32% were female, the latter an increase from 29% in 2001. Though the number of female council leaders has never been high, in recent years the percentage has stagnated and declined from 16.6% in 2004 to just 12.3% in 2013. In contrast, the typical local government leader is male, white, heterosexual, able-bodied, and aged between 56 and 65 (Centre for Women and Democracy, 2011, 2013). Concurrently, the Fawcett Society identifies various aspects of sexism and sexist behaviour in councils as being a significant barrier to women's participation and progression in local politics (Fawcett Society, 2014; Bazeley *et al.*, 2017).

In Scotland, research highlights the fact that less than one in four council candidates and elected councillors in 2012 were women (Kenny and Mackay, 2013). Earlier research on feminism and local councillors found that feminism elicited 'strong feelings of support as well as animosity and that multiple understandings of what constitutes a "feminist belief system" [were] evident' (Welsh and Halcli, 2003). Though this paints a mixed picture of the local government scene in the UK, there are strong and important regional variations. Research has been conducted on the devolved assemblies in Wales and Scotland, whose alternative institutional arrangements to that of Westminster have resulted in different gendered cultures and ways of doing gender/doing politics (Mackay and Meier, 2003; Jones, Charles and Davies, 2009; Charles and Jones, 2013; Charles and Mackay, 2013; Charles, 2014). In addition, research indicates that BME councillor candidates are more likely than their white counterparts to be younger and better educated, although fewer women are recruited from among BME groups (Thrasher *et al.*, 2013).

Councillors are doing the work of representation; work that is complex and straddles both professionalised practices and discourses as well as representative ones. For this ethnography, I drew on a workplace perspective to interrogate these complexities more deeply. In the following section, I set out the rationale of a workplace perspective in a bit more detail.

### **Local English politics: you've got to work it out**

I have always been fascinated by work; how people understand it, practice it, and negotiate their own identities in and around its boundaries. As a fundamental activity of

human life through which inequalities are (re)produced and challenged daily, work matters. When work practices change, human life is deeply affected, for better or worse. As we see with the increasing expectation in western societies to extend the working day, work can leak into other parts of life (and vice versa), both preventing and enabling people to live more expansive, full lives. When I talk about work, though, I am not just referring to the work one does to earn a living. Following a long tradition of feminist scholarship on work, I conceptualise work in a more expansive sense. This approach is interested in uncovering the different kinds of activities that make up social life and naming them as work; showing how taking care of people and oneself requires work, as does managing one's emotions or the emotions of others, for instance. But I am also interested in the ways in which these activities are work *and*... something else. These manifestations are, I think, the fundamentally strange and interesting nature of work; how it can also encompass activities, emotions or experiences that seem to exceed normative definitions of work. As feminist scholars have long shown, care work, kin work, performative work and other types of work encompass complex relations, be that to the self, to others or to the activities and emotions one experiences. Work, then, is pretty strange.

'Strange' is certainly how one might conceptualise representative work. Councillor work in the UK is strange work, and it is this strangeness which complicates the negotiation of inequalities by the people who do that work. At its heart, what makes councillor work (and representative work more widely) strange, is that the everyday work of councillors straddles different regimes and rationalities of work *and* politics. My thesis therefore explores local political representation as an activity that encompasses both political and professional discourses and practices, where some people thrive, and some do not. I draw out some of the contradictory and complex ways in which councillors balance expectations and practices which can be both enabling and restrictive; involve negotiating institutional continuity and change; as well as navigating party political sub-cultures and local government rationalities.

I adopt a workplace perspective which allows me to study political institutions as inequality regimes and identify practising politics as a form of work (Acker, 2006). There is precedent for adopting a more workplace perspective among some scholars who analyse political institutions as gendered organisations (see Lovenduski, 2013; Charles, 2014; Crewe, 2014; Krook, 2018b). To examine politics as a workplace is to 'refer to [gendered, racialised and classed] norms, rules, and regulations that define working in the legislative bodies' (Lovenduski, 2013, p. 8). In my study, I build on these contributions

– still under-represented in the literature – to explore councillor work. It is vital to explore politics as work when the conditions and technologies of work are evolving in the UK, at the same time as politics and the representational relationship are also dramatically changing.

### **Why now? Representational work in the context of shifting practices and understandings of work**

Over the past few decades, what is understood by work and the ways in which we relate to work have been transformed. The combined effects of late capitalism, globalisation, the development of communication technologies and neoliberal forms of government have produced 'insecure, casualised or irregular labour' markets, at least in the global north, which affect lower status workers and higher status workers alike (Gill and Pratt, 2009, p. 2). In recent years, research has been carried out to understand the relationship between the changes to workers' lives and their subjectivities, spawning a plethora of scholarship under notions of 'creative labour, network labour, cognitive labour, affective labour and immaterial labour' (Gill and Pratt, 2009, p. 2) and the ways in which contemporary forms of work may be depoliticised (Weeks, 2011, p. 4). Despite a 'turn' towards examining forms of immaterial and affective labour, feminist analyses have critiqued the failure within this body of work to foreground gender or race (McRobbie, 2011) and maintain that it would be more productive to view the blurring temporalities and spatialities of home and work through gendered histories and cultural understandings (Mannevu, 2016, p. 72).

Feminist academics have interrogated the political subjectivities associated with new ways of relating to work, highlighting that work associated with pleasure, self-empowerment or care can hold both positive and negative affective attachments for the worker (Mannevu, 2016, p. 71). Feminist scholars have also pointed to the continued need for distinctly materialist analyses of work and sought to resist the dismissal, devaluing and ignoring of domestic work (Oakley, 1981), emotion work (Hochschild, 1979, 1983), and body work (Wolkowitz, 2006), to name but a few. Work takes place across many spaces, both within and between 'private' and 'public' spheres; indeed much of this scholarship has attempted to break down a binary understanding of 'separate spheres' of human life.

Feminist approaches have been used to study a range of organisational contexts and forms of employment (Gill, 2014; Conor, Gill and Taylor, 2015; Cohen, 2018), and

political life (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995; Phillips, 1998b; Lovenduski, 2005). They have shown how masculinised cultures and male-dominated workplaces have reproduced themselves (Knights, 2019), despite the increasing feminisation of the labour force, changing industrial relations and the advent of new technologies of work (Acker, 1990; Cockburn, 1991; Warren, 2007; Connolly *et al.*, 2016). More recently, research has taken into account a range of experiences and identities in workplaces and organisations (Pettinger *et al.*, 2006), with research on intersections related to sexuality, race and gender (McGuire, 2002; Acker, 2006; Rumens, 2008; Atewologun, Sealy and Vinnicombe, 2015; Pullen *et al.*, 2016). What the plethora of feminist research on work and organisations suggests is that whilst some aspects of work change, other aspects seem to remain intransigent. Maintaining a hold on processes of change and continuity forms an important part of my own research into politics as a form of work as the political and social context in which my research took place is one of contradiction and change.

In the following section, I discuss the shifting political context which, though not central to my discussion of work, provides necessary and important context to the research.

### **Researching English local politics in times of political change**

My ethnography examines how councillors negotiate the gendered institutions of English local politics during the EU referendum, an exceptional time in British politics. As such, it contributes to academic debates exploring this shifting political moment. I conducted my research during the run up to, and immediate aftermath of, Britain's vote to leave the EU in 2016. As many have commented, this vote can be understood as primarily motivated by English (as opposed to Welsh, Scottish or Northern Irish) nationalism, so focussing on three English local authorities allowed me to consider how councillors negotiated their own public, political identities. This was a critical moment in the context of negotiating British nationalism, citizenship and identity, where the outcomes of such a negotiation have such material, and often devastating, impacts on people's everyday lives. Among all forms of political representation in the UK, councillors often have the closest form of representative relationship with those living in a particular area, in terms of geographical closeness, availability, and responsiveness to everyday issues affecting people's lives. As such, this research offers an important orientation through which to understand the ways in which inclusion and exclusion are played out, not only within an institutional context in councillors' working lives, but in their relation to wider public discourses of belonging, citizenship and identity.

The notion of representation itself and the politics surrounding representational claims are, across many contexts and countries, 'both changing fast and troubling – there is more than a little talk of a crisis of representation' (Saward, 2010, p. 1). Central to this crisis, Saward argues, are the decline of political parties and increasing distrust of politicians, alongside repeated demands for better representation for marginalised groups in societies (Saward, 2010, pp. 1–2). For feminists studying political institutions, inequalities among representatives indicate a crisis of democratic legitimacy, with the notion of fair and equal democratic participation at stake (Mansbridge, 1998; Phillips, 1998a). My thesis does not offer an account of the history of the idea of representation, or indeed of the influential feminist critique of it. Such a project would be well beyond the scope of this project and would invariably fail to provide the eloquent and authoritative summaries that can be found elsewhere (see Pitkin, 1967, 2004; Runciman, 2007; Saward, 2011; Pateman, 2014).

The time during which I carried out my fieldwork included the run up to the EU referendum vote and the murder of Jo Cox MP, the vote itself, and the months which followed. Academic and media commentators alike rushed to diagnose and explain the referendum result, often focussing on a perceived 'left behind' Leave voter population consisting of northern, older, white English working class people (Ashcroft, 2016; Ford, 2016; Goodwin and Heath, 2016; Mason, 2016; O'Toole, 2016; Harris, 2017; Watson, 2018). This diagnosis has been criticised for failing to account for the prevalence of southern middle-class English Leave voters (Dorling, 2016) and for its ahistorical lens which failed to account for the racialising discourses inherent to a referendum dubbed as 'a proxy for discussions about race and migration' (Bhambra, 2015, 2017b, 2017c; Emejulu, 2016; Shilliam, 2016; Edwards, 2018). Bhambra's work takes aim at such 'methodological whiteness' (2017a), instead seeking to re-centre the history and role of British empire and colonialism in debates on 'British' identity, nationality, belonging and citizenship (Bhambra, 2015, 2017a, 2017d, 2017c, 2017b). That the urge to locate the (apparently) hitherto unknown 'Leave' voter and their reasoning should focus on particular English localities is not surprising. As Dorling (2016) suggests, however, what has become lost in the dominant media and social scientific discourses is the role southern, predominantly wealthy and middle-class areas have played in the Leave vote. An attention to place, and specifically which British places are cast as 'left behind' and conversely those whose role was downplayed, is crucial to understanding the kind of 'racially sedimented society' in which Brexit took place (Shilliam, 2016). This means trying to excavate the 'specific ecology' of racial sedimentation where:

Every locality – whether regional, town, city, or intra-city – will have its specific ecology of this sedimentation that I am talking about. The political economy of the UK is complex when you get down to the [local] level. There can be no abstract model to fit everywhere. Everywhere, the articulation of colonial wrongs with multicultural xenophobias will be of a particular history and mix, and must be engaged with in light of those balances of forces (Shilliam, 2016, np)

But an attention to place and locality cannot account for all. Histories must also be uncovered or recovered. As Gilroy reminds us, ‘long after racism is supposed to have faded away [in a supposed ‘multicultural Britain’], racial abuse, like racialized inequality, remains’ (Gilroy, 2012, p. 382). The kind of ‘inferential racism’ (Hall, 1995), where racism is ‘loudly disavowed while the speaker seeks simultaneously to instrumentalise it’ (Gilroy, 2012, p. 394), was prevalent throughout the process of the EU referendum. But this racism and xenophobia was certainly not new, building as it did on a tradition and history of racist, dog-whistle political utterances by British politicians.

My research also took place in the context of budget cuts to local councils and the implementation of austerity measures to reduce local services. The budget cuts introduced by the Coalition government and deepened throughout the Conservative government’s administration, have been identified as a clear threat to equality as women, and in particular BME women, bear the brunt of cuts to services and local government staff (where women tend to be over-represented in terms of employment) (Bassel and Emejulu, 2014, 2017; Sandhu and Stephenson, 2015; Emejulu and Bassel, 2018). This is particularly significant in relation to equality and diversity initiatives under the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED). The PSED requires councils to focus on nine protected characteristics. It has been suggested that separating out each characteristic to be dealt with individually can risk undermining a holistic and intersectional approach to public service initiatives (Sandhu and Stephenson, 2015).

This discussion is intended to provide important context to my thesis and situate the claims I later make against the backdrop of a rapidly shifting political moment, albeit one which has deep socio-historical roots. I now move on to discuss how I organise my thesis chapters. My thesis is structured around several important layers. I scrutinise the work councillors do, exploring what inequalities are present and how they shape the way the work is structured and experienced. In the following section, I outline the layers of analysis and how these fit into my thesis structure.

## **Thesis structure**

My thesis attends to different levels of analysis, from the personal to the cultural, and the discursive to the institutional. I move between these analytical levels to explore what happens when councillors disrupt institutional norms or confront the 'walls' of an institution (Ahmed, 2012, 2017b). I attempt to weave through these different levels of analysis in each of the analytical chapters, centring and decentering different levels of analysis where they are most appropriate. By doing so, my thesis shows how councillor work is like work, but is also not like work. A crucial aspect to this is how councillors navigate local government inequality regimes (which affect all councillors, though unequally), and the inequality regimes of their political party. I consider what the cultures of local government institutions are like, and how councillors navigate the competing pressures and understandings of different political party and local government workplace cultures. Central to my analysis of councillor work is how gendered social actors are differently positioned in relation to these inequality regimes, and as such experience the cultures and practices differently.

In the following sections, I outline each of the subsequent chapters.

### Literature Review

My Literature Review focusses on the concepts which help me to make sense of the work that councillors do. To do this, I concentrate on how work has been conceptualised in relation to gender and politics. My thesis draws on knowledge from both Sociology and Political Science. I take an explicitly feminist institutional ethnographic approach to local politics in England, in order to bring actors, agency, as well as structuring regimes of inequality, into the study of local politicians' work. As an ethnographer, I was able to get close to the different kinds of activities which local politicians do, to provide a more nuanced understanding of processes of inclusion/exclusion and the (re)production of hierarchies and inequalities. I emphasise negotiation, processes, paradoxes and contradiction as part of my analysis, and so aim to convey a deeper understanding of how councillors practise politics as active, dynamic agents, than is currently available in the literature.

I highlight my research questions in this chapter, before explaining which key concepts I will draw on in the subsequent four analytical chapters. In the latter section, I

discuss how different concepts and theoretical tools enable me to meet the research questions and tackle the different levels of analysis that I map out in the thesis. Because of my framing of *politics as work*, a broad conceptualisation of work is necessary. My analysis chapters deal with the different levels of this work, from macro to micro processes as well as how gender, race and class fit into this picture. To do such an analysis justice, I needed to draw on different theorists and concepts. In my Literature Review, I concentrate my discussion on Dorothy Smith's notion of work and how I use it. I also discuss Joan Acker's concept of inequality regimes, showing how this provides a useful framework when applied to political institutions. I then illustrate how I use some of Pierre Bourdieu's key concepts to analyse the norms and micro-processes within political institutions, as well as how broader structures in society shape individuals within political institutions. Throughout this part of my literature review, I showed how the inclusion of each concept enables me to say something about politics that the others may not be able to do.

#### Methodology: Creating an institutional ethnography of English local politics

In my methodology, I introduce Dorothy Smith's feminist institutional ethnography (IE) and how it has been applied to study other forms of institutions and social life. I discuss Dorothy Smith's foundational work in IE as a kind of 'sociology for the people' (Smith, 2005), arguing that the approach has increasingly been distilled to a primarily methodological approach. I go on to make the case for putting the 'feminist' back into 'feminist institutional ethnography'. Here, I draw parallels with feminist debates about loss, histories and the stories we tell (Hemmings, 2005), and the ways in which feminist knowledge and scholarship can be at once recognised yet dismissed (Pereira, 2012, 2017). By emphasising my IE project as explicitly feminist, I hope to recapture what I perceive is lost during this distillation; the political energy and impetus for making change in the world. I then outline my research design, discussing the selection of the three research sites, and the methods I used. I explain my use of observation across different kinds of spaces, the interviews I conducted, and the shadowing I carried out with a number of councillors. I explore the ethical questions my approach raises, and how I experienced and negotiated my time in the field, using my own experience as an analytical stepping stone to move forward into the discussion of my participants' experiences and negotiations in my empirical chapters.

#### Data Chapter 1: Understanding Councillor Work as Work

This is the first of my analytical chapters. In it, I depict what kind of ‘work’ it is that councillors do, how they understand their own roles as work (and more), and the aspects which make it unique. Here, I discuss the representational relationship with their ward electorate as located at the heart of this uniqueness. The chapter then focusses on how their political work is gendered. I consider how the differently gendered experiences of the work are associated with varying levels of exposure to risk and vulnerability. I explore where councillors do their work, and the expectations and subjectivities they negotiate within these spaces.

In this chapter, I decentre issues relating to party politics to focus on what work *all* councillors, across the party political spectrum, undertake. I ask what is the nature of councillor work, what it is like and how it feels to do that work. As part of this analysis, I explore institutional inequalities and how they shape councillor work and identities. I weave a concern with time and space through the discussion. I pay particular attention to mentoring and caring responsibilities and in what ways these are gendered. By focussing on the relationship between the individual and the institutional, I show how practising local politics and doing gender are shaped by inequality regimes of local government (Acker, 2000, 2006b, 2012; Charles, 2014). I explore how councillor work is complicated because some aspects of it are understood and practised as work or a job, whilst others are part of the representational relationship. Councillor work therefore requires drawing on a range of political and work regimes and rationalities, where having the skills required to do one aspect may be opposite to the skills required to do the other aspect.

#### Data Chapter 2: Authenticity, class and ‘legitimately local’

Whilst I am interested in exploring how councillors experience their work, I am most interested in drawing out how they negotiate regimes of inequality in their work.

Throughout Chapters Five and Six, I therefore re-centre the particularities of political parties, in order to show how their idiosyncratic structures and cultures enable and restrict councillor work. To do so, I consider the micro and macro regimes of inequality affecting councillor work (Acker, 2006). I concentrate on two of the most dominant political parties in local government, Labour and Conservatives, and how their party politics act as sub-communities of culture within the overarching frame of local government representation. This section of analysis makes space for some of the complexity, contradiction and paradoxes of councillor work. In these chapters I unpack

the relationship between work and political cultures, and the individual. I also consider how councillors experience the culture of their party in an easy or disruptive way according to how they are positioned by the cultures of the party. This analysis moves away from the notion of unity and community among councillors (and between councillors and their ward residents) which I foregrounded in Chapter Four.

Chapter Five explores identities within Labour, and how they are being contested in the present moment. I explore how Labour councillors in particular navigate instances when the community they imagine they represent appears to be breaking down. In reference to the representational relationship and councillors' representational claims, I focus on issues of legitimacy and claims to authenticity made by Labour councillors. In doing so, I consider what political performances are valued and challenged in times of political change and concentrate on the ways in which ideas of 'localness' are negotiated and legitimated.

Here, I am interested in understanding what claims to representation *do*, and thus to concentrate on its dynamic and particularised character. Being seen as 'authentic' is a considerable preoccupation for many politicians. The desire to appear authentic in the eyes of the electorate and other party members influences priorities, decision making and interactions with the public and media. I consider how claims to (raced, classed and gendered) authentic identities change in response to wider social instability, and how these changes in turn affect entrenched ideas of what it means to be a politician.

### Data Chapter 3: Respectable and reasonable political identities

In this chapter, I continue my analysis of inequality regimes in party politics by focussing on the Conservative party. I centre professionalised discourses and practices of work in the Conservative party, and how women are able to align themselves with such discourses and practices to navigate inequalities. This alignment is made possible, I argue, through their habitus as women who are able to fit in with the behaviour and work expectations which dominate the local Conservative political style.

This chapter considers the ways in which Conservative political identities are manifest in local politics. I depict how, in the Conservative majority council, Conservative councillors created a political identity through discursive and performative practices of dis-identification; they constructed their own identity of 'reasonable, respectful and nice' in response to suggesting that other councillors offered more 'extreme' political views

and behaviours. This involves identity creation through describing who ‘we’ are not, and in doing so involves the creation of identities or labels for others. I consider the political non-identity expressed by many of the Conservative councillors I encountered; that they were not ideological or ‘doctrinaire’, as one participant repeatedly informed me. I then explore the ways in which this particular Conservative self-proclaimed ‘non-doctrinaire’ political identity was normalised under a regime of neutral, respectful, moderate behaviour and language, and in what ways this is gendered, classed and raced. I draw out some of the exclusions, contradictions and opportunities this unmarked or neutral political identity produced, especially for women.

#### Data Chapter 4: Against municipal walls: abuse and complaints in local politics

This final analysis chapter connects different party political inequality regimes and resumes the discussion of councillors as a whole. It concentrates on how issues of harassment, bullying and abuse in local politics are experienced and dealt with. It once again draws together the particularities of councillor experience to show how power is safeguarded and challenged in the everyday life of local politicians. Drawing on Sara Ahmed’s (Ahmed, 2017a) evolving work on complaint in institutions, I seek to contribute to important and timely debates around the ways in which instances of abuse towards councillors and the complaints which arise from the abuse are, or are not, dealt with. I discuss this in the context of when and how formal or informal processes of complaint are enacted by either the council or by individual political parties.

I focus on what happens when instances of abuse are made visible to institutions via formal or informal complaints being made. What is central to this chapter is a concern with what instances of harassment, bullying and abuse – and the attendant complaints – *do* in political parties. I consider the texts which formally delineate what is deemed acceptable behaviour by councillors, within the confines of the council house or City Hall and beyond. These texts are a council’s Codes of Conduct for members and the party disciplinary procedures, the latter of which are often invoked verbally. Following Dorothy Smith’s (2014) work on incorporating texts into institutional ethnographies, I consider the locally-produced Codes of Conduct as active texts which are performative, linking the particular local circumstances of how they are read and enacted with wider gendered and racialised discourses and relations of ruling. In mapping out the experiences of both formal and informal complaints involving councillors, I also draw on Ahmed’s evolving work on complaint, where ‘the experience of identifying and challenging abuses of power

teaches us about power' (Ahmed, 2017a), specifically, how it is safeguarded and challenged in the everyday life of, and institutional cultures surrounding, local politicians.

#### Conclusions: Mapping layers of inequality and reflecting on non-dualistic thinking

In my concluding chapter, I do a number of things. Firstly, I return to the original research questions and discuss my contributions to knowledge. I summarise the inequality regimes to emerge from my research, and identify how councillors experience and negotiate their position within local government. I then discuss the analytical points that have emerged from my feminist institutional ethnography, weaving analysis from different chapters together to respond to each research question in turn. I contend that using IE enabled me to investigate different layers of inequality which other methodologies would not have allowed me to do in such detail. I argue that feminist IE enabled me to evaluate the everyday and ongoing ways in which institutional inequalities are (re)produced, paying attention to the paradoxes and contradictions of political life. At the same time, this framework allowed me to keep hold of the intransigent nature of local political institutions, even as they, and the councillors who constitute them, negotiate wider social and political changes. Finally, I touch on the epistemological and methodological contradictions and puzzles which IE presented. I reflect on how it is precisely *through* the complexities I identify here that my study has been able to provide valuable contributions to knowledge in several ways; for conceptualising political work, for understanding how minorities negotiate institutional inequalities, and by outlining a useful framework with which to study institutions more broadly.

## Literature review

Feminist sociologists have long been concerned with ‘making invisible work visible’ (Warren, 2011, p. 129). In this chapter, I discuss what existing research tells us about councillor work in the UK. I focus on aspects of feminist scholarship on work and organisations which are most relevant to my study of councillors at work. I therefore focus my discussion of the kinds of scholarship on work that tries to do ‘justice to the complexity – the messiness, the mutual imbrications – of the relation between paid work and other life concerns’ (Wolkowitz, 2009, p. 847). I discuss what the ‘messiness’ of councillor work looks like in my first empirical chapter. For now, I examine the literature relevant to understanding councillor activities *as work*, and how both ‘work’ and our understandings of it are changing.

I begin by outlining the broader scholarship on gender and politics, and in what ways this is linked to theories of gendered work. I then focus my discussion on what kinds of research has been undertaken at the lower levels of government, in particular in relation to shifting devolution contexts. I then examine the representational and community aspect of councillor work, before detailing how this is shaped by localised gender, class and race inequalities. I then discuss how research has framed one of the most crucial inequalities that take place within councillor work itself; the abuse of local politicians. Following this, I outline my research questions. I then go on to explain my conceptual framework in order to show how I go about answering my research questions.

### Conceptualising inequalities in political research

The wide range of existing research on gendered organisations has interrogated the structural forms of gendered segregation in workplaces and its continued reconstitution via organisational change, the norms of masculine behaviours associated with workplaces and their cultures, and how the gendering of organisations is shaped by wider socio-cultural gender and class inequalities (Kanter, 1977; Cockburn, 1981, 1991, Acker, 1990, 2006; Gherardi, 1995; Gherardi and Poggio, 2001; Knights and Surman, 2008). The issues facing women entering political legislatures and parties, such as how best to negotiate masculinist political cultures, navigate exclusionary selection procedures or combine family life with male-centred working practices (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995; Lovenduski, 2005), reflect the concerns which have preoccupied those researching gender and organisations more broadly. In particular, feminist political scientists have drawn on Kanter’s (1977) organisational theory and how the notion of a

critical mass of women, typically imagined at thirty per cent (Dahlerup, 2006), might transform the dominant modes of doing gender and enable women to 'make a difference' in political life, though what constitutes 'making a difference' is largely ill-defined amongst women's groups (Dahlerup, 2006; Charles, 2014). The debates around the utility of critical mass theory or critical actors are complex (Celis *et al.*, 2008; Campbell, Childs and Lovenduski, 2010; Celis and Childs, 2012), but the concepts serve to illuminate the importance of conceptualising political arenas as workplaces in which the specificity of the working environment affects women politicians' agency to perform their 'representative role' (Threlfall *et al.*, 2012).

The field of gender and politics comprises a substantial body of feminist research, with numerous themes providing the background to this area of research. These include, but are not limited to, the explorations of the links between women's presence in political arenas and pro-women or feminist policy outcomes and organisational change (Bochel and Briggs, 2000; Childs, 2004; Tremblay, 2007; Mackay, 2008) and conceptualisations of, and proffered solutions to, the issue of women's under-representation within legislative bodies (Childs and Krook, 2012; Gains and Lowndes, 2014; Kenny, 2014; MacKay and Waylen, 2014). Sociologists and feminist political scientists, in particular those from a feminist institutionalist perspective within political science, have been concerned with the ways in which organisations are gendered, raced and classed and draw on theories of gender and power from scholars such as Acker (1990), Connell (1987, 2006), West and Zimmerman (1987, 2009) (1987) and Butler (1990, 2004). Feminist institutionalists conceptualise political institutions in relational and historically contingent ways. They are concerned with how the gendered nature of both formal rules and informal conventions that shape political behaviour constrain and enable action through processes of regulation, obligation and narration (Gains and Lowndes, 2014). This body of work shares commonalities with my own research approach as it foregrounds the ongoing, everyday, and negotiated dimension of gender inequalities.

As women have increasingly moved into formal politics in the UK, feminist scholars have documented and analysed the impacts women politicians' representation has on gender equality in elected office. Much of this work has focussed on the kinds of electoral gains for women made possible through positive action measures such as gender quotas, for example with the introduction of 'All Women Shortlists' (AWS) by the Labour party (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995; Squires, 2005). The tendency for political actors to focus on quotas can serve to obscure the broad range of initiatives designed to tackle women's under-representation (Krook and Messing-Mathie, 2013; Krook and

Norris, 2014). Analysis has tracked the inconsistent and controversial implementation of AWS within Labour, as well as how quotas are framed within other major political parties in relation to different understandings of equality; equality of opportunity or equality of outcome (Dahlerup, 2007). One of the ways in which the Labour party has wrestled with crises of representation in local government is via the introduction of AWS in local elections. There have not been similar shortlists adopted for disabled people or BME people. There was internal backlash over Labour's use of AWS, with some arguing that the implementation of AWS serves to disadvantage local candidates in elections (Jones, Charles and Davies, 2009). Some complain that AWS have resulted in the national Labour party 'helicoptering' in women candidates to replace local candidates, who also happen to be men. This logic functions to move the debate away from that of redressing gender inequalities, to one which pits local Labour party autonomy against the national party. It does, of course, therefore elide the fact that there are local women, from whom the local party could draw potential candidates. There also those who point out that they do not account for intersecting inequalities and so can obstruct BME men from selection, for example (Thrasher *et al.*, 2013). Much of the anti-AWS discourse stems from an argument that 'merit' should decide candidate selection alone. That what may count as 'merit' is gendered, racialised, ableist and classed in particular ways, and which varies across space and time, is often ignored in these discourses (Murray, 2014). As a result, identity and merit become disconnected and dichotomised. Labour women may oppose AWS precisely because they do wish to be seen as candidates selected on the basis of 'identity' over 'merit'.

The different party understandings of equality and approaches to gender quotas have been shown to impact the attempt to increase the number of women at the local level of UK government (Bazeley *et al.*, 2017). More recent studies have also sought to address issues of representation from intersectional perspectives, and pay closer attention to the ways in which women are positioned in complex ways by institutions and societal norms (Lépinard, 2013; Severs, Celis and Erzeel, 2016; Childs and Hughes, 2018). Work is also being carried out to try and re-frame the discursive construction from the 'problem' of women's under-representation to that of (certain) men's over-representation. A critical perspective on men is required, it is argued, in order to understand the nature of men's continuing dominance in political institutions and the negative effects this has (Bjarnegård and Murray, 2018). Murray (2014) argues that conceiving of gender and representation solely in relation to women's under-representation, and by extension quotas for women only, 'perpetuates the status of men as the norm and women as the "other"' (Murray, 2014, p. 520).

Scholars have also focussed on how women experience and (re)negotiate the working conditions of politicians and how institutional processes and practices are gendered (Mackay, 2004; Mackay, Kenny and Chappell, 2010; Chappell and Waylen, 2013; Kenny, 2014; MacKay and Waylen, 2014). Attention has been paid to the friendships and networks which enable or prevent women's mobility through formal politics (Childs, 2013; Franceschet and Piscopo, 2014) and the capacity for old and new political institutions to implement family-friendly working environments for politicians (Jones, Charles and Davies, 2009; Allen, Cutts and Winn, 2016). Within much of the work on gender and formal politics, however, most attention has been paid to national rather than local legislatures (Borisjuk, Rallings and Thrasher, 2007). However, the different levels of government in the UK are characterised by different gendered cultures and institutional arrangements. In the following section, I discuss existing research specifically on regional and local UK government.

### **National, regional, local: The research landscape of UK government**

In this section, I explore existing research on different levels of UK government, and show what insights this research can give us about English councillor work. Historically, research on local political institutions has provided evidence for gender differences in political styles, descriptions of work-loads and career progression. Research indicated that women politicians in Westminster and local government felt they behaved differently to their male counterparts; women felt they engaged in less adversarial styles and more co-operative and consultative styles of practising politics (Bochel and Briggs, 2000). Previous research on councillors in Scotland, Wales and England showed women councillors were more likely to describe themselves as 'full-time' councillors than men, and were also more likely to identify caring responsibilities as a major constraint on their council work, whereas men were more likely to cite employment (Bochel and Bochel, 2004, p. 38). Research also indicated that women tend not to progress to senior levels in local government; when they do they face significant opposition (Bochel and Bochel, 2004, 2008, 2010; Centre for Women and Democracy, 2011), with gendered assumptions about the nature and purposes of leadership prohibiting their ability to fulfil the role as they wish (Broussine and Fox, 2002). Local government is also an important site of training or 'political apprenticeship' for politicians, with many MPs 'learning their trade' at the local level, but 'women councillors are less likely than men to make the jump from local to national politics' (Allen, 2013a, p. 147).

Whilst Westminster and local government may have traditional masculinist political styles, cultures and institutional arrangements in common (Charles, 2014), other levels of UK government offer an alternative vision of representative politics. In the UK's regional assemblies, the number of women representatives has typically been far higher than at Westminster, and the assemblies' statuses as new political institutions afforded greater opportunities to change unequal practices and processes (Jones, Charles and Davies, 2009). Devolution afforded new possibilities for shaping differently gendered political opportunity structures; moving practices away from Westminster-style adversarial politics (Ball and Charles, 2006; Charles, 2014). Research on the devolved assemblies in Wales and Scotland shows how their alternative institutional arrangements – such as adopting more 'family-friendly' working hours – has resulted in more inclusive gendered cultures and practices (Charles and Jones, 2013; Charles and Mackay, 2013; Charles, 2014). Unlike at Westminster and in many local councils, these newer institutional arrangements provide the conditions for a different type of gendered politics; one which is not so readily tied to masculinist political norms. In Wales, for example, women and men Assembly Members describe the working environment, practices and culture of regional government in far more inclusive terms than their counterparts in Welsh local government (Jones, Charles and Davies, 2009; Charles and Jones, 2013; Charles, 2014).

This research reflects feminist and queer theorising of 'doing/undoing/re-doing gender', which conceptualises the reciprocal relationship between practices and the conditions of practice (Butler, 2004; West and Zimmerman, 2009). As Butler (2004) argues, individual attempts to 'do gender' differently will largely fail without collaborative efforts to reshape social structures and institutions. This has important implications for my own research agenda; showing that alternative ways of practising politics are possible, but only where the institutional conditions enable them. Research on the Welsh Assembly offers an important further insight; that there are significant regional and local variations in how (gendered) politics is 'done'. For instance, Jones et al (2009) describe the political culture in the National Assembly for Wales as 'feminised', but also as being a distinctly Welsh way of practising politics (Jones *et al* 2009 np). The research on regional UK politics therefore indicates it is both the distinct locality and individual institutional arrangements which shape, and are shaped by, gendered norms. This insight is central to my own research design; that it is vital to be attentive to the specificities of both locality and the individual institutional arrangements of local government.

## **New opportunities or continuing inequalities? Local politics in the context of 'English Devolution'**

The existing research on the devolved nations highlights them as sites of more equitable representation than Westminster; a development made possible by processes of devolution (Jones, Charles and Davies, 2009). This is significant to my own research in the context of the changing landscape of English local government; especially in relation to the acceleration of English devolution and the creation of regional Combined Authorities. But there are important contextual differences for English devolution compared to devolved nations. Unlike Scottish or Welsh devolution packages, Combined Authorities are emerging from existing English local government structures. As such, any inequalities that currently exist in English local government (such as the under-representation of women or BME councillors) stand to be reproduced at the level of Combined Authority. Though English local government tends to have, on average, a greater number of women compared to Westminster (Bochel and Bochel, 2010), the proportion of women varies dramatically according to council type and area. Combined Authorities therefore select members and leaders from the existing pool of elected councillors, some of which contain very few women or BME councillors. Although Elected Mayors are voted in by the public, in practice the role is very similar to that of a more traditional Council Leader (Copus, 2012).

Not only do Combined Local Authorities build on existing structures of local government, which are characterised by the dominance of masculinist modes of practicing politics (Charles and Jones, 2013; Charles, 2014), but their creation has attracted remarkably little interest within public or academic discourse (Terry, 2017). This is not to say it has gone unnoticed, as we have seen with campaigns by the Fawcett Society, which has attempted to highlight the lack of women and ethnic minority representation on both Combined Authority cabinets and during regional Mayoral elections. But with a combination of a lack of women leaders (Allen, 2013a, 2013b; Bazeley *et al.*, 2017), cabinet members, and a lack of feminist organising around the creation of these new structures, the risk is that narrow, male-dominated environments seen in local government are reproduced at this newer, regional level.

Numbers may only offer a crude and partial analysis, but the available gender composition figures for existing Combined Authorities do not paint a picture of parity. Only four out of the sixteen directly elected mayors in England and Wales are women, and 72% of the senior leadership roles in the 'Northern Powerhouse' group of Combined

Authorities (the focal point of the Conservative Government's devolution agenda) are occupied by men (Trenow and Olchawski, 2016, p. 3). Whilst the overall picture in England is still changing, these early figures suggest it is far more difficult to shape equitable political opportunity structures from existing institutional arrangements. In Wales and Scotland, devolution also afforded new opportunities for feminist social movements to influence the political agenda, although it was suggested that more radical feminist voices were marginalised (Ball and Charles, 2006; Charles and Mackay, 2013). It remains to be seen what the opportunities will be for feminists to shape the political agenda in the context of English devolution.

In my own research, each council was involved in developing a Combined Authority for their region, along with other neighbouring councils. One council I studied had also adopted new political structures which were being promoted as part of the push for greater English devolution, like a rainbow council cabinet (made up of members from all parties). It is important, therefore, for new research to show when and how inequalities occur within existing structures of English local government, not only to address inequalities in their own right, but for the implications they might have for new governance structures like Combined Authorities.

### **Race, gender and class in local government: examining critical research**

There have been important critical studies which analyse the complex ways in which class, gender and race inequalities operate in local government. Following a variety of legislation aimed at reforming local government during the late 1970s and 1980s, race, class, gender and critical social policy scholars turned a critical gaze towards local government as a key site of the (re)production of various forms of inequality and as a key site of organising for anti-sexist and anti-racist movements (Solomos and Back, 1995). In the following section, I outline some of the key insights from this body of work which are relevant to my study.

In her 1977 study of corporate management and community development policies at Lambeth council, Cynthia Cockburn confronts some of the contradictions associated with local government. She notes that:

'[i]t is *precisely because* of the caring and commitment of so many elected members and officers that it is important to understand the exact nature of the institution in which they work. Callousness played a smaller part in the wrecking

of Lambeth's council houses than it is sometimes thought.' (Cockburn, 1977, p. 3 emphasis in original).

This tension – between 'caring' councillor intentions and 'wrecking' practices – is one I also confront and attempt to make sense of, over forty years after Cockburn's study took place. To do so requires an attention to 'situation and structure [rather than] personalities' (Cockburn, 1977, p. 3). The impulse to individualise problems should not be surprising, considering that local government is an integral part of national government and the state (Cockburn, 1977, p. 2), which characteristically treats us as 'individual citizens, families communities, consumer groups – all categories which obscure class [and other aspects of social control, difference and inequality]' (The London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group, 1980, p. 4). As part of the state, local government is more than a structure which administers services, but is 'a complex set of social relations' which co-exists within, and helps maintain, wider capitalist and other social relations of inequality (The London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group, 1980, p. 4).

The London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group (1980) also focussed on the contradictions of local government, highlighting the ambivalent and resistive relationship that Labour councillors, or those from more radical left-wing political positions, had with their position of power. They highlighted how socialist councillors, officers and state workers operate with a contentious relationship with their local authority, working both *within and against* it (The London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group, 1980). As such, local government offers both possibilities and limitations for socialist or more radical politicians. For example, they document how Labour councillors were able to:

'give funding to certain radical community groups and projects; to work with squatting groups over the use of empty housing; to appoint race relations advisors to purge the council bureaucracy of racist practices – in their housing allocation among other things' (The London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group, 1980, p. 38)

At the same time, the structure of local authorities reinforces a technical, rather than political, approach to problem-solving, which can bring radical councillors and officers into conflict with one another (The London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group, 1980, p. 40). The bureaucratic structures of local government can therefore both constrain and enable councillors to act on behalf of marginalised groups in society.

The relationships which feminist and anti-racist activists have had *with/in and against* the state continue to be complex ones. Newman (2012) examines the 'strained relationship' between political activism and neoliberal forms of governance, and how this relationship is so often 'mediated through gendered labour' (Newman, 2012, p. 2). She addresses the charge of depoliticisation and co-optation of radical politics by neoliberal practices and processes, arguing the picture is more complicated. Newman (2012) contends that all the women she interviewed, who had all worked within, outside and at the edge of the state:

'worked the spaces of power generated through contradictions in the ruling relations of their time, mobilizing new spaces of agency, prefiguring alternative rationalities and opening out spaces for those that followed. Their work did not just 'reflect' the profound social and political transformations of their day but were generative of them' (Newman, 2012, p. 3)

Similarly, Johnson Ross (2018b) argues that the dismissal of 'professional feminists' as institutionalised and depoliticised fails to account for the extent to which they draw on feminist knowledges and practices which help to blur the boundaries between social movements and the state in more complicated ways.

Writing at close of the 1970s, The London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group emphasised the rational nature of the state and how local government under capitalism 'ensur[es] that we relate to capital and to each other in ways which divide us from ourselves and leave the basic inequalities unquestioned' (The London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group, 1980, p. 4). They acknowledge these relations are not merely capitalist ones, but also sexist and racist, arguing that 'once we focus on the relational aspect of the state we see racism and imperialism within the capitalist system take on a particular significance' (The London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group, 1980, p. 84). In the following decade, Paul Gilroy (1987) articulated the crucial importance of focussing on the local state when trying to understand the dynamics of British racism. Academic work sought to track and analyse the policy and practice innovations associated with racial (in)equality that took place throughout the 1980s, as local authorities sought to respond to Section 71 of the 1976 Race Relations Act (Ouseley, 1990; Solomos and Ball, 1990a).

Focussing on the changes to the notion of a 'British' identity and nation under Thatcherism (and later multiculturalism), Gilroy (1987) considered the complex ways in

which black and Asian citizens were excluded and only accommodated on specific terms. Others have also tied ideas of nation and belonging, representation and the local state, together. As Solomos and Ball (1990b) argue, the 'racialisation of local politics [are] to some extent determined by the specific histories of particular localities [...] [but also] correspond to the transformations in the politics of immigration and race' in the UK from the 1960s onwards (Solomos and Ball, 1990b, p. 6). The complex relationship between local geographies, histories and institutional specificities on the one hand, and wider patterns of social change on the other, is one I also explore in my study.

Other empirical studies highlight the lack of ethnic minority local representatives. Using survey data to examine the candidates contesting local elections, Thrasher *et al.* (2013) indicate that BME candidates are more likely to be younger and better educated than their white counterparts, but that fewer women are recruited from among this group. This research revealed that BME candidates were under-represented compared to their proportion in the wider electorate (Thrasher *et al.*, 2013, p. 290), but highlighted that the picture of underrepresentation varies across regions, with London (and, to a lesser extent, other metropolitan areas) more likely to select BME candidates (Thrasher *et al.*, 2013, p. 301). Thrasher *et al.* (2013) also indicate that whilst BME candidates may lack traditional party political networks, they may benefit from closer community ties. More recent ethnographic work has sought to make sense of the 'messy, unruly and contingent' work of government, governing and policy making, and the 'uncomfortable' work of challenging race (and other) inequalities in the contemporary context (Jones, 2013, p. 13). Jones (2013, 2014b, 2014a) traces the ambiguously-defined 'community cohesion' policies which emerged from 2001 as a response to the perceived splintering of society along ethnic lines (Jones, 2013, p. 1). Her analysis contends with how notions of identity, belonging, place and race are understood and practised in the everyday work of local governance, and in particular highlights the importance of everyday emotion-work in policy making.

This existing body of research indicates several important factors for my own ethnography. Firstly, whilst research has been carried out on UK government structures outside Westminster, less work has examined English local government within the context of English devolution in the form of Combined Authorities and directly elected mayors. Although some important survey work has been carried out on councillors, there is less existing in-depth, qualitative research on English local representation. Lastly, whilst some important research has been carried out on intersecting inequalities and the local state, there is comparatively little research being carried out on how women and

other minorities in England, specifically, experience and negotiate political work in local government. To understand how and why inequalities are reproduced and potentially passed on to new governance structures, it is vital for more qualitative research to be carried out which can offer important, in-depth insights that the existing survey research is not able to provide.

Having indicated a need for a greater qualitative research focus on English councillors, I wish to discuss some of the areas of councillor work that existing research covers. For this research, I conceptualised politics as (unique) work. This is not how local government is often investigated. In the following section, I examine existing research on councillors' representative roles, and how that role is conceptualised in relation to place and community.

### **Understanding councillor work: communities and representation**

The usual approach to understanding what political representatives – and councillors in particular – do, is to focus on their representative role, rather than conceptualise what they do as work (for example Welsh and Halcli, 2003; Bochel and Bochel, 2004, 2008; Mackay, 2004; Gains, 2009; Siebert, 2009; Copus, 2010; Allen, 2012, 2013a). Some research on political life, particularly from a 'feminist institutionalist' (Kenny, 2014; MacKay and Waylen, 2014) tradition in political science, draws on the insights of feminist theories of organisation and work, particularly that of Joan Acker's concept of gender regimes (Kenny and Mackay, 2009; Annesley and Gains, 2010; Gains and Lowndes, 2014; Verge, 2015). Primarily, however, this body of existing research does the important job of analysing the role of politicians as *representatives*. In contrast, I am primarily focussing on local politics as *work*. I expand on this further in the second half of this chapter, when I discuss my conceptual framework.

Research on councillors has shown that as part of the representational relationship at the heart of their work, councillors distinguish between 'pastoral care and the pursuit of policy, the latter being driven more by the relationship the councillor has with the party than that with the community' (Copus, 2010, p. 587). A crucial part of local politics involves supporting the local community and furthering local needs. There is a greater proportion of local candidates elected as Independents, for example, than in other levels of UK government, often because they seek election on the basis of a single issue community campaign (Bottom and Copus, 2011). In 2000, the Local Government Act was designed to redress what the Labour government of the day considered to be

'waste' of the average councillors' time; that councillors should not be spending their time attending long committee debates but rather be out in their local communities. The idea was that changes to local authorities following the Act would place decision-making more centrally with the cabinet and council executive, so that non-cabinet councillor input would primarily be in an advisory or scrutiny capacity (Copus, 2010). This would, the government argued, enable backbench councillors to spend less time in council meetings and in the Council Hall, and more time as 'champions' of their ward communities, attending local residents' meetings and surgeries (Copus, 2004, p. 237). However, the reality of backbencher life is that of a multitasker; backbenchers are often being involved with some formal function or another, be it chairing a committee, a scrutiny panel, or being a policy 'lead', for example, in addition to their ward-level work. Councillors can be appointed to these posts – some of which, in the case of policy 'leads' are less formalised than others – or stand to be selected for them. The dynamics of this depends on the position, the local authority political structure and the political party structures and promotional procedures. Regardless of their positions, however, councillors habitually multitask as 'case workers, problem-solvers and advocates' (Thrasher *et al.*, 2015, p. 716).

Understanding how 'localness' is conceptualised is important for local politics. This is defined in terms of being physically close (i.e. the representative living in the same ward as the electorate or in the neighbouring ward) (Arzheimer and Evans, 2014; Evans *et al.*, 2017). Beyond physical distance, however, 'localness' should be understood as having a significant emotional element. Tom Collins (Collins, 2017, p. 191) argues that different emotions are mobilised in different places, and that these are politicised and contested according to localised dynamics. In particular, he sees the notion of 'civic pride' as influential in shaping the kinds of policies and practices we see dominating in local government. He argues that the emotive register inherent within 'civic pride' is a useful way for understanding how citizenship, localism, austerity and belonging are being locally shaped and contested (Collins, 2017, p. 191). As part of my research, I use his provocations in relation to civic pride to explore what kinds of civic pride are produced in the three councils and how it was being contested in a fast shifting political moment.

### **Place, space and inequalities: mapping local inequalities**

Place also matters in relation to the amount of time councillors spend on their political work, and the kinds of work it is they have to do. As Thrasher *et al.* (2015) show, councillors who represent more deprived wards tend to spend more time on council work

than those representing affluent areas, and that the kinds of work activities councillors pursue (whether that is proactive or reactive representation work) relate to the localised context of the place (Thrasher *et al.*, 2015, p. 713). Their research also concluded that it is women and retired councillors who invest more than the average 23 hours per week which other colleagues spend on councillor work (Thrasher *et al.*, 2015, p. 713). This research indicates, then, that localised gender and class relations shape the kind of work councillors do. There is an important spatial dimension to inequalities; England is characterised by different gender, race and class inequalities which map on to rural and urban areas in complex ways with uneven distribution of wealth, opportunities and services (Tyler, 2004). Doreen Massey, writing about gender as part of 'the process of the reproduction of local uniqueness' (Massey, 1994, p. 201) describes how place and gender relations constitute one another in localised forms. Tracing the history of East Anglian rural communities, she noted the significance of 'the rural village, which was overwhelmingly conservative - socially, sexually and politically' in shaping local women's lives and horizons (Massey, 1994, p. 201). This important spatial dimension of inequalities informed my decision to study three different sites.

As well as localised gender relations, place is entwined with notions of class in complex ways, where residents shape a locality through active, dynamic classed practices (Benson and Jackson, 2013). In their study of middle-class residents of London boroughs, Benson and Jackson argue that people shape localities not just according to their own 'imaginings, but also through practice and the ongoing processes through which class and place intersect' (Benson and Jackson, 2013, p. 794). They show how 'place-making' involves a set of discursive practices where middle-class residents mark the symbolic and socio-spatial borders of 'their' identity and place through 'processes of disaffiliation' with others, and also via 'processes of distinction' *within* middle class communities themselves (Jackson and Benson, 2014, p. 1195). They argue that ways of 'doing' neighbourhood' should be understood in relation to other 'circulating representations' (Benson and Jackson, 2013, p. 793), as notions of place are actively made and maintained through everyday actions and interventions. Of particular interest to my own research in a middle-class dominated rural county council, are the discursive negotiations which village residents undertake in attempts to 'uphold the image of their village as the rural idyll, a classed and racialised vision' (Benson and Jackson, 2013, p. 793). I found the localised formations of classed identities to be crucial to my research, and use Bourdieu's notions of habitus and doxa to help me make sense of this. I return to a discussion of how I use Bourdieu's concepts in the latter part of this chapter, as part of my conceptual framework.

Alongside localised gender and class relations, racial inequalities also have local manifestations which shape the kind of work local representatives do. Those researching the intersections of place, gender, class and race have illustrated how rural life, and in particular the figure of the 'English village', has become a 'a stage for the enactment and reproduction of a racialised set of white middle-class social and moral values' (Tyler, 2004, p. 391), where BME communities are 'imagined to lack the 'proper' middle-class values of respectability and decorum, which are associated with the traditional white rhythms of English village life' (Tyler, 2004, p. 391). The exclusionary effects of the intersection of class, race (and, presumably, gender) relations Tyler (2004) discussed are not limited to "proper' middle class [...] English village life' (ibid., 391). They are also linked to discourses on citizenship and belonging in politics. As the public discourse surrounding the UK's referendum on EU membership indicates, much of the discourse on race, place and belonging centres around white (English) working class identities and livelihoods (Bhambra, 2017b). Meanwhile, it is argued that the exclusionary power of white middle-class codes of 'respectability and decorum' seem to go unmarked (Bhambra, 2017a).

'Localness' of political candidates is also widely considered to be a factor which influences voters at election time, with evidence that 'voters view representatives at the local level in terms of whether they are 'from here' or 'from else-where'' (Arzheimer and Evans, 2014, p. 5). Childs and Cowley (2011) argue that 'where voters see themselves as having a local identity, it should come as no surprise that localness is raised as an identity that warrants descriptive representation' (Childs and Cowley, 2011, p. 14). Arzheimer and Evans show that a key factor in determining 'localness' is the degree of physical distance between candidate and voter, which they argue matters for County Council elections (Arzheimer and Evans, 2014, p. 5). It is considered unsatisfactory for a representative to merely represent their designated area, but rather they must, in some form, *come from* that area (Childs and Cowley, 2011, p. 4 my emphasis). Childs and Cowley (2011) argue that there is widespread acknowledgement from political parties that a 'local candidate' can be an electoral asset, hence its extremely frequent use as a campaign tool'. 'Localness' is preferred regardless of the voter's gender, with 'women sa[ying] that they would prefer to be represented by a man as long as he was local rather than a woman if she came from outside the area, by a factor of 15:1' (Childs and Cowley, 2011, p. 5). Childs and Cowley cite modern preferences for a 'local candidate' being rooted in nineteenth-century British traditions, when many MPs had strong local connections (Childs and Cowley, 2011, p. 6). But the desire for a 'local' candidate has

also been entwined with a backlash against the measures which some political parties have made towards ensuring gender equality among candidates. In the 2005 General Election, Blaenau Gwent's successful candidate ran on 'on an explicitly anti-AWS ticket', where an All-Women Shortlist would have resulted in 'the imposition of a New Labour, London-based [woman] candidate' over a local, 'old' Labour man (Cutts, Childs and Fieldhouse, 2008, pp. 576–7).

Finally, influential to my research has been the accounts of the spaces and histories of political institutions, with a focus on Parliament in particular as 'both a memorial to a selected history of politics and the nation and a working environment consisting of living scripts' (Puwar, 2014, p. 234). The places where work takes place are 'where we often experience the most immediate, unambiguous, and tangible relations of power that most of us will encounter on a daily basis' (Weeks, 2011, p. 2). The representative work that councillors do in a Council Hall can be conceptualised as involving both front and back stage labour (Coulter and Schumann, 2012). I focus on the political performances situated in these spaces because, following Shirin Rai (Rai, 2014; Rai and Johnson, 2014) and Nirmal Puwar (Puwar, 2010), a focus on performance allows us to ask different questions about legitimacy and representation; questions of *how* claims of representation and legitimacy are made by individuals and institutions and to what effect. Fundamentally implicated in these questions are how harassment, abuse and bullying are or are not dealt with in these spaces. Council Hall spaces, with both front and back stages, are significant to this discussion because this is where many of the sexist or racist behaviour, discussed in the subsequent chapter on complaint, took place.

As well as 'localness' and the intersections of place, space, race, gender and class inequalities, there are inequalities which occur as part of the ongoing and everyday nature of councillor work. Perhaps the most significant manifestations of inequality is through the forms of abuse which councillors' experience as part of carrying out their work. In my final empirical chapter, I examine abuse of councillors in detail. In the following section of this chapter, I outline some of the recent scholarship which has been undertaken on the abuse of politicians and the implications this has for councillors.

### **Inequalities within councillor work: abuse and complaint as 'institutional walls'**

In recent years, there has been a rise in the reports of harassment, abuse and violence against politically active women (Krook and Sanín, 2016; Krook, 2017, 2018b; Restrepo

Sanín, 2018). Violence against women in politics is understood to encompass 'physical attacks as well as humiliation, harassment, intimidation, and stigmatization' (Biroli, 2018, p. 681). Feminist political scientists have argued that the study of abuse and violence towards women and other minorities in politics is so new that it is defined by its 'uncharted territory' (Kuperberg, 2018, p. 685). Within gender and politics scholarship, focus on this phenomenon is relatively new, with scholars tracking incidents across regions (Krook, 2017). There is an increasing emphasis on the need to approach this global problem with an intersectional lens (Kuperberg, 2018) that acknowledges that women have different gendered experiences shaped by disability, race, class, sexuality, generation and nationality (Collins, 1998, 2015).

During my fieldwork, Jo Cox, the Member of Parliament for Batley and Spenningsdale in Yorkshire, was shot and stabbed in her constituency. The murder took place in June 2016, a week before the UK's referendum on membership of the European Union, and the killer was found to have far-right affiliations. It has been argued that the public response to the 'assassination of a national elected representative has been dampened in significance because of an appeal to her life as a wife and mother rather than as a political actor in her own right' (Jones, 2019, p. 2). Jones argues that the gendered and raced ways in which Jo Cox MP has been mourned and remembered ignores the political context which made possible the murderer's radicalisation through 'domesticated misogynist white supremacy' (Jones, 2019, p. 3). There is increasing attention being paid to the harassment of politicians and intimidation of politicians in public life (Committee on Standards in Public Life, 2017). Online abuse, with its offline effects and escalations to other forms of offline violence, are increasingly being debated (Henry and Powell, 2015). In Westminster, one study which surveyed 239 MPs showed that 80.8% (192 MPs) had experienced at least one form of intrusive and aggressive behaviour, with 53% of respondents' experiences meeting definitions of stalking or harassment (James *et al.*, 2016, p. 9). Almost three quarters of the total incidents took place in MPs constituencies. A number of men MPs have resigned or been suspended from political parties over abuse towards women colleagues (Krook, 2018b, p. 65).

I consider harassment, bullying and abuse of local politicians as ways in which institutions form walls against change. In the context of the #MeToo movement and worldwide Women's Marches, the political mobilisation of women seems to be experiencing a 'galvanizing' moment (Lukose, 2018, p. 35), just as far-right and nationalist discourses have increasingly become part of the mainstream UK (and global) political discourses (Rzepnikowska, 2018). As high-profile instances of sexual

harassment and abuse have been publicly exposed under the banner of the #MeToo hashtag politics, new attention has been given over to 'interpersonal dynamics in intimate and workplace relationships across power lines, the meanings of consent and coercion, the quality of women's sexual lives, and more subtle forms of violation within everyday life' (Lukose, 2018, p. 35). However, as Ritty Lukose argues, intersectional feminist perspectives have only been 'fitfully absorbed' by these movements, and there is more need than ever for a 'decolonizing imperative' addressing feminist knowledge production and organising (Lukose, 2018, p. 37).

Whilst there has been feminist scholarship on sexual harassment and abuse in workplaces taking place for years (MacKinnon, 1979), global movements like #MeToo and #TimesUp have focussed renewed attention on the issue. Though sexual harassment and abuse has certainly increased in its visibility within public discourse in many countries, public debates about survivor and perpetrators believability and credibility still rage on (Serisier, 2018; Andersson *et al.*, 2019). Research in other forms of work has explored how even when there are mechanisms put in place to deal with issues of sexual harassment and bullying, these can serve primarily to distance the institution from responsibility for the harassment (Whitley and Page, 2015), what Alison Phipps identifies as a form of 'institutional airbrushing' (Phipps, 2018). Sara Ahmed (2017a) concurs with Leila Whitley and Tiffany Page's (2015) assertion that institutional tactics often attempt to relocate the 'problem' of sexual harassment elsewhere; either by quietly moving a harasser, or by moving the location of the 'problem' onto the women bringing forward a complaint. Ahmed's (2017a) work has been valuable for understanding the kinds of walls my participants come up against in local politics, particularly in relation to abuse and complaints about abuse. In Ahmed's evolving work on complaint, she advocates understanding institutional complaints procedures and their effects as comparable to forms of diversity work (see also Ahmed, 2004, 2007b, 2012; Ahmed, 2017b). Drawing on research on sexual harassment, sexism and abuse within other professions and through the theorising provided by Leila Whitley, Tiffany Page, Alison Phipps and perhaps most centrally, Sara Ahmed, my ethnography contributes to the growing body of literature on violence, bullying and harassment of women in politics.

I am conscious of the multiple ways of conceptualising sexual harassment, violence against women and different forms of abuse, and that using one 'umbrella' term to describe a range of behaviours or experiences can flatten out difference (Boyle, 2019). The experiences I refer to are mostly those described to me by women interviewees. However, I also include some experiences men discussed with me, and include some

discussion of forms of race and class based discrimination. Because my main aim in this chapter is to consider how institutions respond to complaints about abuse or discrimination, I find it useful to think with a 'broader social meaning of the [term] abuse: that women are targeted because they are women [and which] is now commonly taken as the basis of definitions of violence as gender based' (Boyle, 2019, p. 23). This emphasises the gendered nature of abuse and reflects the fact that much of the abuse I discuss was directed at women. But, by retaining a 'broader social meaning' of the term abuse, it also enables me to say something about the experiences of men councillors, particularly those who do not conform to somatic or hegemonic forms of local political masculinities.

In addition to Local Authorities being sites of councillor work, they are, importantly, places of work for many council employees. As local government is an important site of women's employment and provider of relevant services, council employees, and particularly council officers, work in tandem with councillors to tackle inequalities in their area. Whilst my thesis does not focus on the roles of officers, it is important to consider the role that officers and other council employees have. I do this in the following section.

## **'Professional feminists' in local government: tackling inequalities from the 'other side'**

For years, local government in the UK has been a crucial site in the development of gender equality practices and the implementation of equalities legislation (Johnson Ross, 2018a). It is important to consider the understandings and impact feminism has on local councillors precisely because they have decision-making power in relation to how public money will be spent on local services, including services that primarily function to support women (Charles and Mackay, 2013). Research has focussed on the relationship between descriptive and substantive representation; in other words, how women's increased presence in formal politics affects pro-women and/or feminist policy outcomes, and in what ways (Phillips, 1998b, 1998a, 2012). Though a large portion of this research has focussed on left-wing political women, there have been important studies highlighting how right-wing, Conservative women politicians make explicitly gendered, if not feminist, claims to speak for women (Campbell, Childs and Lovenduski, 2010; Celis and Childs, 2012, 2018; Campbell and Childs, 2015a). Feminist social movements in the 1960s and 1970s recognised that the state had the power to change policies and so challenged the state with demands for gender equality, reproductive rights and the resources to tackle domestic violence (Charles, 2000, 2015). The 1980s saw the rise of 'municipal feminism' as specific initiatives to tackle women's rights were implemented (Johnson Ross, 2018a, p. 1). In subsequent years, the Equality Acts in 2006 and 2010 have been significant moments for councils, who have a duty as public bodies to respond and implement legislation within service provision, as well as embed them within internal organisational working practices. Yet gender equality initiatives in local government, and the workers inside the state who advocate for and implement them, have not always been considered significant in accounts of the history of the UK's feminist activism (Mackay, 2008).

Along with politicians in other government institutions, councillors take on responsibility for policies that impact on gender inequalities across all forms of life, which means their decisions can have a direct effect on women's lives (Welsh and Halcli, 2003; Stephenson, 2016). In their research on how local councillors understand and enact feminism, Elaine Welsh and Abigail Halcli (2003) demonstrate a range of complex, and often contradictory, attitudes of women councillors towards feminism. All the women councillors they interviewed articulated strongly held beliefs in equality of opportunity, but many viewed explicit feminist principles and activism as anti-male, exclusive and as something which positioned women as less able than men (Welsh and Halcli, 2003, p.

354). For these councillors, belonging to such an 'exclusive' political project (with the attendant emphasis on positive action measures for women) was understood as being 'in marked contrast to their political responsibilities to represent all individuals in their constituencies' (Welsh and Halcli, 2003, p. 354). These findings are echoed in research undertaken by Nickie Charles and Stephanie Jones in Welsh local government. They found that despite councillors supporting gender equality broadly construed and articulating support for an increase in the number of women representatives, there was significant opposition to positive action measures which might translate their rhetoric into material action (Charles and Jones, 2013, p. 182).

Research has shown that the specific institutional arrangements and cultures within councils contribute to variations with which councils interpret and enact equalities legislation (Johnson Ross, 2018a). Much of this depends on the institutional actors within local councils who are tasked with the implementation of initiatives and legislation. In her research on the practices of local government gender equality workers, Freya Johnson-Ross (2018b) argues that these workers are in a more complicated position in relation to feminist social movements than previously thought. She characterises them not as 'femocrats' but as 'professional feminists' who are closer to the ideals and practices of the women's liberation movement despite their position within the state. She argues that professional feminists have feminist knowledge of gender inequality and are motivated to effect change, but that these efforts are often complicated by their 'paid 'challenge position' in relation to the ideas and organizing of their institutional location' (Ross, 2018, p. 2).

The ways in which policies are implemented, both in relation to council's duties as public bodies and in relation to their own internal organisational structures, should be seen within wider discourses of equality, feminism and work. Feminist social movements help to fundamentally shape the public and political discourses around feminist concerns (such as abortion and prostitution), which can lead to policy changes (Outshoorn, 2012). But these discourses are constructed and deployed in concert with other frameworks of intelligibility. Post-feminist, neoliberal and new public management discourses provide the contextual backdrop to gender equality work in UK local government (Johnson Ross, 2018a, p. 1). They are also not static, shifting in response to changes to legislation. In the UK, the Gender Equality Duty is a legal requirement on all public authorities to have due regard to eliminate discrimination and harassment on grounds of gender, and to promote equality of opportunity between men and women (Conley and Page, 2010, p. 321). This duty was later incorporated into the Public Sector Equality Duty (along with

similar duties on disability and race) as part of the Equality Act 2010. In their research on the implementation of the Gender Equality Duty in UK local government, Conley and Page (2017) show that local government equality specialists have instrumentally used liberal and radical equality discourses to promote gender equality initiatives. They suggest that this shifted towards an emphasis on providing a 'business case' argument for services (Conley and Page, 2010), but have since argued that even this shift towards the language of markets has been unable to 'protect equality initiatives from the 2010 coalition government's austerity and cuts agenda' (Conley and Page, 2017, p. 7).

The 'effectiveness' of feminist social movements' capacity to influence policies also depends on the their 'ability to place an issue in a meaningful sense before councillors, in such a way as to influence the policy process' (Copus, 2010, p. 577). In the context of austerity, councils have been the site of feminist protests about housing policies, cuts to services and in particular cuts to domestic violence services (Howard, 2016; Stephenson, 2016). If, within the context of austerity and significant cuts to public services, appeals to a 'business case' or equality discourses are increasingly ineffectual, this raises the question of what forms of influencing are open to feminists – be they activists, professional feminists within the council or councillors themselves – seeking to influence local decision making. In his research on councillors and citizen engagement, Colin Copus (2010) found that, perhaps unsurprisingly:

Councillors are particularly unwilling to admit that protest action such as disrupting meetings or occupying buildings has any influence—some protest action cannot be seen to be effective, even though it may raise the profile of an issue and prompt a response, which may not be the response protesters had sought (Copus, 2010, p. 580).

If we follow Copus' definition of 'effective' as influencing actions which can shape policy, what a councillor might consider 'effective' will differ to what social movements, and indeed 'professional feminists', might consider effective influencing.

In the first half of my Literature Review chapter I explored the landscape of scholarship around English local government. I examined some of different ways of understanding councillor work; from a representational and community perspective, to a more workplace perspective which brings into view other in-work forms of inequality like abuse. I also covered some of the key insights into how inequalities are (re)produced in localised forms, and as such how place and space make a difference not only to local

patterns of inequality, but therefore to the kinds of work councillors do in different areas. In the subsequent section, I ask what new questions emerge from studying formal politics from a workplace perspective in the current moment.

## **Research questions**

Councillor work in the UK is strange work, and it is this strangeness which complicates the negotiation of inequalities by the people who do that work. At its heart, what makes councillor work (and representative work more widely) strange is that the everyday work of councillors straddles different regimes and rationalities of work and politics. Councillor work is one of both political and professional work where some people thrive, and some do not.

In order to the fullness of this work and to identify the inequalities of it, I pose the following research questions:

### ***1. What is councillor work and how is it changing?***

To answer this research question, I explore the nature of councillor work, focussing on the practices and cultures. In order to answer this question, I move between an institutional to an individual level of analysis, asking how councillors experience their work and how it feels to do it. I decentre party politics in order to show how councillors are workers with similar working conditions.

### ***2. How do councillors experience and negotiate everyday inequalities at work?***

Here, I am concerned with the inequalities of councillor work and how existing inequalities (re)produce the work as it is. To show the complexity of councillor work, I bring back an analysis of differences among political parties and how this shapes councillors' experiences. I highlight the different regimes and rationalities which councillors navigate in relation to their political parties and the council more broadly. I explore how councillors, as gendered social actors, differently experience the working practices and cultures of local government and political parties.

### ***3. How is councillor work shaped by and how does it shape broader regimes of inequality?***

In order to answer this question, I consider how councillors are constrained and enabled by wider regimes of inequality; how their habitus and doxa influence their experiences. I focus on what happens when those who are not the 'somatic norm' (Puwar, 2004) of local government come up against the institutional walls. Once again, I de-centre differences across party political lines to focus on a discussion of councillors as a whole.

### **My conceptual framework**

In order to answer my research questions, I need to draw on a range of conceptual tools. In this section, I outline some of the crucial theoretical concepts which I will use to help me explore politics from a workplace perspective; a perspective in which politics is conceived as a form of gendered work and local councils are conceptualised as gendered, raced and classed organisations in which particular gendered cultures are enacted (Charles, 2014). As with other work organisations, local councils are sites of negotiated gendered performances; this perspective enables me to consider how people are constrained within these contexts.

Different theorists are valuable to my project in different ways. I draw on Dorothy Smith's feminist conceptualisation of work. I use Joan Acker's (2006) notion of inequality regimes to make sense of institutional structures; what inequalities are present in local government and how these inequalities operate. As I contend that councillor work is a form of work, I use Bourdieu's concepts to explore how this is embodied, also drawing on Ahmed here to connect discourses to bodies. In this section I also outline how I understand power and entrenched inequalities which affect different people according to different intersections.

### ***Dorothy Smith's expanded notion of work***

Councillors exist in a liminal place in relation to their civil service counterparts; they do not receive the same benefits and protections as a properly defined employee of the council might, and receive arguably very little remuneration for the amount of hours most of them actually spend working. They are subject, as elected representatives, to councils' codes of conduct and, excepting Independents, their party's disciplinary processes. Yet councillor work shares much in common with other activities which can be described as work, and therefore ought to be valued as such. In making the case for councillor – and

other representative work – to be valued as ‘work’, I am not arguing for a straightforward equivalency between representative work and paid employment, however. Rather, I follow a feminist tradition which contends that it is necessary to move beyond notions of work which are only conceptualised in relation to production. The notion of work which has been most valuable to me in this regard comes from Dorothy Smith, whose definition is generous enough to allow me to include a range of activities which cross boundaries of home, paid employment, volunteering, or vocation and yet still name them as work.

For my ethnography, I use a definition of formal politics ‘as a social and cultural space’ (Puwar, 2004) because this has its roots in feminist expanded definitions of politics. Equally, I use an expanded definition of work to shape the kinds of research questions I ask. One of the key influences Dorothy Smith’s research has had on my ethnography is how she understands the concept of ‘work’. Smith defines work as ‘anything or everything people do that is intended, involves time and effort, and is done in a particular time and place and under definite local conditions’ (Smith, 2006, p. 10). Writing from her position as a mother and academic, Smith’s expanded definition of work encompassed both the more abstract, esoteric work of a university academic and the contrasting localised actualities of everyday life as a mother. Smith coined the term ‘bifurcated consciousness’ (Smith, 1987) to refer to the clashes of temporality, spaces and bodily existence that these two ways of being gave rise to. Women sociologists’ ‘bifurcated consciousness’, she argued, gave them an advantage in the male-dominated and positivistic world of sociology at the time. As both insiders and outsiders to the world of academia, she argued women could articulate the kinds of ‘relations of ruling’ that exposed the image of the abstract, objective academic as a particular social location, supported by very material forms of everyday social reproductive labour. I found Smith’s conceptualisation to be useful in its openness and generosity; it allows space for a feminist researcher to conceptualise activities not normally understood as ‘work’ as precisely that. This has been an important conceptual orientation in my ethnography.

Using Dorothy Smith’s concept of work enables me to foreground the interdependency of councillors’ actions across time and space (Griffith and Smith, 2005; Smith, 2005). In my research, I use the term ‘work’ to explore how councillors’ activities and experiences are shaped by different institutional regimes and rationalities. As an institutional ethnographer, my starting point for investigating local politics as *work* is through the everyday lives of councillors. This starting point allows me to then explore how social and political relations shape the kinds of work they do. When I refer to everyday life, I mean the kinds of actualities and particularities of councillors’ lives – their

ordinary work and other activities – that are embedded within wider social relations and shaped by relations of ruling (Mykhalovskiy and McCoy, 2002; Smith, 2005, p. 31). To start from a position of ‘everyday life’ is to seek to explain the kinds of common-sense knowledges and taken-for-granted ways of living that we all abide by, putting together a map of how our lives are both shaped by, and contribute to shaping, social and political relations (Campbell, 1998). This approach highlights the relational nature of life, as we are ‘all caught up in and participating in relations that coordinate [one another’s] doings’ (Smith, 2005, p. 43). The goal of institutional ethnography is an explicitly feminist, material and political one; aiming for nothing less than the transformation of oppressive and limiting forms of everyday life by ‘revealing and remaking the socially organised disjunctures and knowledges that objectify people’s lives’ (Klostermann, 2019). Organisational researchers have used institutional ethnography as part of attempts to politicise the field of organisational research and expose how organisations are accomplished in everyday life/work (Klostermann, 2019, p. 2). For institutional ethnographers, exposing the organisation of everyday life and the ways in which people are objectified through social relations involves the exploration of texts and institutional processes. I discuss how I understand and use these research concepts in my methodology chapter.

Dorothy Smith’s definition is particularly useful for thinking about extending conceptions of work to include these elements, in order to value the full extent of councillor’s work. But in some ways, her definition may be limited, particularly in relation to her point about ‘particular’ times and places. As with many other forms of work, the boundaries between the times and spaces which might have formerly served to separate out work/non-work categories are increasingly blurred for councillors.

### ***Interrogating the institutional: utilising Acker’s ‘inequality regimes’***

I draw on similar conceptual frameworks to those used by feminist institutionalists, in particular Acker’s (2006) concept of inequality regimes, which I will use alongside some of Bourdieu’s concepts, discussed below. For this research, I conceptualise doing the work of local politics in much the same way as one might think about doing paid work for any organisation, with organisations operating as ‘inequality regimes’ (Acker, 2006) that are characterised by their own practices and cultures, which shape and are shaped by their members’ everyday negotiation of gender relations (Gherardi, 1995). I consider the inclusion of men in this research as vital, drawing on Connell’s (1987, 1995) recognition that the category of ‘men’ (as well as women) does not reflect a homogenous group, that

gender models and practices are not fixed but capable of change, and that addressing sexism necessitates an understanding of men as well as women in order to explore the strategies individuals develop to promote processes of change (Pease, 2000). I draw on Connell and Messerschmidt's definition of hegemonic masculinity as 'the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men's dominance over women to continue' (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). They contend that whilst hegemonic masculinities might not be how the majority of men behave, they are normative as they 'embodied the currently most honoured way of being a man' (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832).

I am interested in exploring how councillors negotiate, resist and challenge dominant gendered cultures, including in what ways men understand their role as actors which could, or in some cases may already do, contribute to change. Acker (1990), widening her original 'gender regime' analysis which considered the ways that gender forms part of a particular organisation's processes, at a particular point in time, developed the concept of 'inequality regimes' to refer to the ways in which gendered, raced and classed structures shape organisational 'advantage and disadvantage, exploitation and control, action and emotion, meaning and identity' (Acker, 1990: 146). The notion of inequality regimes offers an approach to understanding the creation of inequalities in organisations through the entwined practices and processes that result in the mutual reproduction of class, gender, and raced inequalities (Acker, 2006: 446). Political institutions are characterised by gendered hierarchies, masculinist political cultures and rituals informed by class and race and, at least in the context of Westminster, spaces that retain a historical association with the male body and particular forms of, albeit changing, masculinities (Kenny, 2007; Lovenduski, 2012; Puwar, 2004; Rai, 2011). As such, political institutions can be considered as inequality regimes, defined as 'loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions, and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender, and racial inequalities' (Acker, 2006: 443). The widely held view that an intersectional analysis is crucial to understanding such regimes is therefore also highly pertinent to the analysis of political institutions. Acker (2006) proposes that an intersectional approach should be concerned with 'looking at specific organizations and the local, ongoing practical activities of organizing work that, at the same time, reproduce complex inequalities' (Acker, 2006: 442).

***Understanding embodied councillor work: drawing on Bourdieu's notion of doxa and habitus***

Women do also achieve leadership positions in local government, though they face male-dominated leadership, the predominance of masculine, and arcane leadership practices (Broussine and Fox, 2002; Bochel and Bochel, 2004, 2008, 2010). As such the number of women leaders, which have historically been very few, are falling and women councillors are less likely to consider running as an MP than their male counterparts (Centre for Women and Democracy, 2011, 2013; Allen, 2013a; Fawcett Society, 2014). This research, then, requires a theoretical approach that can adequately account for the ways in which some women are able successfully to enter politics and rise to occupy cabinet positions. Feminist political science scholars have sought to explain, via complex interweaving of differing combinations of supply and demand factors at party candidate nomination, selection and election stages (Norris and Lovenduski, 1995), why it is that women might count themselves out of the running for office or indeed, in the case of local councillors, drop out of office and politics altogether or fail to further a political career (Siebert, 2009; Allen, 2012, 2013b).

An alternative understanding relating to these issues builds on Bourdieu's notion of the doxa to consider how those women who enter politics counteract perceptions that they are unqualified to represent (Liddle and Michielsens, 2000b). The notion of the doxa, understood as forms of naturalised beliefs which, rather than requiring overt articulation are instead embodied in practice, forms of knowledge without concepts (Bourdieu, 1977), brings into view the naturally felt, yet often unarticulated, sense of entitlement to power and representation that is present among those who traditionally hold power and occupy the position of the somatic norm (Puwar, 2004). For those who do not so easily embody such historically and culturally constructed gendered entitlements, alternative narratives must be constructed in order to have their authority recognised (Liddle and Michielsens, 2000b). Bourdieu's (1977, 1979) concepts of habitus and doxa have been used to understand women's under-representation in politics. In particular, they have been used to conceptualise how an entitlement to power associated with women MP's middle-class position that enables some women to compensate for and challenge the gendered power deficits. This, Liddle and Michielsens (Liddle and Michielsens, 2000b, 2000a) argue, enables them to transform their sense of right to political power into authority recognised by others as well as the self-confidence, or 'sense of right' that one feels to exercise power.

The doxa forms part of Bourdieu's concept of the habitus which, as 'systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures' (1977: 72), expresses how objective, external limits derived from

one's position within a particular class, become internalised appreciations; a sense of personal limitations informed by the experience of living within objective limitations (Bourdieu, 1979). Habitus contributes to the reproduction of social structures through this internalisation and self-regulating aspect. This is not to imply that habitus is simply a fixed way of being as a result of the imposition of social structures on the self; rather it is understood as a 'generative structure' formed in relation to different social fields. Habitus is 'creative, inventive, but within the limits of its structures' (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 19). Dispositions, made up from the interaction of varying forms of social, cultural and economic capital and acquired primarily through the structures of family and education, are manifested as individual personal qualities like charisma and authority. Middle-class women have historically occupied positions of power and dominance over other women and men and both elite and non-elite women have achieved political office, often despite a perceived deficit associated with their gender (Liddle and Michielsens, 2000b, 2000a). Whilst such women's occupation of a higher class status, for example, may have allowed the negotiation of gender deficits, nonetheless the political systems in which they operate still institutionalise forms of elite male dominance via the gendered norms, ideologies and practices associated with the successful performance of a politician.

I use the notion of doxa and habitus in particular to help frame my discussion on classed 'legitimately local' and 'authentic' political identities. The modern notion of authenticity, 'that one should lead a life that is expressive of what a person takes herself to be' (Varga, 2011, p. 113), has been conceptualised differently across different scholarly traditions. The concept's importance and relevance across disciplinary boundaries can be traced through work on gender and leadership (Gardiner, 2015), gender, consumption and subcultures (Schouten and McAlexander, 1995; Pavlidis, 2012; Nordström and Herz, 2013; Cobb, 2014; Dupont, 2014), and in the ways both political scientists and political philosophers approach issues of representation (Runciman, 2007; Jones, 2016). The concept has a history which can be traced through existentialist philosophers such as Sartre and his disavowal of *mauvaise foie* [bad faith], becoming saturated with modern notions of 'being true to oneself' even as the notion of 'self' became recognised as that which is constituted via social interaction and is inherently unstable. As such, authenticity has a significant relational dimension and, crucially for political representatives, arguably that which matters most now is that personal authenticity is believably performed. Performances believed to be authentic convey legitimacy and authority to the performer; research on parliamentary politicians has shown that individuals lend authenticity to their performances through 'their assuredness, their conformity with the somatic norm, their

sense of entitlement to the cultural landscape in which they perform, and therefore to the social relations they reflect.' (Rai 2014, p.1185). The presentation of assuredness and entitlement differs between locality and political party.

Here, then, I understand authenticity as an interpretive category, not an ontological state which is arrived at, but one that is contingent upon and results from processes of social construction (Alexander and Mast, 2006, p. 7) and, crucially, the conditions of its negotiation in formal politics are changing. Claims to this identity are not always coherent, as I witnessed across diverse research sites, and are not equally accessible by all. In thinking about what authenticity does, and the types of work which go into creating and maintaining it, I am conceptualising the ability to be perceived as 'authentic' as a valuable but contested resource for politicians; a resource which is co-constituted through gendered, classed, ableist and raced discourses and drawn upon by participants in multiple and ambivalent ways. For some, the desire for modern politicians to communicate in an authentic manner is an impossible political ideal (Runciman 2007), whilst for others it still represents a virtue, allowing the electorate to gain an understanding of how their representatives might act when not in the glare of the public limelight (Jones 2016). Truth, trust, and personal character remain at the fore of understandings of authenticity in politics; Jones (2016) is right to highlight the importance to the electorate, particularly following decades of political 'spin', of the communication of shared values. The ability to, and desirability of, being seen to be consistently upholding and representing the values that define a politician's identity preoccupy representatives across a range of political parties. Authenticity, then, arguably appeals to voters from across the political spectrum and plays to a more universal contempt for political hypocrisy, where hypocritical acts are read as a display of corrupt political elites. Shirin Rai (2014) argues that turning a performative lens on political institutions allows us to ask different questions about legitimacy and representation; questions of how claims of representation and legitimacy are made by individuals and institutions and to what effect.

## **Conclusion**

In this review of relevant literature, I have explored what current research can tell us about the nature of councillor work. I discussed some of the key ways in which inequalities are conceptualised in English local government. In particular, I focussed my discussion on the intersections of place, space, 'localness' and forms of inequality. I also addressed the emerging scholarship on an important form of inequality within political work; that of abuse of politicians and how those instances of abuse are handled. I have

concentrated on aspects of feminist scholarship on work which are most relevant to my study, seeking to highlight some of diverse ways of conceptualising the strange and messy work of councillors. I emphasised the need to focus on understanding councillor activities *as work*, and not just in relation to the representational role, but also the need to pay attention to how both 'work' and our understandings of it are changing. I have also outlined my research questions and explained the key concepts I draw on throughout my thesis. In order to answer my research question, I need to examine the everyday work of councillors at an individual, interactional level as well as broader political and workplace cultures and structures in local government. In the following chapter, I will outline my methodological approach to my institutional ethnography.

## **Methodology: Creating an institutional ethnography of English local politics**

When thinking about how to do my research, I knew from the outset that I wanted to produce an in-depth analysis of councillors' multi-layered working environments. To do this, my research questions aimed to interrogate these different layers; layers which are inter-dependent, highly complex and mutually constitutive. This meant I needed a qualitative methodological approach that could provide an in-depth analysis, which in turn required spending greater time with participants and as such drew from a relatively small sample. An ethnographic approach provides all of these advantages to myself as the researcher.

This chapter explains my decision to produce a particular kind of ethnography – an institutional ethnography – of local politics. I explore the reasons for selecting three fieldwork sites, and the methods I used to produce data. As a feminist sociologist working in an institutional ethnographic tradition, I reflect on how my position(ing) as the researcher influenced my engagement with the field and the data analysis which emerged from the research.

### **Feminist epistemological considerations**

My ontological position drew on a broadly constructivist and feminist account of social reality which emphasises how social reality is historically and culturally situated and contested. My social ontology is based on the assumption that 'people generate the social world they live in, know and experience' (Campbell, 2016, p. 249), and that meaning is created through everyday interaction between social actors. I also foreground the complexity and interplay between social structures and agentic social actors; how communities and individuals are both shaped by, and contribute to shaping, wider social norms, cultures and behaviours. My epistemological position proceeds from these assumptions. I prioritise trying to understand the subjective interpretations and meanings that people hold, how these meanings shape their actions, and how these actions affect and are coordinated by wider social relations. My epistemological position and methodological orientation are bound up with one another, and mutually reinforcing; emphasising that social research should begin with the ongoing and embodied actualities of people's everyday lives. I draw on the insights from feminist thinkers like Dorothy Smith, who articulated a vision for a different kind of feminist inquiry using ethnography, which 'begins where people are and proceeds from there to discoveries that are for them,

for us, of the workings of a social that extends beyond any one of us, bringing our local activities into coordination with those of others' (Smith, 2006, p. 3). As such, I valued an ethnographic approach that emphasises rich and in-depth data, acknowledges the positionality and reflexivity of the researcher, and which can 'generate knowledge through explication that is faithful to social actualities' (Campbell, 2016, p. 249).

Dorothy Smith's feminist sociological and ethnographic work has been key to the formation of my feminist epistemological position. Smith has been critical of the way sociologists can become part of the relations of ruling, albeit unintentionally (Smith, 1990b, p. 4); producing people as objects through the reification of sociological concepts (Smith, 2006, p. 3), and by beginning the research process 'in discourse with *its* concepts, and relying on standard good social scientific methodologies' (Smith, 1999, p. 5). She called for a reorganisation of sociology away from top-down imposition of paradigms, methods or theories. As part of reorganising sociology, Smith showed how a particular kind of ethnographic approach could form an alternative feminist sociological approach; institutional ethnography (IE). IE forms a constituent part of building an alternative feminist sociology, and for Smith functions beyond merely a collection of research methods (Smith, 1990b; Smith, 2005). What is fundamental to IE is a commitment to analysing how everyday experiences of inequality are organised in relation to wider societal norms and power, an example of which is inequality regimes which aim to bring macro, mezzo and micro processes into view. As such, this form of feminist sociology is fundamentally compatible with my research aims which prioritise trying to understand the subjective interpretations and meanings that people hold, and how these shape their actions.

### **Why institutional ethnography?**

I understand practising politics as a form of work. It was therefore crucial to use an approach that foregrounded gender, race, class and other inequalities as some of the key organising principles in work. There are many points of connection between emancipatory feminist research, and ethnographic approaches to researching formal politics or work. Ethnographers of work, working across a broad range of topics and sites, focus on the processual, the relational and the dynamic elements of work, 'highlighting the complex in the routine and the routine in the complex, and [...] examining the reproduction of power and inequality' (Smith, 2001, p. 227). These aims are also central to the history of feminist scholarship which blurs public/private boundaries and pays attention to relations of ruling, power and inequality (Smith, 1987; D. E. Smith, 1990a).

By 'relations of ruling', I refer to Dorothy Smith's notion of 'the intersection of the institutions organising and regulating society with their gender subtext and their basis in a gender division of labour' (Smith, 1987, p. 3). She emphasises the specific historical formation of ruling relations, with marginalised groups (her focus being on women) organised differently at different times. My research follows these traditions of focussing not only on the micro-processes of work, but how these shape and are shaped by wider regimes of inequality. Beverley Skeggs (2001) provides a useful definition for feminist ethnographers interested in the kinds of questions I ask in this project. Her definition is one which I used to initially understand my own work as ethnographic:

I define ethnography as a theory of the research process – an idea about how we should do research. It usually combines certain features in specific ways: fieldwork that will be conducted over a *prolonged period of time*; utilizing different research techniques; conducted *within the settings* of the participants, with an understanding of how the context informs the action; *involving the researcher in participation* and observation; involving an account of the development of relationships between the researcher and the researched and focusing on how experience and practice are part of wider processes (Skeggs, 2001, p. 426 emphases in original).

Skeggs draws attention to the commonalities between feminism and ethnography in terms of having 'experience, participants, definitions, meanings and sometimes subjectivity' (Skeggs, 2001, p. 426) at their core. But what I value most in this definition, besides providing a practical and workable guide to conducting ethnography, is her emphasis on ethnography as a 'theory of the research process', which goes beyond conceptualising it as a methodological approach. This is important for my own epistemological standpoint in two ways: that the research should remain fundamentally connected to possibilities for 'social action and meaning', and that the research is, 'about understanding process, and to do this, it has to occur across both time and space' (Skeggs, 2001, p. 426). As Skeggs (2001) points out, there are many forms of feminisms and ethnographies, but the focus on transformative feminist research, and the emphasis on mapping power and inequality (relations of ruling) by understanding processes, is at the heart of a particular form of feminist sociology which this research follows; Dorothy Smith's feminist-based Institutional Ethnography (IE).

Broadly speaking, the emphasis on examining the processual within feminist ethnography, and in particular within feminist IE, is significant to both my epistemological

position and methodological choices. My epistemology and methodology are symbiotic and reinforce one another and I recognise that 'marking out the attributes of different although related feminist epistemologies [...] is thus a necessarily simplified (not a literal/representational) account of the epistemological possibilities that exist' (Stanley and Wise, 1993, p. 190). Later in this chapter, I return to a discussion of how IE has been taken up by researchers, and the implications this might have for feminist epistemology.

As an alternative sociology, Smith's feminist sociology contains three key, interwoven, strands: a critique of mainstream sociology; an alternative feminist ontological and conceptual apparatus; and practices for investigating and 'writing the social' within this alternative framework. Smith defines the 'social' as 'the *ongoing concerting and coordinating* of individuals' activities' (Smith, 1999, p. 6 my emphasis) which emphasises the situated, co-constitutive and temporal relationship between the individual and society. It is a sophisticated attempt to investigate and write about the relationship between agency and structure, which takes into consideration not only the ongoing nature of this relationship, but its localised and historical forms (Smith, 1987, p. 89).

In terms of research practices, Dorothy Smith's IE is 'used simply to signify an in-depth investigation of social actualities from a particular standpoint' (Stanley, 2018, p. 20). By 'actualities', Smith refers to 'the actual ongoing practices of actual individuals as they go forward in just the everyday/everynight sites in which they happen' (Smith, 1999, p. 6). Time and space, then, form an integral part of investigating everyday practices (actualities). As such, I weave spatial and temporal concerns throughout my analytical discussion of councillor work later in the thesis. To go about examining the forms of social organisation that coordinate everyday activities and shape particular experiences, Smith brings in the notions of standpoint, discovery and mapping. In the following sections, I outline the concepts of standpoint and mapping in more detail, and how I applied them to my own research design. I start by discussing how I employed Dorothy Smith's concept of standpoint.

## Taking a standpoint

IE enables aspects of institutional life to come into view which may have previously been invisible and show how institutional texts may hinder and enable the practice of different forms of work (Griffith and Smith, 2014). In order to make these processes visible, a standpoint must be taken as a particular entry point into an institution. Whether it is front-line public sector staff, or local politicians, this choice is inevitably shaped by the researcher's ontological and epistemological position, and this in turn shapes the forms of knowledge which emerge from the study.

For Smith, taking a standpoint is the beginning point of inquiry. She emphasises how the 'the knowing subject is always located in a particular spatial and temporal site [...] The subject/knower of inquiry is not a transcendent subject, but situated in the actualities of her own living, in relation with others' (Smith, 1999, p. 5). It is an 'empty' position, in that it does not 'universalize a particular experience' (Smith, 1987, p. 106) or imagine that experience is not discursively constructed (Hekman, 1997; Smith, 1997). Unlike feminist standpoint theorists, Smith's standpoint comes with 'no *a priori* ontological baggage' (Stanley, 2018, p. 19) which assumes what constitutes 'woman', 'politician', 'worker', or indeed any other social category. Rather, it is merely an entry point into research, one that usually reflects the experience of those who are tasked with 'doing' or enacting the kinds of policies and procedures ('extralocal' discourses) which are created and debated within organisations at different times and in different spaces. In adopting such a position, as opposed to the standpoint of those writing policies, for example, the aim is to construct research which seeks to connect the 'extralocal' to the 'actualities' of everyday life.

One of the key draws to Smith's IE is the respect it affords participants as competent, reflexive knowledge producers about their own lives. Yet in her early work, she notes the feminist sociologist's job is to discover and reveal relations of ruling via 'specialised investigation' (Smith, 1987, p. 154). This is part of a wider political project which desires to make those connections visible to the people whose positionality is adopted at the beginning of the research. In this, we can see the traces of Smith's Marxist and feminist intellectual history of consciousness-raising. The political impetus to share research and use it to mobilise the positions of those identified as vulnerable in society is something which remains deeply resonant with my research project. As part of creating this knowledge, IE researchers are drawn to processes of 'analytical reflexivity, that is,

detailing the processes of analysis and interpretation [...] so that readers can evaluate them using an evidential base' (Stanley, 2018, p. 105).

I am conscious of not overemphasising narratives of generational difference among feminists, particularly when such narratives serve to consign whole sections of feminist thought as outdated and irrelevant (as we have seen with many standpoint theorists), or in accounts of feminist history that over-emphasise generational shifts from 'feminist consciousness to feminist reflexivity' (Adkins, 2003, p. 431). Such an analysis would only serve to '[fix] writers and perspectives within a particular decade' (Clare Hemmings, 2005, p. 115) and obscure 'claims and assumptions regarding what the proper objects of feminism are, and should be' (Adkins, 2003, p. 433). As Adkins suggests, 'the everyday world, like the theoretical world, is characterized by [embodied and emotional self-] reflexivity' (2003, p. 434). A defining feature of feminist research is the ability of the researcher to ethically and critically manage the line between realistic representation and interpretation of participants' experiences on the one hand, and retaining analytical reflexivity on the other (Letherby, 2003). Typically, reflexivity involves making it plain to the reader the procedures of knowledge production within the research, and accounting for the positionality of the researcher, acknowledging that the researcher's own subjectivities affect what is to be 'found' in the research (Stanley and Wise, 1993). I acknowledge that my own 'embodied vision' (Haraway, 1988) of knowledge remains situated and therefore partial, and this research has tried to produce forms of knowledge which begin with the personal experiences of participants and are elaborated in dialogue with them. I understand my own feeling, emotional and embodied 'inner workings' as integral to the making of analytically reflexive knowledge claims which are accountable.

As with the idea of standpoint, Smith's notion of 'actualities' should not be misread as straightforward 'truth' or 'reality' existing 'out there'. Her use of 'discovery' initially caused me disquiet as I do not consider epistemological privilege to lie with a researcher, but rather that a researcher's task is to explore the complexities of life. To my initial novice reading, using a word such as 'discovery' might signal to a contemporary feminist reader that Smith conceives of a reality 'out there' discoverable to the specialist sociologist with the right research tools. This says something about the emotional and generational status of contemporary feminist scholars and their assumptions when engaging with earlier work, a point which I explore further shortly. It also, perhaps, expresses a wider paucity of terms with which a researcher can describe truth, reality, and material everyday life following poststructuralist critiques of the ways in which 'reality'

is brought into being via contested discourses. I believe in reading generously and carefully with any writer or scholar, especially in times where earlier feminist work can too easily be dismissed as outdated or irrelevant. My later, more experienced and reading of Smith's use of the term 'actualities', understands it as her attempt to address this paucity of language, in order to keep in sight the material nature of the ways in which contested discourses might bring 'reality' into being.

### **The metaphor of mapping: realising spatialised modes of thought**

Mapping is an essential concept within IE, with institutional ethnographers typically following textually-mediated institutional processes to map individuals' activities and the organisation of these activities by texts. As part of my analysis later in the thesis, I refer to the enactments of complaints policies and procedures (rather than, say, the documents themselves or media discourses surrounding them). This focus suits an ethnographic approach, and particularly an institutional ethnographic approach that prioritises mapping the 'extralocal' relations of ruling that configure and are configured by localised, everyday lives.

Mapping involves 'proceeding from the actualities of the everyday world' (Stanley, 2018, p. 19), tracing the ways in which people speak about their lives and observing their activities. Doing so allows IE researchers to examine research questions focussed on how ideas, principles and policies are taken up in practice (Nichols and Griffith, 2009). An IE approach is especially well suited to examining changes within public sector organisations, where it enables researchers to, for example, consider the effect of competing discourses on public sector workers' everyday activities, and to chart important changes associated with a rise in neoliberal managerialism (Griffith and Smith, 2014). Key to this, Smith argues, is 'exploring how texts mediate, regulate and authorise people's activities [which] expands the scope of ethnographic method beyond the limits of observation' and enables researchers to understand how organisations and institutions exist as they do (Smith, 2001, p. 159). Using an IE approach, researchers are able to bridge the distance between the local and particular, and wider societal level discourses or ways of organising institutions, by starting in people's everyday worlds. This enables an IE researcher to locate disjunctures; what Smith describes as 'lines of fault' or 'bifurcated consciousness' between peoples' embodied knowledges and how such ways of knowing are excluded from wider institutional discourses and practices of power. Smith originally depicted a 'bifurcated consciousness' as that which related to

how, as a feminist sociologist and mother, her embodied forms of knowing and living as a mother conflicted with the androcentric rationality expected of her in the academy.

The metaphor of a map is also useful in terms of data analysis and the creation of categories. I took a mapping approach to the practical coding of data and identification of analytical themes. Though I started my analysis using Nvivo software to capture indicative themes and give me easy access to the data, I used this software primarily to facilitate manual coding and analysis. I did this in order to try and decrease the possibility of losing the connectedness, complexity and nuance between different data themes, which I felt the programmable analysis functions on Nvivo could not provide in their entirety. It is a difficult task to think and analyse in such a way, but translating a 'spatialised mode of thought' or a map, into the linear, mostly-rigid written structure of a PhD has proven more difficult, as I explore later in my discussion on 'the art of loosing' and trying to think and write nondualistically.

In the next section, I consider how IE has been taken up by researchers, and what some of the implications this may have for my feminist IE.

### **Stressing the *feminist* in feminist institutional ethnography**

I emphasise the term *feminist* in feminist IE to indicate the emancipatory and liberatory political motivations behind the practice of IE. I emphasise this because, although the concept originated from Dorothy Smith's feminist sociology 'for women' (1987) (later widened to a 'sociology for people'(2005)), IE can sometimes be primarily taken up as a pragmatic, methodological toolkit, rather than as a form of alternative feminist sociology as originally intended (Walby, 2007, 2013; Reid and Russell, 2017). In its uptake across a variety of disciplines, IE has been used by researchers to map 'institutionalised relations of ruling, rather than the remaking of sociology or any other subject-area in distinctively feminist terms' (Stanley, 2018, p. 16). That IE is a malleable methodological approach is to its founders' credit. But where it is deployed chiefly as a methodological toolkit, its feminist and transformative roots risk being de-emphasised (Stanley, 2018). I believe that where this occurs, a form of '*dismissive recognition* of feminist scholarship' may be taking place (Pereira, 2012, p. 296 emphasis in original). This is where a de-politicised uptake of IE as primarily a methodological approach enables the creation of, 'spaces for analyses of feminist themes [...] [whilst simultaneously limiting] the possibilities of claiming that a distinctively *feminist* approach is necessary for such analyses' (Pereira, 2012, p. 296 emphasis in original). My

commitment to an explicitly feminist institutional ethnography, then, is a small contribution to the (re)valuation and recognition of Smith's original emphasis and its political, transformative feminist possibilities.

The transformative work Smith emphasises as part of her sociology for the people is arguably already taking place across the social world. Patricia Hill Collins (1992) argues, for example, how Dorothy Smith's 'work overlooks the knowledges produced by [marginalised] groups as they actively resist objectified knowledge that justifies their subordination' (Hill Collins, 1992, p. 78). For Hill Collins, this constitutes an inattention to the 'dialectical nature of all social relations of domination and resistance' (Hill Collins, 1992, p. 78). Hill Collins contends that different knowledges and ways of speaking *already* exist and therefore may not need (re)making; rather, the problem is that they remain invisible and unintelligible to most sociological approaches (Hill Collins, 1992, p. 78). However, she notes that Smith's idea of starting sociology from everyday experiences and taking the standpoint of marginalised groups does offer a powerful framework for analysing and thinking about resistance. As much as my research seeks to challenge any 'dismissive recognition' (Pereira, 2012) of IE's feminist roots, I am conscious of my own potential entanglements; both in relation to processes of academic dismissive recognition and through processes of translation between marginal and mainstream forms of knowledge. In the following section, I go on to reflect on these in more detail.

### **The concept of intersectionality: a different kind of dismissive recognition?**

I maintained an intersectional awareness in my research, in order to resist the treatment of categories as mutually exclusive (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). I acknowledge my limited capacity in this chapter to do justice to the rich seam of Black feminist thought through which intersectionality emerged as a radical and transformative concept (see Brah and Phoenix, 2004; Collins and Chepp, 2013; The Combahee River Collective, 2014; Collins, 2015). An intersectional feminist framework has variously been described as a theory, a theory of identity, a perspective, a concept, a methodological approach, an analytical perspective, and a research paradigm (Collins and Chepp, 2013; Collins, 2015). Though much of this origin story relates to Black feminism in a North American context, Amos and Parmar (2005) argue that similar histories of exclusion exist in British feminist and womens' movements. Intersectionality's ability to travel as a theory and be applicable to multiple contexts has been widely noted (Yuval-Davis, 2006; Cho, Crenshaw and McCall, 2013). Indeed, its ambiguity and open-endedness is, much like IE, argued to be a

strength (Davis, 2008, p. 67). Its uptake in the field of gender and politics has seen intersectional analysis of institutions like the EU (Verloo, 2006). In UK local government, research has also been carried out on the complex and situated structuring of sexualities and transgender equalities at the local level (Monro and Richardson, 2010, 2013). In the UK context, feminists have been drawing attention to the inability of feminism to account for ethnic minority women's experiences for some time (Anthias and Yuval-Davis, 1983). In order to answer my research questions, I attempted to foreground the complexity of how subjects are positioned and people experience everyday inequalities.

However, I am conscious of the debates on how best to conceptualise intersectionality (Davis, 2008), as well as its increasing 'citational ubiquity' in gender studies (Nash, 2008, 2019, p. 3) which can serve to 'implicate the body that haunts the analytic—black woman—even if she is not always explicitly named as such' (Nash, 2019, p. 2). In what could be seen as a different example of dismissive recognition, scholars have argued that certain rhetorical and citation practices are used in relation to intersectionality merely to 'manage' the concept (Tomlinson, 2018, p. 1) without actually implementing intersectional research practices or undertaking intersectional analysis. The effect, Barbara Tomlinson (2018) notes, is the depoliticisation of the concept (2018, p. 1) which serves to 'whiten, discipline and dilute an initially insurgent knowledge firmly rooted in black feminist thought and activism' (Bilge, 2014, p. 175).

I am conscious, then, of how 'intersectionality as buzzword' (Davis, 2008) has given rise not only to a plethora of understandings of the concept as theory and/or practice, but also to concerns that its ubiquity in feminist research projects occludes its radical potential and original intentions within black feminist thought (Cho, Crenshaw and Mccall, 2013). A further concern is that 'intersectional feminism' more often proceeds 'under the banner of diversity and [has] more often than not been linked to the idea that women have multiple identities that need to be included' (Lukose, 2018, p. 39). It is this focus on identities, rather than social structures and how people are positioned, which I also find problematic. Lukose argues that a mobilisation of 'intersectionality' *exclusively* under such terms may work to diminish the analytical power of Crenshaw's (1991) formulation of 'the ways in which the law and institutions constructed ideas *in and through* the operations of sexism and racism about women of colour' (Lukose, 2018, p. 39 my emphasis). As such, my research attempts to consider harassment, abuse and bullying as some of the intersecting power structures which create identifications and subject positions that affect women's lives.

In my own research, I sought to engage in the politics of listening to ‘unheard voices’ in moments of political tension and anxiety, which is how I characterise my time spent in the field during the EU referendum (Bassel, 2017, pp. 4–5; see also Back, 2007; Back and Puwar, 2012). The politics of inclusion are complex, as to be included is always complicated by the terms of that inclusion (Yuval-Davis, 1997; Yuval-Davis, Kannabiran and Vieten, 2006). Whilst I included women and men from a range of class-positions, ages and ethnic backgrounds in my study, I was wary of a reading of intersectionality and inclusion that ‘hinges on the identities that women possess that need ‘inclusion”’ (Lukose, 2018, p. 39). To do so, Ritty Lukose (2018) argues, would be to obscure the radical potential of Crenshaw’s contribution which was concerned with how ‘the law and institutions constructed ideas in and through the operations of sexism and racism about women of colour’ (2018, p. 39). It would also arguably fail to question the politics of inclusion as a new imperative in workplaces and to engage critically with inclusion (Adamson *et al.*, 2016). Moving away from the level of individual, and individualising, identity then, my analytical approach to the politics of intersectionality and inclusion resonates with existing research on inequalities carried out in UK local government (Monro, 2006, 2007; Monro and Richardson, 2013). Surya Monro’s analysis foregrounds social categories like sexuality, race, class and gender as ‘structuring forces’ in the context of LGBT equalities initiatives (2013, p. 191). Like Monro, I am also concerned with how inequalities are discursively and cultural framed in local government (2013, p. 194). This framework supports an analysis of inequality regimes in local politics that was aware of, and sensitive to, the complex way subjects are positioned at work and experience everyday, ongoing forms of inequality (e.g. see Acker, 2006; Wasserman and Frenkel, 2015).

At some point, an ethnographer must put boundaries around her research. My thesis engages in an in-depth analysis of how councillor work is shaped and contributes to shaping wider regimes of inequality – namely class, gender and race. Age is an additional category which is weaved through some aspects of my analysis, namely where a participant has named it as relevant or where it occurs as a point of analysis in interview talk. During my observations and shadowing, I also observed councillors interact with officers, and sought their views on their relationships with officers. I acknowledge that officers’ experiences contribute to wider institutional council cultures. However, this research focusses on the complexity of councillor experiences and political work across a variety of spaces. As such, it was beyond the remit of this study to engage with officers in a sustained way.

Staying with the notion of boundaries, in the following section, I pick up on another critique Hill Collins (1992) highlights in relation to IE; how to transform sociology when one is working within its boundaries and subject to its professional discourses.

### **Transforming from within: the paradox of being a professional sociologist**

Hill Collins notes the difficulties Smith identifies with ‘the need to create [a] sociology that refuses to support relations of ruling and the difficulty of doing so using the language and the implied worldview of the inner circle [of dominant sociological discourse]’ (Hill Collins, 1992, p. 79). Though Hill Collins notes that Smith acknowledged this paradox in her work, she suggests that Smith has yet to find a way around it. This is not, however, due to a lack of theoretical sophistication on Smith’s part, Hill Collins recognises. It is, rather, a testament to the unresolvable paradox all critical scholars face; how to pursue practices, ideas and pedagogies of liberation whilst working within and against the norms of academia (see also Lorde, 1984; Pereira, 2016; Perlow *et al.*, 2017). The paradoxical process of becoming a sociological ‘professional’ whilst simultaneously resisting some normative aspects of that profession produces some interesting (and often difficult) effects. Smith conceptualised the psycho-social effects using the concepts of ‘bifurcated consciousness’ and ‘disjunctures’, arguing that different social positions produce specific subjugated and dominant knowledges (Smith, 1987).

I cannot ignore the material context in which my own PhD was brought into being. That context for me is the neoliberal, performative UK university (Pereira, 2016) where the ‘intensification of PhD workloads has resulted in the blurring of temporal and spatial boundaries in doctoral students’ everyday lives’ (Ablett, Griffiths and Mahoney, 2019). I have substituted the word ‘create’ for ‘producing’ or ‘doing’ ethnography in this chapter title. This stems from a resistance to think of myself, and academics more broadly, as primarily ‘producers’ of knowledge. I am conscious of the normative language of productivity in academia, where ‘producing’ knowledge seems to have become synonymous with institutions compelling academics to produce ever more ‘outputs’ to survive (Pereira, 2017). The economic-infused etymology of the word ‘produce’ has perhaps never felt so relevant, to the extent that I think this resonance may obscure any creative, bringing-into-being, meanings associated with the word. For this reason, I choose to talk of making or creating a feminist ethnography, with hopefully less certain ties to the language of outputs.

Though this discussion has so far referred to academia, the paradox of being within and against an institution resonates with the kinds of paradoxes some of my participants described in relation to their identities as councillors. As such, being reflexive about my own situated position as a feminist ethnographer helped me to identify similar complexities for some of my participants; I discuss these in my analytical chapters. Sometimes it is easy to trace the source of these disjunctures and their effects, as in, for instance, the times when my participants articulated their frustration with their council or political party's inability to foster family-friendly working practices. At some points, the effects of 'bifurcated consciousness' are less easy to locate. It should be noted, therefore, that experiencing disjunctures 'can generate not only change and transformation, but also disquiet, ambivalence, insecurity and uncertainty' (Reay, Crozier and Clayton, 2009, p. 1105).

### **Speaking of the self: embodying emotional self and analytical reflexivity**

In writing this thesis, I have been inspired by Eve Sedgwick's (2003) description of her attempts to think, create, and write in ways which might, 'explore promising tools and techniques for nondualistic thought' (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 1). In my approach to doing ethnographic research, whether thinking about the conceptualisation of gender or how to write with/about the experiences of those I encountered, I have tried to think and write in such a way. But doing so can have stultifying or paralysing effects, occurring as it does, 'near the boundary of what a writer can't figure out how to say readily, never mind prescribe to others' (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 2). During the course of my PhD, I have many times read my own experience of '*feeling like an imposter*, and an attendant "freeze" or stuck-ness' (Breeze, 2018), as a sure indication of failure on my part to be a 'proper' researcher, ethnographer, feminist and/or 'producer' of knowledge. Sedgwick describes a 'decreasing sense of having a strong center of gravity in a particular intellectual field' (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 2); a departure from whatever intellectual confidence and surety she previously felt as an established and experienced academic. For Sedgwick, confronting her own mortality and spirituality contributed to the 'slip-slidy effects' on her 'strong consciousness of vocation' (ibid., p. 2). Her point of origin for her journey into (what I consider to be) the possibilities of living and working with/in doubt and doubting, may be far removed from my own social location. But nonetheless, they resonated deeply with my encounters with depression and illness, which have their own 'slip-slidy' effects on intellectual confidence, and feeling 'stuck' or untethered.

I raise these personal reflections here for two reasons. Firstly, as C. Wright Mills states, 'no social study that does not come back to the problems of biography, of history and of their intersections within a society has completed its intellectual journey' (Wright Mills, 1959, p. 9). Feminist researchers have always sought to unsettle the boundaries between the personal, political and professional. As Smith (1999) argues in relation to the notion of standpoint, inquiry starts with the knower, the body, and its location:

[S]he is active; she is at work; she is connected up with particular other people in various ways; she thinks, eats, sleeps, laughs, desires, sorrows, sings, curses, loves, just here; she reads here; she watches television. She sits at her computer playing solitaire, analysing data, sending e-mail messages to friends, writing a paper. Activities, feelings, and experiences hook her into extended social relations, linking her activities to others and in ways beyond her knowing (Smith, 1999, pp. 4–5).

Through trying to understand my own imposter syndrome, I have also been far better positioned to understand my participants, their words and actions. Feeling like an imposter is not, after all, limited to academia. There were times when councillors spoke to me about their lack of confidence, their intimidation by the spaces they were required to occupy and the tasks they were required to perform. Councillors exhibited many reactions, whether flight, fight or freeze, all of which signified important dimensions of how gendered, classed and raced power relations are locally organised and organising of political work. I will discuss issues relating to power in the research setting in more detail in the Ethics section.

Living and working with/in doubt and uncertainty may be a very modest ambition. However, it is one that I have come to realise has been integral to my epistemological position and hence also to my choice of methodology and alignment with particular thinkers in the analysis. In doing so, I hope to follow what Sedgwick calls an invocation of 'the art of *loosing*' which can be understood as 'the ambition of thinking other than dualistically [...] The ideal I'm envisioning here is a mind receptive to thoughts, able to nurture and connect them, and susceptible to happiness in their entertainment' (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 1). If one is able to approach thinking in this way, Sedgwick argues, then one may be more open not only to seeing the connection between ideas, but also between thinking and other (embodied) aspects of life so that '[i]deally life, loves, and ideas might then sit freely, for a while, on the palm of the open hand' (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 3 emphasis in original). Though an initial impulse might be to correct the seemingly

nonsensical term 'loosing' to 'loosening', the former depicts a deliberate conflation of 'losing' and 'loosening' where letting go of previously self-evident truths entails loss, possibilities, and much in between.

This has had some very practical theoretical and methodological implications for my research. For instance, I recognise a kind of 'loosing' in Dorothy Smith's approach to ethnography; one that resists being pinned down to a determined set of practices (though this is not always how her ideas are taken up), whilst never losing sight of its feminist theoretical foundations. In this sense, 'loosing' as a research approach does not suggest a lightness of theoretical or methodological touch. When it comes to Smith's notion of how to go about 'writing the social', I also recognise similarities with Sedgwick's attempt to write nondualistically. This has been important as I strive to make sense of issues relating to continuity, change, agency and structure. Structure and agency are key concerns for the feminist organisational researchers like Acker (2006) from whom I took much inspiration for this project. The messiness with which they are entangled within one another requires an approach that complicates these binaries and attempts to make sense of the meanings which occur between what could be classified as 'agency' and what could be termed 'structure'. Such an approach could be understood, in Sedgwick's terms, as exploring 'the middle ranges of agency', which she argues is the only place that might 'offer space for effectual creativity and change' (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 13). To do so entails an exploration of the spaces between 'abstractly reified form[s] of the hegemonic and the subversive... [or] arguments about whether a given period was one of "continuity" or "change"' (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 13). In my concluding chapter, I return to my attempts to do this and assess to what degree it is possible to move beyond binaries, think nondualistically and explore the middle ranges of agency in the context of the binary world of British politics.

For now, however, I move on to a more pragmatic discussion about my choices of methods.

## Case study rationale and choice of methods

This section is concerned with the methods I employed as an institutional ethnographer, and explicated the rationale behind choosing the particular Local Authorities I studied. The idea of the 'intensively-focused-upon single site of ethnographic observation and participation' (Marcus, 1995, p. 96) maintains a hold on the ethnographic imagination, if not necessarily the actual practices nor, Falzon (2009) argues, to quite the same extent that alternative ethnographers might contend (Falzon, 2009, p. 1). The boundaries of what constitutes an ethnography are continually being re-formulated in response to different moments (Denzin, 1997). In recent years, feminist ethnographers have not only championed a wide range of new sites to be studied ethnographically, but also challenged the fundamental precepts of what an ethnography *is*. Whether studying the feminist 'I' using autoethnographic methods (Ettorre, 2016); investigating the status of academic feminism using discursive ethnography (Pereira, 2017); or doing ethnography in temporary, transient sites (Henderson, 2015), feminist academics continue to push the boundaries of ethnographic scholarship. Multi-sited ethnography has been part of the expanded landscape of ethnography for some time, starting with increased awareness in the 1990s that some social phenomena could be examined ethnographically but could not be accounted for by focusing on a single site (Falzon, 2009, p. 1). It is defined as 'multiple sites of observation and participation that cross-cut dichotomies such as the "local" and the "global," the "lifeworld" and the "system"' (Marcus, 1995, p. 95). In its essentials, multi-sited ethnography involves following 'people, connections, associations, and relationships across space [...] [to show how the] global is collapsed into and made an integral part of parallel, related local situations, rather than something monolithic or external to them' (Falzon, 2009, pp. 1–2). The emphasis on multiple sites within my own research was to provide a rich picture of how space is socially produced and always under construction, but also to emphasise how space is characterised by plurality and heterogeneity (Massey, 2005, p. 9). For my study, a key component in the ongoing social production of plural and heterogeneous local government spaces is the political party composition of each council. Furthermore, the gender, class and ethnicity composition of councillors complicates this picture further. As such, I decided to focus on three substantively different local sites. I concentrated on England because the different devolutionary contexts complicate the picture in other UK regions.

I use interviews, observations and shadowing as complementary research methods. I also referred to documents such as councils' codes of conduct, but as I was interested in how these were enacted and taken up in practice rather than the creation of the

documents themselves, I did not include document analysis as one of my main research methods. The research sites had the following key characteristics<sup>1</sup>:

- Southern rural council: 1/5 women councillors, 1% ethnic minority councillors. Conservative majority.
- Midlands post-industrial council: ¼ women councillors, 25% ethnic minority councillors. Labour majority.
- Western urban council: just under ½ women councillors, just under 10% ethnic minority councillors. Labour majority.

The rationale for choosing these three local authorities to research encompassed three main requirements: to have different political parties represented and in leadership; to have a range in the numbers of women and councillors from minority ethnic backgrounds; and to have a range in the type of socio-economic area (urban and rural) which each council controlled. Women are usually least likely to be elected in district or county councils, so one predominantly rural Southern county council was chosen for the case study site that had the lowest number of women and minority ethnic councillors. Women are most likely to be elected in metropolitan councils or unitary authorities, and so two cities were selected which had differing socio-economic histories and political management structures; one had a directly elected mayor and appointed cabinet, the other had a more typical Council Leader and appointed cabinet executive system. During my fieldwork, the political composition and leadership changed dramatically for the elected mayoral city.

## **Research methods: interviews, shadowing and observations**

### *1. Interviews*

Between February 2016 and May 2017, I conducted 56 semi-structured interviews across three local authority sites. During this time, the EU referendum was held, along with councillor elections, so my access to the field was limited at times when councillors were too busy to meet. Otherwise, I spent between four and five months investigating each site. Of the 56 interviewees, 31 identified as men, and 25 interviewees identified as women. All participants, if they were happy to disclose, were given the option to self-

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<sup>1</sup> For a more complete breakdown, see appendices

define their gender, ethnic background, nationality, (dis)ability, sexuality and other characteristics. I interviewed councillors from a range of political parties in each field.

The topics I covered in the interview schedule included: social background and pathway into local politics, including councillors' relation to feminist politics and activism; their negotiation of the public and private realm, particularly in relation to caring or domestic responsibilities; their political aspirations; and their negotiation and performance of identities within local government settings (please see appendices for example interview schedule). Interviews were concerned with eliciting the stories councillors tell about their career trajectories, aspirations, and the interrelation between their council work and personal lives. Each interview lasted between forty-five minutes and an hour and a half. I audio-recorded the interviews, transcribed them and used thematic coding, an approach to interview analysis that involves drawing out 'repeated patterns of meaning' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 91) from the text. As well as identifying themes, my iterative analysis interrogated the discursive creation of coherent or incoherent subjective selfhoods through narration, and allowed for consideration of the construction of gendered power in council settings via councillors' own 'narratives of entitlement' (Liddle and Michielsens, 2000a). Additionally, it was through the interviews that I examined councillors' depictions in their own accounts of their sense of entitlement and, conversely, any forms of ontological anxiety around the 'psychosomatic dimensions of public [masculinities and femininities]' (Puwar, 2004, p. 17). These moments of doubt are arguably the locus at which the potential for the production of new forms of reality becomes imaginable; eliciting these moments of doubt via the stories councillors told about their lives, supplemented by observations and contrasted with narratives of entitlement, formed the basis for my examination of the ways in which gendered power is constructed in specific locations.

The use of semi-structured interviews allowed me to explore the personal resources, in the form of capital, which councillors drew on to become successful politicians. The language interviewees use can reveal much about the reality of power in daily experience through conversation (Oakley, 1981; Devault, 1990). As Les Back states, 'listening to the world is not an automatic faculty but a skill that needs to be trained' (Back, 2007, p. 7); it is a feminist researcher's ability to listen, to recover the missing aspects of women's accounts of their own lives, and to avoid practices like correcting or 'smoothing over' women's voices in interview transcripts that is crucial to ensuring the diversity of women's experiences are given full articulation as part of any feminist research project (Devault, 1990).

## 2. *Shadowing*

Between February 2016 and May 2017, I also shadowed 3 Labour councillors and 2 Conservative councillors. As this study is concerned with councillors' working practices and how they relate to wider inequalities, it would be problematic to base the research on interview data alone without observations of local councillors doing their everyday work (Speer, 2002). Shadowing is a research practice which involves a researcher closely following a member of an organisation, usually over an extended period (McDonald, 2005, p. 456). Shadowing has been used by organisational researchers as part of ethnographies of work to provide further, in-depth opportunities to support or contrast the interview responses with observations of conduct (Harding, Gherardi and Poggio, 2005; Gilliat-Ray, 2011; McDonald, 2018). Shadowing involves being with the participant as they carry out every aspect of their work, from the mundane to the exceptional; it will be 'as various and complex as the job of the individual the shadower is investigating [and] can be done over consecutive or non-consecutive days for anything from a single day or shift up to a whole month' (McDonald, 2005, p. 456). I found it a highly useful research technique which allowed me to gain greater understanding of the public-facing and private aspects of councillors' working practices; in other words 'what people actually do in the course of their everyday lives, not what their roles dictate of them' (Quinlan, 2008, p. 1480). Shadowing requires the researcher to be highly flexible, reflective and responsive to participants as it involves such close relations and trust with participants. It demands situated and ongoing judgements about access and ethics in practice (Darling, 2014; Johnson, 2014).

I shadowed five councillors overall: one Labour man, two Labour women, and two Conservative men. Some of the cabinet members I shadowed had been in cabinet positions for some time, whilst others were new to the role. I chose one member because she had a caring role which she was learning to balance with her new cabinet position. These shadowing periods were conducted in a formalised way where I arranged to spend concentrated periods of time with them as they went about their normal working weeks. These shadowing experiences formed the bulk of my fieldnotes on shadowing. However, I also engaged in more informal shadowing practices whilst carrying out observation work in each Local Authority. The five formal shadowing experiences were all with cabinet members. This was a strategic decision, based on the difficult political time period in which I was researching. At the first council I researched, maintaining access was particularly challenging as my fieldwork fell during the time of the run up to the EU referendum and the murder of Jo Cox MP. These events, coupled with recent changes

in the Labour Group's leadership, meant that councillors were increasingly sceptical of my presence. As such, I had to negotiate access repeatedly throughout each day, and experienced having access that had been previously granted suddenly rescinded at the last minute. Shadowing cabinet members helped me to gain access to party political meetings and areas which would have been difficult to access without the agreement of senior councillors.

Each 'shadowing' experience lasted for as long as the councillor would allow me to spend with them and was very much driven by their availability; for some, this was a maximum of a few days, for others it was a period of a few weeks, though I would not always be granted access to them every day. In the Conservative-led council I conducted formal shadowing with the leader of the Conservative party (a man). My decision was based on a strategic approach to gaining access; during observations and interviews I noted that the hierarchies of the local Conservative party were relatively rigid, and that I was unlikely to gain access to spaces were I not 'seen' with someone in authority. I conducted a number of informal shadowing posts with women councillors in this council. The informality was driven by the fact that, as a large county council, their districts were spread across a wide area and their presence in the Council Hall was more fluid (unless they had a formal role such as a cabinet member which required greater presence in the Council Hall). In adapting to their fluidity, I was at least able to spend some time with them. The more informal shadowing arrangements arose from serendipitous encounters during fieldwork, such as when a councillor I was shadowing suggested I might be interested in an aspect of their colleagues' work, or when I knew a councillor I had interviewed would be at a Labour network conference I planned to attend as part of my research. Often, these ad hoc opportunities offered me a chance to see parts of backbench councillor life which I had not encountered, and were invaluable in providing a more rounded understanding of the work councillors do.

In the final Labour-led Western urban council, I shadowed another recently elected woman cabinet member. I wanted to shadow her because of her relatively recent appointment and also because, in her interview with me, she had expanded on her awareness of an equalities agenda. As with the previous two councils, shadowing someone in a position of authority in politics does open many doors; other councillors who I had previously struggled to make contact were suddenly willing to talk to me, for instance. I was taken more seriously as a researcher the more time I spent in the company of senior councillors, but this also had its disadvantages. In the last council, for example, the cabinet member was experiencing hostility and backlash to her

appointment and way of practising politics. By spending time with her, I was considered to be 'on her side'. This was made clear to me when, during my shadowing, I received a bizarre email from another woman councillor asking if she had done something wrong to alienate me. This seemed quite strange and surprising, until I realised that this woman was on 'the other side' of the Labour Group's divided sub-networks of loyalties. As such, shadowing as a method embroiled me – unwittingly, perhaps – in the dynamics of relationship building and 'taking sides' which I was ostensibly trying to record.

### 3. *Observations*

At the same time as I was conducting interviews, I engaged in observations at public council meetings. These observations were carried out at Full Council meetings, committee meetings, and public-facing events (both in the wards and at the Council Halls). These observations not only helped me to gain a sense of role responsibilities among councillors in each council, but also allowed me to observe the behaviours councillors would display in public. The trust and access I was able to build through shadowing enabled me to then progress my observations to more private meetings. These included Group political meetings, where I took notes when allowed, or otherwise took notes immediately after (I was never allowed to audio record these). They also included local constituency party meetings in councillors' wards. Access to such private meetings was, again, subject to change and granted very much on an ad hoc basis. Where I was not allowed to attend, I usually asked the councillor I was shadowing if there were any insights they would be willing to discuss about these private meetings. I was most interested in the political private meetings, as opposed to confidential meetings about ward residents, about which I made no recordings and took no notes if discussions referred to private casework issues.

The observations I undertook in both formal and informal settings, within and outside the Council Hall, were highly significant in trying to understand how artefacts and space are implicated in the processes of engendering and reproducing processes of legitimation. The construction of councillor identities at work is at all times shaped by the legitimation processes associated with the work, as they strive to manage the perceptions of others, notably the electorate and media. In terms of my research design, I paid attention to the gendering of the building, for instance, where the toilets were, whose images adorned the walls and which were in the most prominent positions, as well as the images and artefacts relating to mythical local stories or portrayals of heroic local deeds or exalted citizens. This involved observation at the following types of interactions: Full Council, AGM, Cabinet meetings, Scrutiny meetings, Ward Forums,

Ward meetings, Committee meetings, and witnessing interactions with the press. At these meetings and interactions, I was looking out for differing embodiments of political masculinities and femininities, for example through representations of aggressiveness by banging on the tables or engaging in name calling or everyday sexist language. I tried to attend to where this might differ among and between political parties and factions. I also wished to see how notions of equality were expressed or enacted.

### **Selection and sampling processes**

The data collected on councillors' gender, ethnicity, disability, age or other biographical information, is usually done at a national level. The Local Government Association (LGA) conducts a census which documents a range of councillor characteristics for England. Of the key statistics relevant to my study, the 2018 census found that 36% councillors were women, 45% councillors were retired, 96% were white, 36% had caring responsibilities (most commonly looking after a child) and 16% had long term health problems or disability which affected their daily activities (LGA, 2019). At a regional or local level, however, there is less availability of data. In particular, the ethnicity of councillors is not collated by councils themselves. This was confirmed by a number of councils I contacted directly.

However, data from the LGA census shows that councillors from minority ethnic backgrounds are more likely to be young, have children to care for, be employed (as opposed to retired), use social media for political work, be more highly qualified and be a member of the Labour party, than their white counterparts (LGA, 2019). Therefore, this data indicates that councillors from minority ethnic backgrounds may have very different expectations of political work, different working practices and require different kinds of support from their political parties (for example, with childcare support) than their white colleagues. The LGA collates this census at a national level, and whilst it shows some important English regional variations within the data, the scope of the census does not provide more localised accounts for individual councils (LGA, 2019). Additionally, their survey uses vague categories of ethnicity; defining ethnic groups as either 'White', 'Black', 'Asian', 'Mixed' or 'Other'. However, even using such broad categories and taken at a national level, the census indicates significant variation in representation terms between BME groups; whilst 'Asian' councillors accounted for 57% of the total BME councillors, 'Black' councillors only accounted for 12% (LGA, 2019). This finding is echoed by research conducted by Operation Black Vote (OBV), which indicates that there 'appears to be a "gap" in African/Caribbean representation within the broader

BAME category', and particularly among African/Caribbean men (Syal and Clarke, 2019; OBV, 2019).

The research by OBV shows only one third of 'single tier' English authorities (the level of council I also research) has either no BME representation or just one BME councillor (OBV, 2019). OBV identified 40 local authorities in England with BME populations of between 6% and 12% but who have either zero or just one BME councillor (OBV, 2019). For example, Portsmouth council has just 2% BME councillors despite 12% of the population classed as BME (Syal and Clarke, 2019). The Conservative party and Liberal Democrats perform particularly poorly with BME representation, attracting only 11% and 3% BME councillors respectively. OBV conclude that these findings highlight the need for political parties to create BME-only shortlists for new candidates (BBC News, 2019).

As part of my selection and sampling processes, I wanted to include councils which had a range of political parties, variation in terms of councillor gender composition, and different numbers of BME councillors.

The size of my interview sample is commensurate with recommendations for ethnographic work (Morse, 1994, 2000). Interviewees were approached directly via the councils' websites and also through one associated feminist group at the Unitary Authority council. A snowballing technique was used to recruit participants beyond this. Most councillors got to know about my presence in each council site, and councillors would introduce me to their colleagues. In that way, I got to know informal networks and friendship groups of councillors within political parties, and securing contacts sometimes proceeded through such recommendations and introductions. For shadowing, I used a snowballing technique based on purposefully selected sampling after interviews. I wished to shadow councillors from a range of genders, ethnic backgrounds, ages and caring responsibilities, levels of experience and seniority in the council. I shadowed two Conservative cabinet members, both men, and another male Labour cabinet. I also shadowed two Labour women cabinet members; a BME councillor who had only recently been elected, and a white councillor who had recently moved cabinet posts and had caring responsibilities.

The concept of ethnicity accounts for both majority and minority ethnic groups (Ware, 1992). My selection criteria for interviewees therefore aimed for a range of interviewees across majority and minority groups, as well as gender balance and a range

of ages. However, the number of councillors from ethnic minority backgrounds is around 4% (Kettlewell and Phillips, 2013). This would prove problematic for participant recruitment. Some researchers seek to over-represent ethnic minority interviewees (in relation to the proportional numbers in the population) as an effective way of giving voice to minority views (Threlfall *et al.*, 2012, p. 148). Following this approach, I sought to interview all those who identified as BME councillors. I attempted to interview all councillors from ethnic minority backgrounds by requesting an interview from all councillors in the council. At interviews, I would ask how councillors identified their ethnicity, and would ask all councillors about the ethnicity composition of the local party, and if they could recommend people to speak to.

It sometimes helped to persuade councillors to speak with me if I indicated that I had already spoken with a number of their colleagues. As my time among councillors grew, so too did my awareness and deployment of political strategic maintenance of rapport not just in interviews but in participant selection. This related to how receptive councillors were to my presence and whether they took me, and the research, seriously. Often, this was not an issue. But at times, particularly during times of intra-party upheaval, political groups could close ranks and I would have to start all over again with trying to gain access. At these moments especially, deploying a certain kind of 'methodological manipulateness' or canniness ensured I could keep the research going; usually, this took the form of arranging shadowing with a senior or well respected councillor, which gave me visibility and a kind of status-by-attachment among other councillors. This potentially risks alienating some councillors. But at times when access was seemingly impossible, this strategy enabled me to gain further interviews and the trust of councillors.

In the subsequent section, I go on to discuss some of the difficulties I experienced doing my fieldwork, beginning with the politics of access, before exploring power in the research relationship.

## **The politics of access and waiting**

The experience of gaining and maintaining access to the field, and the waiting which this entails, can reveal much about the practices and power which take place in organisations (Cunliffe and Alcadipani, 2016) and this was certainly my experience in local councils. For my first case study, I emailed all councillors with a polite, generic request for an interview, not revealing my particular research focus on inequalities. The first group I approached were Labour women, thinking they would be the most self-aware group of how issues of class and gender related to their experiences of being a councillor (Liddle and Michielsens, 2000b). However, I did not receive any replies; it was the start of an ongoing battle to get some women and councillors from ethnic minorities to respond to my emails and calls. I alternated my recruitment approach as I went, sometimes emphasising my project's focus on inequalities, and sometimes leaving giving more general project information initially. My inability to recruit any BME women in one council is testament to the limits of this approach, and how my position as a white, middle class, feminist woman researching (primarily) gender inequalities could be read as one that did not do enough to engage them or appear relevant to their concerns.

I waited, but did not hear back from the women I initially contacted. Waiting is a feature of most research; for mine, it was usually waiting for councillors to reply to me, but also in terms of rearranging meetings or waiting for the 'right' time for them to be interviewed as many were too busy to speak with me. The importance of 'timeliness' in my approach to interviewees was sometimes self-evident, for instance in terms of not expecting a reply during electioneering times. This was especially the case around the time of the EU referendum, when I noted in my fieldnotes that it 'has been far harder to gain access over the last couple of months. Not only down to the members being busy with local elections and EU referendum, but change in leadership has bred distrust and many see me as an outsider' (Field notes, 29<sup>th</sup> June 2016). The same fieldnote continues that, 'having said that, some are almost boastful in their revealing of secrets about the [Labour] Group to me', indicating the salience of secrets as a form of currency in politics. I cast my net wider to include some men. I had a reply from one within minutes, and arranged a time to meet at the council offices.

Conservative men, in particular, were often very keen to talk to me. I wondered if this was because my initial email was too vague and did not reference inequalities, so they felt it would be a 'cosy' chat about their experiences as councillors. But even when I made my research focus more explicit, they were still keen to talk about their

experiences. Reading this generously, it may signal a genuine desire by Conservative men to engage in more productive and thoughtful conversations about barriers to inclusion within their party. Yet, often the experience of the interview belied this, with them giving these issues seemingly very little thought and wanting to move on quickly to another topic. Rather, and this is both uncomfortable to express as well as to have experienced, I often got the sense that Conservative men I interviewed were ‘sizing me up’ as a potential young woman candidate myself or even, as one interviewer, intimated ‘when [I] asked [a] question on are you a feminist and he said “well, I do like the ladies”’ (Field Note, 27<sup>th</sup> April 2016).

The majority of interviews were conducted in private spaces in Council House buildings as this was most convenient for participants, and the location seemed to have no effect on their ability to speak frankly to me about the dynamics of power in the council, or their views on the leadership. They would often politely enquire, as we were walking down the corridor, as to who else I had spoken to. Although I declined to give any names in order to protect the confidentiality of the previous interviewees, I indicated that I was starting with a particular political party group but intended to interview across all parties, and sought their advice, at the end of every interview, as to whom they recommended I speak with next. Their questioning of me was a way of positioning themselves in relation to me, to probe my own political inclinations and to tease out where my political loyalties might lie. Maintaining party political neutrality and not revealing my own political affiliations was crucial to gaining access and not prejudicing their accounts, but I was aware that it may also have risked alienating them; interviews are a two-way relationship and to give nothing of yourself to the interview is not only potentially exploitative but can make participants wary and uncomfortable. Asking about my own political beliefs was probably also a way of positioning themselves in relation to their fellow councillors; nowhere was this demonstrated more clearly than in the exchanges I witnessed as I walked down corridors with councillors, and they introduced me to their friends and colleagues. I was aware that I was granted interviews with a number of them because they had seen me with, or I had been introduced to them by, a colleague who they might have felt was influential, someone they wanted to impress, or someone who they themselves trusted and respected. At a particularly difficult time for research participant recruitment, during the run up to the EU referendum, I noted that I had ‘also had to try new tactics like stating “a number of your colleagues recommended I speak with you” – for the most part, that’s true, but I’m also well aware that what I’m doing is playing on their political vanity of feeling respected by their colleagues’ (Field note 29<sup>th</sup> June 2016).

At one point, my presence as a researcher was used by a councillor to demonstrate the nature of cross-party working to a potential councillor candidate.

In this way, access was an ongoing project, one which required a significant amount of canniness and the ability to maintain a delicate balance of flattery and affiliation. I was also constantly negotiating it due to the ad hoc nature with which I was granted a 'door access' pass card. Council Hall buildings are usually divided into publicly accessible and backroom spaces. This requires the use of an access pass to move about the building. Sometimes I was given a pass which allowed me access to everywhere in the building for a number of days; at other times I was escorted around the building by a councillor or member of staff and not given a pass, and yet at others I was given a temporary pass for a few hours or one day. I noted in a field note from 10<sup>th</sup> June 2016, that I 'have become a regular on the phone to the PAs [personal assistants to members] who are stringent gatekeepers to Cabinet members. One of the reasons I approached [a particular cabinet member] for shadowing was because her PA was so nice and willing to help me out so I knew it was more likely than others to actually get set up.' Gaining physical access and establishing relationships with gatekeepers was a constantly moving feast, and required insistent and repeated repetition of my status as a researcher, and information about the project, to a wide range of council staff members to reassure them that I should be allowed in. This process was further hindered by austerity cuts to the council's budget which entailed job cuts to a number of the support staff for councillors. I became a regular, and no doubt somewhat irritating, face to staff who were already stretched trying to manage their own increasing workloads under stressful conditions.

I was not the only one for whom spaces were routinely blocked off. In the Western council, the cabinet members sat along a corridor which was several floors above, and on the other side of the building, from the main members' corridors. Backbench councillors would need a good reason to go up to the cabinet members' corridors, which were also only accessible with a pass. On one occasion, I became that 'good reason', when a newly elected Labour councillor took me up to the cabinet-only space for our interview, despite a meeting room being available in the members' corridor. I understood this as fulfilling two objectives for her; firstly, it was, as she described, her rebelling against the divisions between backbenchers and cabinet members (which often caused tension, in each council). Secondly, it allowed her to be 'seen' by influential cabinet members, and for her to introduce me to them. This benefitted both my ability to recruit them as participants, as well as increasing her own visibility, and perhaps credibility,

among her own peers; the women she introduced me to were a group of experienced feminist councillors who supported my research. In this way, politicians 'used' me with a degree of canniness as much as I did them.

In the subsequent section, I analyse power in the research process and how this was manifested in my research.

### **In between elite and feminist interviews**

Sometimes, my experience of interviewing councillors came close to what I imagine feminist scholars thought of when they talked about deconstructing researcher/researched power relations (Oakley 1982) and creating a more 'sisterly' exchange. In my field notes dated 21<sup>st</sup> March 2016, written after an interview with a woman Labour councillor, I reflected that I 'tend to find, overall, that with women they just *get it* - they understood the reason why I was there. With men, not so much and so performance from me in terms of establishing their trust is more pronounced' (emphasis in original).

This 'just getting it' meant the interviews would often get up and running more quickly, with the interviewee very quickly, sometimes almost intuitively, understanding what my research was about and the reasons for conducting it and so honing their answers to my questions. At these times, I would come away feeling like a 'successful' interviewer, who had got or achieved some 'useful' data from the person. At other times, the experience felt far closer to that of attempts to interview a government minister or MP or a 'failed' interview (Puwar, 1997; Nairn, Munro and Smith, 2005), with me struggling to keep control over many aspects of the interviewing process, including over the setting, timeliness, and agenda. In my field notes dated 15<sup>th</sup> May 2017 at the latter part of my time in the field, I reflected that 'although they aren't elites in the same way as MPs, the experience of access, managing the interviews (keeping them on track) and occupying an authoritative space as an interviewer/researcher has felt like I'm interviewing elites at times!' At these times, I would struggle to engage the interviewee in my research aims and come away more deflated, feeling like I hadn't got much 'useful' data as the interviewee just didn't 'get' it.

To some extent, setting up a binary between 'elite' and 'feminist' interviews may obscure the complexity of feminist qualitative methods. Part of the complexity of interviews can be analysed by attending to the 'sensory, emotional and affective

relations' in the research setting (Fraser and Puwar, 2008). It was only once fieldwork had properly concluded that I realised that my frustrations reflected the gendered differences of councillors' experiences of work depending on their position in relation to the norms of their work. Although I explained my project focus at the beginning of each interview, some interviewees did not seem to understand the relevance of answering questions about inequalities. The seeming irrelevance of my project to them reflects how difficult it is for people to feel or notice inequalities which do not affect them. The interview is so much more than the content of what is being said. Had I not been carrying out these interviews myself, I would not be able to recall, on reading through the transcriptions, the echoes of emotion, strain and unarticulated understanding between myself and the interviewee, communicated through mere looks or a wave of the hands. I considered my interviews in two distinct, but related, lights; as a resource that produces knowledge about the topic under consideration, and as a situated performance itself where silences, absences or confusion generate interesting insights (Czarniawska, 2001; DeVault and McCoy, 2001; Ryan-Flood and Gill, 2010). I consider silences and confusion described above as 'knowledge without concepts', which become apparent through embodied performances in the interview as opposed to being expressly articulated (Liddle and Michielsens, 2000a, p. 129).

### **Researching up, researching down?**

At times, I felt as if I was 'researching up', with the distinctive problems associated with such research: difficulties arising from the control councillors had over the setting, timeliness, and dominance over the interview schedule by talking at length on a wholly unrelated topic, often despite my repeated attempts at interruption. These are the 'distinctive problems [...] related to space, talk, access, control and empowerment [which] have a bearing upon the research relationship in quite a different way to when feminists are researching down' (Puwar, 1997, NP). My interviewees maintained various forms of power which influenced the research setting, such as the positional power associated with their role and social power within the research context. They could negotiate their participation, controlling what they disclosed and where the interview would be situated, as well as the various gendered, classed and experience imbalances between the researcher and participants.

Though an apprentice researcher in many ways, in my previous work prior to starting the PhD, I had worked as a press officer and so conducted and facilitated a number of journalist-style interviews. For the majority of my interviewees, too, their only

experience of being interviewed was by journalists. As others researching MPs have found, this can cause a number of hurdles to research interviews; not least, as I experienced more than once, requests to be 'off the record' or to turn my tape recorder off. At these times, I had to make it very clear to my participants that I could not promise full anonymity and reiterated our discussion about consent. Any prior experience with dealing with journalists meant that the interviewee could easily slip into habits of deflection, generalisation, or evasion, not unlike others have found when interviewing MPs (Williams, 1980). We both, then, could be described as novices to some extent, feeling our way through a process that felt familiar and strange at the same time. Such acts of self and other censorship also illustrate the complexities of how silence and interruption work in the research relationship (Ryan-Flood and Gill, 2010); at times, my participants very purposefully silenced and halted themselves and/or me. This overturns traditional notions of unequal researcher/participant power relations where the researcher is assumed to be in a more powerful position to potentially silence or erase participants.

I discuss power in the research relationship in more detail in the following section.

### **Power in the research process**

Power relations are arguably inherent within any interview situation; they shape 'the process of interview research from beginning to end, from the initial formulation of the research question to the final dissemination of results' (MacLean, 2013, p. 67). Understanding, reflecting upon and negotiating aspects of power is an integral and necessary feature of any form of knowledge production. Indeed, it can be argued that a feminist approach to research ethics is concerned with power before any other ethical concerns (Smart, 2009; Christians, 2013). Arguably, discursive power is mobilised through the act of representation in research; to speak for, or to 're-present' participants is an act of power, an act which, for a feminist researcher who values grounding theory in the reality of peoples' experiences, can be an uncomfortable one. Questions of responsibility and accountability become central to such research in relation to power and representation; for example, if the act of writing about the men and women I interviewed in some way produces them anew, how does one ethically negotiate this to ensure my representation is both accurate and fair? Any social interaction, and in particular the interview, is a partial connection; so even if both parties occupy the same social group, the 'dangers of misinterpretation' (Bourdieu, 1999) are never fully erased. It is the concept of reflexivity, broadly defined as the attempt to make explicit the power

relations and the exercise of power in the research process (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002), which I turn to in order to negotiate the ethical issues of representing others, as well as issues of objectivity and subjectivity and the relationship between researcher and researched (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Bourdieu, 2003; Madhok, 2012). Reflexivity on the part of the researcher, in terms of their social location and the difference this makes to the type of knowledge created by the project, requires more than simply acknowledging your social position(ing) as a researcher which may give the impression that one's identity somehow authorises epistemic privilege (Bola *et al.*, 1998). I therefore move beyond acknowledging my social position as a white, middle class, woman and student to engage with reflexive sociological research practices including practical steps such as maintaining a research log as an additional resource for challenging my own assumptions (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992; Bourdieu, 2003; Kenway and McLeod, 2004).

Whilst the research practices employed in this study remain grounded in feminist principles, I also acknowledge the problematic assumption inherent in too decisive a separation between researcher and researched; one that might presume a 'chasm between the knowledge of the oppressed and the oppressor in which the oppressed develop their own practices in order to develop better knowledge' (Walby, 2001, p. 485). As with much feminist research, the impetus for using qualitative research techniques originates in their capacity to 'focus on women's experience and to listen and explore the shared meanings between women with an aim to reformulate traditional research agendas' (Skeggs, 2001, pp. 429–430). Whilst the overall benefits of a feminist approach to interviews include the opportunity to develop high levels of rapport and a degree of reciprocity (Bryman, 2012), the enactment of feminist commitments to non-hierarchical interview relationships may at times be impractical and unachievable, in particular in relation to interviewing politicians.

Feminist scholars conducting interviews have largely been concerned with addressing the issues arising when the interviewer retains more power and control over the research setting and direction of the interview; typically, feminists have therefore attempted to address power imbalances (Oakley, 1981; Maynard and Purvis, 1994). At times I did experience the kinds of effects associated with doing the feminist work of troubling the power relations between interviewer and interviewee. A field note written after an interview reflected that it was perhaps a (read as) shared gendered position between us that,

seemed important to women councillors when opening up about instances of harassment or bullying, as they were able to include me in a sense of being part of a common experience of being a woman. But I'm well aware, in the majority of circumstances, of the vast differences between myself and these women in terms of their significant political experience and have families (Field note 21<sup>st</sup> March 2016).

Here, I also note some of the obvious differences between me and my participants. I found that expressly acknowledging differences could be helpful, in order not to deny difference or mislead participants (Edwards, 2002). In addition, I tried to ensure a degree of reciprocity by keeping myself open to other, sometimes surprising, commonalities or points of connection. This enabled me and my participants to speak across some fairly significant political and personal differences.

Councillors could have received media training and so can be adept at formulating generic or evasive responses. Many also displayed a tendency to try and steer the interview onto their preferred topics or engage in political debate with me. They are also, of course, in positions of social power, being elected representatives with local decision-making power and the potential to impact others' lives. In these ways, though it would be inaccurate to describe this as elite research, it is certainly research conducted on a privileged group. As such, throughout my thesis I try to adhere to Sohl's call for researchers to 'turn to the problems, fears and feelings of being uncomfortable' (Sohl, 2018, p. 470) when researching any privileged group. This is particularly resonant in the chapter focussing on the predominantly middle-class, Southern and Conservative-led county council where my own feelings of discomfort acted as an analytical springboard to help guide my 'insights into the complex processes by which class, gender and whiteness are constituted' (Sohl, 2018, p. 480).

Studying elite or privileged women challenges some of the fundamental assumptions of feminist methodology (Puwar, 1997). As Puwar (1997) notes, feminist interviews with women politicians do not fit neatly into either feminist methodology or elite methodology literature, with power relations between the interviewer and interviewee inherently complex because of the elite status of the interviewee and the sharing of gender identities. Whether or not we think of local politicians as 'elites', my experience of conducting feminist research with them echoed that of Nirmal Puwar's (1997) experience with MPs, where 'the whole power asymmetry is reversed when researching women elites' (Puwar, 1997, NP).

In the final section below, I outline the ethical procedures I adhered to.

### **Formal ethical procedures**

My study was granted ethical approval by the Sociology Department's ethical procedures at the University of Warwick. The British Sociological Association's (BSA) ethical guidelines, the Statement of Ethical Practice (2002), and the University of Warwick's Code of Practice were observed at every stage of the research process. Informed consent was sought from all interviewees and information sheets about the research project were made available (see appendices). Participants were reassured throughout of their right to withdraw from the project at any time. Informed consent was negotiated with all interviewees as the research commenced, but I also engaged in situated ethical practices (Darling, 2014), seeking additional consent when potentially identifying information was revealed, or if the interviewee brought up personal issues relating to their colleagues, employers or family lives. Equally, informed consent was gained from third parties during the shadowing stage of fieldwork where this entailed my presence at private meetings. This was considered and negotiated in collaboration with the councillor in question. Confidentiality was maintained through the protection of identifiable information in the storage, analysis and distribution of research findings. However, as councillors occupy public positions of power and the political composition of councils is publicly available via their own websites, I was not able to guarantee confidentiality to them, which I made clear to all participants. Whilst I explained that I would make every attempt to set out the information relating to participants in such a way that deniability is possible for individuals, I discussed with my interviewees the difficulties of completely concealing the identities of those in public positions.

Before moving on to my data analysis chapters, I will provide a short summary of the main points from this chapter.

## Conclusions

To conclude this chapter, I will briefly summarise my key methodological choices, before setting out how the following analytical chapters will answer my research questions. My three research questions ask:

1. What is councillor work and how is it changing?
2. How do councillors experience and negotiate everyday inequalities at work?
3. How is councillor work shaped by and how does it shape broader regimes of inequality?

These questions are formulated so as to best investigate councillors' multi-layered work. To go about understanding the complexity of these layers and provide a rich analysis, I needed an in-depth methodological approach. I chose an institutional ethnographic approach which could provide this level of depth by spending greater time with participants. I chose IE as a specific feminist approach to ethnography as it is one that foregrounds an awareness of how gender, race and class form some of the key organising principles in work. In its emphasis on processes within work, IE offers a distinctive approach to investigating and writing 'the social'. As an IE researcher, I pay attention to the ongoing and everyday coordination of activities by relations of ruling, and how those relations of ruling are in turn shaped by individuals' activities (Smith, 1999). I chose to look at three sites of local government to provide a rich picture of how local government is produced via ongoing and social processes, but processes which are plural and heterogeneous (Massey, 2005) owing, in particular, to the political party composition of each council and the composition of councillors.

In this chapter, I have noted the methods I used to show the complexity of councillor work. These included 56 interviews, multiple observations in public and more inaccessible council spaces, and shadowing a total of 5 councillors across all three research sites. I have discussed some of the difficulties associated with researching politicians and the specific difficulties I encountered in terms of negotiating access. As a feminist sociologist working with IE, my position(ing) as a researcher influenced not only the dynamics of fieldwork, but the direction my analysis took. In this chapter, I discussed my reflexive engagements with the field. I attempted to scope out what a non-dualistic

engagement with investigating and writing the social might look like. I return to my reflections on whether or not I was successful at doing this in my concluding chapter.

In the subsequent four chapters, I focus on four distinct analytical themes from my research data which show how inequalities are negotiated in local politics. To do this, I move between different levels of analysis, centring and decentring the particularities of political parties as appropriate. I begin in the first analytical chapter by looking at councillors as a whole, across political parties, in order to show the kinds of work they all do and the inequalities of that work.

## Data Chapter 1: Understanding Councillor Work as Work

This chapter serves two aims; it provides some context about councillor's activities beyond the case study information previously outlined, but it then goes further to explore councillor activities as *work* as a first empirical data chapter. As part of conceptualising politics as a form of work, I draw attention to the spaces and times in which this work takes place. In the first section, I outline what kind of work councillors do in relation to their public-facing work, their office-based work and their party political work. Though I separate these elements out, they overlap enormously in the everyday life of councillors. So, for example, when I discuss the more political aspects of the role, I do include discussions of more procedural aspects of the work. After exploring the different features that characterise councillor work, I go on to explore how councillor work is unique. In this part, I consider what is specific about councillor work in relation to training, pay, 'hiring and firing' (selection and stepping down) practices, and the ways in which temporalities clash. Political institutions and political cultures also happen to be work institutions and cultures for others, and I explore the relationships between councillors and officers as part of this chapter. I also consider how the kinds of work councillors do are shaped by the kinds of party politics councillors practice.

Taken together, these elements provide an exploration of the messy and unbounded work of being a councillor; how what is understood by that work is up for negotiation and how the work is constituted by gender. Time and space are central to understanding councillor work; Council Halls<sup>2</sup> are places of inequality and difference, and the same rhythms of councillor work can be both enabling and/or restricting for different people, in different settings or at different times. As I discuss in my Literature Review chapter, I partly choose to conceptualise formal politics as work because of the increased conceptual scope such a perspective allows for. The other motivation for doing so is that 'work' is how my participants framed their own relationship to their councillor activities,

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<sup>2</sup> I refer to each municipal building, which are sometimes referred to as City Halls, Council Offices, Council Halls or Council Houses, as a *Council Hall*. However they are referred to by their inhabitants, each features both private offices and public legislative spaces. I like the term *Council Hall* because it reflects the ambiguity of councillor work; they are not merely 'office' spaces, which would foreground the buildings as a place of work. Instead 'hall' encompasses its public facing, legislative, deliberative and public service components.

albeit in complicated ways. I use this conceptualisation within my ethnography to try and capture the nuance and complexity of councillors' working lives, and to make visible and (re) value their diverse activities.

In the first section of this chapter, I discuss some of the procedural, utilitarian and performance elements of councillor work in relation to three areas: firstly, I look at the kinds of office-based work that takes place in Council Halls; I then discuss the public-facing aspects of the work like case-work; and finally I consider some of the more performance-based political work councillors do.

## **Section One: What kind of work is councillor work?**

### **1. 'Office-based' work: the procedural and utilitarian elements of councillor work**

#### ***1.1 Relating to representation as a form of work***

The motivations which promoted councillors to seek election and take on councillor work were multiple and complex. All councillors were motivated by a range of reasons; their family history, personal and work experiences, a sense of social duty, or as a response to the changing social world they saw in their local area. But for most, 'making a difference' to their local communities was a key source of motivation. What they understood by making a difference depended on the local area, the needs of its residents and how those needs were understood by councillors. For many of the new Labour councillors elected during my fieldwork, a key source of motivation to stand for election was a desire to tackle austerity and cuts to local services. They identified as far more left-wing than other Labour councillors. There were other motivations such as the desire to further a political career or the commitment to a political cause, and each councillor drew on multiple reasons as to why they entered politics in the first place. Though this took distinct forms depending on the political party and geographical area, each councillor faced a myriad of motivations. They also faced a variety of experiences of being a councillor. Such is the variety of councillors' work that the experiences of that work involved a negotiation of a set of elements which did not always easily co-exist; there was a clash of the procedural, the utilitarian and performance elements to their work. For many councillors across the political spectrum, the influence of professional discourses and identities were significant in shaping their experiences. But how they related to these professional or employment-based discourses would depend on the reasons they wanted to get into local politics in the first place.

Councillors used 'work' as an explicit frame of reference when describing their patterns of activities as a councillor. Understandings of 'work' among councillors also shaped how councillors normalised their relations with one another:

[...] you have that just spiral of err backstabbing, bitchiness, but you know it happens in all walks of life doesn't it. You could argue that it's office politics. You know, any work environment ends up being a bit like that, you know (Cllr Jones).

As a Cabinet member, Councillor Jones spent the majority of time within the confines of the Council Hall working from his office and attending meetings with officers, other politicians and external organisations. He describes how councillor work is like 'any work environment', where 'work', in this case, is equated with paid employment. By evoking a shared cultural understanding of the kinds of everyday 'backstabbing, bitchiness' and 'office politics', he normalises such behaviour as something that happens in both paid employment and in 'all walks of life'. He expresses this in a highly gendered way by using the term 'bitchiness'; as with other derogatory terms like 'catty' or 'waspish', 'bitchiness' is a quality more closely associated with kind of 'feminine' spitefulness. Its use here contributes to the normalising of aggressive politics both by his dismissive tone, and by the infantilising gendered language.

Another Cabinet member expressed the importance of fostering relationships within the Council Hall and the similarities, in terms of work rhythms and challenges, which she experienced in her previous role as a manager at a charity:

I mean there are always people that you won't get on with, that find it difficult, I mean it is like any other workplace, you've got people you hit it off instantly and you know where they're coming from, [...] But from a point of view of a workplace, it is like any other, any other job. The difference is, the public side of it, if something goes wrong, the public, it's the Councillor that takes the public side of it and takes the fall (Cllr Smith).

The 'public side of it' refers to the 'doing' of democracy; be that the work of immediate engagement with constituents at ward-level 'resident's meetings' or via mediated interactions through local news or social media, or through party political campaigning. Casework bridges the domains of public-facing and office-based work; it forms a large

part of a councillor's representative role and involves often lengthy interaction with constituents, though the actual problem-solving element involved is often conducted out of the public gaze at the Council Hall. The management of on-going ward-level issues requires a different spatial and temporal orientation to the 'office work' associated with being in the Council Hall, as does political campaigning and party political work. These features of representative life constitute a uniqueness to representative work, which I elaborate further in section two.

### ***1.2 Roles and responsibility***

Councillors' political duties within the council will depend on their position, and whether their party is in power. For a cabinet member, the role is large enough that they are employed full time by the council to work on their portfolio. In contrast, backbench councillors will tend to have less to do. However, there are a range of posts, such as sitting on committees or policy scrutiny panels available to all backbenchers. Each councillor is remunerated according to their seniority, with the Leader of the council receiving the greatest level of remuneration. The roles available to councillors are varied. Most new councillors enter as backbenchers, although this depends on the political culture and point in time. One member I shadowed had been promoted to cabinet within months of joining the council, due to her pre-council experience, relations with the new Leader and political alignment with the direction the Leader wished to take the council in. The cabinet and Leader form the executive responsible for policy and leadership. Each cabinet member holds a portfolio of responsibilities, the largest of which tend to relate to children's services, adult social care, and public health, though the configurations and priorities vary depending on the type of council. There are other positions of responsibility in between the level of backbencher and executive; formal roles such as participation or chairing of scrutiny committees, or more informal ones, or leading on a particular project. There are also particular political party roles, such as the Chief Whip or acting as a media spokesperson on a particular subject. The type of role a councillor becomes involved with invariably affects the amount of hours they spend on councillor work. The hours a councillor works are also mediated by other factors such as caring responsibilities, which are gendered and which I discuss shortly; levels of experience; and personal understandings of what it means to be a representative. For some, their understanding of the role was inflected with a belief that public service happens around other aspects of your life, and as such it is unreasonable to be expected to be available all the time. Some described taking holidays, for instance, whilst for others such a thought would be anathema.

For experienced backbenchers, knowing who among the council officers to seek out in order to solve a resident's problem meant that case work was far quicker to complete than for less experienced members. This changed with promotion to more senior positions, as one Labour member described: 'I mean councillor jobs are not full time jobs, they're not, and I don't pretend to work full time now. But when I was Deputy Leader of the council I certainly did' (Cllr Red). As an experienced councillor, he was practiced in dealing with resident casework which forms the largest part of a backbench councillor's role. This aspect of the work dictates a kind of steady rhythm to the work, punctuated by more intense and fast paced moments of political work during electioneering or at Full Council. This councillor was able to find some regularity to his working hours which others were not able to. In part, this was because of his experience, though for all councillors, the impact of austerity on job cuts to local council staff meant that case work was taking longer and longer to resolve as officers and support staff moved around, or left the council. But it was also because he did not have other caring responsibilities, and so could stick to his work routine fairly successfully without fearing interruption by others. He had also previously worked for one of the local Labour MPs, in common with other councillors at this city council. It was this work, and the attendant understanding of political life from the MP, which also contributed to his ability to keep relatively set, regular hours. All councillors need to attend evening and weekend meetings. But for many, the working day would be far more ad hoc and geographically scattered than for him. Regularity and flexibility both have their advantages and disadvantages, but having the ability to at least plan some of your day with certainty was some advantage to him.

As well as cabinet, councillors can sit on, or chair, a political scrutiny committee. Scrutiny is an important democratic function in any council, but the ways in which it takes shape varies, and is significantly affected by the kind of leadership style and ethos in each council. At the Conservative-led council, for example, the scrutiny process was relatively rapid, with 'decision days' run in public, though not often attended by the opposition. Opposition and feedback was considered, but the (Conservative) cabinet member held the final say as to whether feedback was listened to and incorporated. Officers and the cabinet member worked as a team to chair the meeting and present the policy, with the opposition and public invited to comment on it. For one Labour-led city council, the scrutiny committee stage involved multiple meetings, and the committee had greater power to slow down or halt aspects of a policy development. The committees here were much larger, and the organisation was the reverse of the Conservative county

council; officers and cabinet members were allotted time to be questioned by the scrutiny panel, which was made up of opposition and Labour councillors, and chaired by a specific 'scrutiny' councillor. Whilst this chair may be a member of the Labour party, and so may ostensibly have less interest in deeply scrutinising their party's policy than the opposition, such were the factions in the Labour party at this particular council that this rarely occurred and opposition and scrutiny could be forceful even among fellow Labour councillors. It meant that scrutiny chair and committee member positions were coveted both by the leadership and their faction, and by opposing factions within the party. The council's former Labour leader spoke about the balance needed between efficiency and accountability:

One of the things I managed to do was to sort of truncate the time spell between a report coming in and finally getting through [committee stage and full council] whilst still keeping the time in for proper scrutiny. And that was as a result of conversations again which I had with business [...] But we are accountable [...] there has to be a process by which we are seen to be accountable (Cllr Moon).

As this Cllr Moon indicates, her frustration with long committee stages and procedures stems partly from a desire for greater efficiency, in this case in order to attract private sector investment into the city; a response to complaints from businesses to the council that issues like licensing approvals and planning applications were too slow in forthcoming. In all three councils, it was the political leadership who valued scrutiny efficiency more than backbench councillors, which is a difference, perhaps, to be expected. Being seen to be accountable, however, was a concern for almost every councillor, particularly in relation to the purpose and function of public facing meetings like committees and full council. This is not the same as actually being accountable or assuring accountability procedures (even if a measure of accountability was accurate, feasible and desirable). Every councillor I spoke with agreed on the need to demonstrate, or perform, their representational relationship in public arenas via due process and political performance. This was regardless of how they were positioned in relation to scrutiny committees (if they sat on them or not), their allegiance to leadership aims for efficiency above process, or their personal opinions on the efficacy of democratic fora. In fact, the stated desire to be seen as accountable would often come into direct conflict with their simultaneous condemnation of full council, in particular, as being largely theatre and spectacle.

### **1.3 The representational relationship and remuneration**

One of the difficulties councillors identified with the representational relationship was that they considered the public to not fully understand what it is they actually do. As the representational relationship is so foundational to their role, councillors are quite reflexive about what being a councillor means; they know their role's meaning is contingent upon, and established in relation to, their residents' knowledge of their work. Many councillors spoke of their frustration that the breadth of their representative role is often poorly understood by the public, if at all. This made it more difficult for them to straightforwardly label or understand their own role. Lack of public awareness also contributed to the view, voiced by some councillors, that one should not go into the role expecting decent or fair remuneration, benefits or rewards, particularly in times of austerity:

I think in general terms the public get a very good deal out of the council, I would say that wouldn't I?! We have taken a very conscious decision to freeze all our allowances, they've not gone up for about 5 years now. [...] And it's a difficult one to answer. You can't have it clocking in, sort of working, because it's a role, it's a representative role and each representative's going to do it in the way their electors are prepared to put up with. [...] In the fullness of things, it wouldn't actually cost the budget a lot more but it's perception. We've been asking staff to accept no rises and you have to lead from the front, so I guess that's it. I'm conscious that that perhaps deters some good people from joining the council but not very many because I think the money isn't the factor (Cllr Woodrow).

I think for young people it's difficult, it's not enough, if they make it their sole income. And I don't know how.. but at the same time you don't want to give people so much money that it becomes a career option, I don't think it should be a career option. And if you're a back bencher you're not doing a full time job anyway. If you're a member of the cabinet you probably are doing the equivalent of a full time job (Cllr James).

All councillors receive a basic allowance and some receive an additional 'special responsibility' allowance where they take on further work, such as sitting on the cabinet or heading a scrutiny board. The base allowance for councillors in the two city councils and one county council I researched ranged from £11,530 to £13,554. However, the variation among councillors was significant depending on their level of responsibility and

so within one council the level of remuneration could vary from just over £1200 per year to over £40,000 per year. There was often a significant jump in allowance for the Leader of the council compared to other senior cabinet colleagues. Most of the councillors I met worked long hours, always made themselves available for contact by their ward residents, and often juggled the role with other work or caring responsibilities. Though they could usually claim for childcare, travel, subsistence and communication expenses, the self-reported take-up of these entitlements was uneven.

#### **1.4 Institutional symbols of representation**

The archi-textures 'sensate legitimate [local government] rites, rituals and performances' (Puwar, 2010, p. 298), and the political performances which take place within its walls simultaneously legitimate the ways in which the particular architecture and its adornments represent place and nation. Working together, then, political performances and political archi-textures constitute one another and give meaning to one another. What is interesting about the archi-texture of the Council Hall is the kinds of frameworks of intelligibility written into the walls; what is made visible and what is absent. Those choices tell us about how power operates in each space in relation to *which* meanings of place, 'localness' and nationhood get circulated. As Stuart Hall notes, 'every image that we see is being read in part against what isn't there' (Hall, 1997, p. 15). Council Hall spaces owe much to the kinds of pomp, ceremony, ritual and national imagery and commemoration that Parliament upholds. These are localised versions, though there are many things in common across sites, notably the use of military imagery.

Any Council Hall building is divided up into publicly accessible spaces and those which are only accessible to members or council employees, which I categorised as front and backstage areas. The boundaries of these areas were usually delimited by automatic, locked doors which are opened with a 'security pass'. When I was shadowing members at each council, I was allowed into the backstage areas and was given a pass to enable me to move around the building more easily. The passes almost always had a time limit and were either only valid for a day or week at a time, and on some days I wasn't issued with one and depended on members or support staff giving me access. Sometimes the passes were spatially 'limited', meaning that I could only access specific parts of the backstage areas. Whether I was issued with one also depended on who I was visiting or shadowing; the decision to give me a pass was either taken by members or member support staff.

All three Council Halls I researched could be characterised as masculinised and white spaces, though in different ways. Across all three sites, the Council chambers were the most formal spaces, where Full Council took place. In each one, the paintings of former Lord Mayors adorn the walls, representations which are typically white men with the inclusion of some women in more recent years. These images remind councillors of the history of the dominance of white men in politics. Often the only images of women in the public-facing spaces in Council Halls are the Queen or women of local legends; women relegated to regal or mythic presence in contrast to the images of men who have done the political labour. The symbols of remembrance and the artwork which adorns these spaces – the statues, portraits, paintings, war memorials and plaques – depict particular aspects of the histories of the areas. Whilst these differed in their aesthetic and object of representation, each site was characterised by masculine representations, often with imperial connotations, such as an association with military.

In the Southern county council, paintings depicting local pastoral and naval scenes featured along the walls of the members' corridor and in the members' common room and offices. The naval scenes – typically of old warships at sea – reflected the county's historic relationship to the armed forces and as a seat of English naval power. In contrast, the bucolic depictions of rural life offer a contrasting frame of reference to the looker; one of a benign 'Englishness', connected to the local land and prosperous because of this connection. So why is a focus on such 'archi-textures' (Puwar, 2010) of local government spaces important? Council Halls are important sites of representation in more than the political sense of the word; they are also spaces whose 'walls, floors, doors, grilles, sculptures, murals and glass' (Puwar, 2010, p. 298) offer particular depictions of locality and nationhood.

One of my interviewees was the Labour Lord Mayor for the Midlands post-industrial council. The Lord Mayor acts as the chairperson of the council, with the casting vote during debates, and is the (supposedly) non-political, ceremonial head of the city. Councillors rotate in this role for a year each, and the role removes them from party politics to promote work with other organisations and encourage investment in the area. He invited me to attend a citizenship ceremony after the interview as the Lord Mayor takes part in this function as a part of the symbolic role. I walked behind him through a throng of smartly dressed people, and into the Council chamber. I took a seat at the back of the room whilst he went to sit on one the highest, ornately carved wooden chairs at the front. He wore the formal attire of the office, including a gold and black coat, with white ruffs and a heavy gold chain. Two council officers sit either side, in similarly ornate

chairs, facing the small congregation of soon-to-be British citizens. I note the ethnicity divide between the white officials and the brown and Black new citizens, and the representations of British sovereignty from the large union jack flying, a portrait of the Queen looking down, and the words which are spoken. The words include an oath of allegiance to the Queen, and the new citizens are required to pledge to uphold the values and laws of the United Kingdom. Democracy and freedom of speech are emphasised as part of these values.

Space, as Lefebvre (1991) illustrates, is not simply something abstract to be 'filled' with human activity, but can be understood as "lived', as an interwoven series of local encounters, involving sensuous connections and imagination" (Lefebvre 1991 cited in Puwar, 2010). In local government Council Halls, these 'sensuous connections' involve those between, and among, representatives, civil service council employees, external organisations, outsourced and in-house support staff, journalists, members of the public (where public is understood as the electorate, in this instance), and more. They are a meeting place of identities, interests, politics, citizenship statuses, and bureaucracies. In terms of imagination, both national and local identities are (re)produced within the architecture and use of the buildings: they are where British citizenship ceremonies are held, and where particular legacies and moments of civic pride are remembered. In this sense, Council Halls are deeply complicit in the 'textual production of the nation' (Puwar, 2011, p. 326).

## **2. 'Public-facing work': managing casework, managing emotions and constant availability**

### ***2.1 Managing casework: a form of gendered work***

The management of on-going ward-level issues requires a different spatial and temporal orientation to the 'office work' associated with being in the Council Hall, or the political campaigning and party political work. Casework forms a large part of a councillor's representative role and can involve lengthy interaction with ward residents. The actual problem-solving element involved is often conducted out of the public gaze at the Council Hall. Councillors manage casework via a number of means. They can be contacted by residents at ward surgeries (which are organised in a similar way to an MP's constituency surgery), over email, phone or social media (if both resident and councillor use it). The topic of casework varies significantly: from waste collection, to difficulties with the benefit system; parking to problems with local schools; planning issues to resolving neighbourly

disputes. Following the initial approach, a councillor gathers information, acting as a conduit between the council and other relevant parties to help resolve their resident's concern. The variety of issues requires a broad generalist knowledge of local issues, as well as good knowledge of council structures and which officers to seek help from. The ability to resolve casework problems has been affected by austerity. Cuts to Local Authority staff meant councillors found it more difficult to find the right person to turn to for help. This can cause delays in resolving residents' issues. Much of this aspect of the role depends on a good knowledge of the council systems and networks, and maintaining good relations with council officers. The management of issues can go on for months, depending on the issue, and correspondence is usually conducted over email or the phone. Delays can breed frustration and other emotional responses from both residents and councillors. Managing emotions and expectations, then, can become an integral part of managing casework.

In the Labour-led Midlands city council, a Labour councillor spoke to me of the kinds of everyday work he undertook on behalf of the residents in his ward. This is an example of the more 'everyday' casework which all representatives deal with, and which is therefore particular and ad hoc in nature whilst simultaneously constituting a regular stream of problem-solving work for councillors. In this exchange, he draws links between vulnerability, privilege and the representational relationship:

Cllr Stevens: Often the only reason they've come to yer is they've let things drift so far down the line it's almost too far to go back, and you're almost fighting fires for them. I mean really, how many times have you approached your MP or councillor for help or support with a problem?

EA: I don't think I ever have.

Cllr Stevens: Exactly. Neither have I. See the people that tend to come to you tend to be people who struggle. Quite often with everyday life in terms of bills, housing, talking to authority and getting things done. Problems with the kids at school and the head teacher's sent them, sent the kid away or sent a letter home with them, what's all this about the kid's been expelled. You know, they don't know how to interact with people and sometimes it can basically get bigger and bigger and bigger and that's when they come to you.

Cllr Stevens notes the link between vulnerability and a perceived inability or reluctance to deal with bureaucratic systems or state authority figures. Councillors, by dint of their non-employee position and physical proximity to, or historical connections with, the residents, can offer a much needed 'in-between' function, capable of acting as mediator, advisor, translator of bureaucracy as well as a more straightforward representative of residents' interests.

The emotion work element to managing a caseload is done in a relational context (managing residents' emotions) and in a personal capacity (managing councillors' own emotions). Casework is therefore more than just problem-solving; it can involve complex emotion work, done on both the self and others. Emotion work is gendered work (Hochschild, 1983) and its value was differently recognised among the councillors I spent time with. For some, the emotional element of casework was explicitly recognised and valued. Other councillors, however, made no mention of this when asked about the qualities that made a 'good' councillor, or when speaking about their caseloads. An emphasis on the emotional side of casework tended to be articulated less explicitly by cabinet or senior councillors, mainly because the scope of their role took them further away from casework as their primary occupation. Typically, the more senior the councillor, the more time they spend in the Council Hall rather than their ward, and casework becomes one task out of many, rather than the primary or sole representative responsibility. What makes a 'good' ward representative, then, are not the same qualities that make a 'good' cabinet member, scrutiny committee chair or other senior post. Because of the uneven gendered hierarchies in local government, women tend to dominate in backbench roles and there are fewer women than men in leadership roles (Bazeley *et al.*, 2017). As a result, the emotion work that backbenchers (where women dominate) do, is less likely to be seen or valued by more senior colleagues.

## ***2.2. Time: Everyday rhythms and constant availability***

As they often live in their wards, Councillors are highly visible in the community. Councillor Rose, who lived in her ward, spoke to me of being interrupted by residents whilst shopping or taking her daughter to nursery, in order to deal with an issue. Interruptions like these form part of the uneven and unbounded temporality of councillor work. This implies a jarring between work worlds and everyday life worlds, with the lack of physical distance between councillors and ward residents meaning that councillor work and other aspects of their life collapse in on each other. It also illustrates how spaces cannot easily be separated into home or work; the ward is often both to a

councillor. The temporality of councillor work is felt as an expectation to be 'always on' and 'always available':

I think one of my big problems with it [working as a councillor], as a councillor, you're expected to do mornings and afternoons and evenings and weekends (Cllr Rose).

Not only does this mean councillors are always expected to be 'on' but it leaves them vulnerable to potential forms of violence. This vulnerability was particularly heightened with my participants around the time of the murder on the street of MP Jo Cox. Quite understandably, issues of safety, vulnerability and councillors' relationship with their communities came to the fore at this time. Cllr Rose elaborated on the difficulties associated with being expected to be always available:

Cabinet work mainly is office based, so I would come in and do three full days in the office. And then other work - so case work for individuals - would generally be work from home and be ward based, rather than be in there. But there's never a day that I would go through where I don't look at emails. Over the weekend as well. I think the change with social media, and how we react to social media, and how people contact us through social media, has led to Councillors being available, or the assumption that Councillors are available, for 24/7. Which is difficult to balance that with a life outside being a Councillor (Cllr Rose).

Although Cllr Rose had put together a work regime that kept her cabinet work in the office, she also described how email and social media has blurred that separation. It is these electronic and social communications which she identifies as making it 'difficult to balance that [councillor work] with a life outside being a councillor'.

### **3. 'Political work': pursuing agendas and performing representation**

#### ***3.1. Knocking doors: doing the bodily work of canvassing***

There is also the political side to councillors' roles, where their expectations (if they are a party member and not an Independent) are to canvass within the boundaries of their

party's manifesto. Electioneering has its own temporality; it is bounded by the election date with a more frenetic and immediate pace of work. For incumbent councillors, the kinds of regular work they can do is limited by electoral purdah. Canvassing is often physically demanding and mentally draining; it involves being on their feet and going from house to house in their area asking for votes and explaining policy positions. Excepting Independent candidates, this involves awareness of both national-level party positions as well as local-level party positions on local issues. Some councillors also now run social media campaigns along with traditional door-knocking and the production of leaflets and newsletters for residents. Councils often elect in thirds, which means there is almost always an election happening in any given year.

### ***3.2. Performing representation in the Council Hall***

The most theatrical of spaces for local politicians is at Full Council meetings, where policies are finally debated in public. These sessions are open to the press and public, who may ask questions though usually in a rigid format, and are often filmed and streamed on the Council websites. Though the vast amount of work has already been completed on policies by this point, to the extent that many politicians simply referred to Full Council as a fairly inert form of 'rubber stamping' their approval, most still recognise the importance of *being seen* to debate policies in public. As such, some level of performance was always required by councillors in attendance. Additionally, the opportunity for a member to ask a question or make a comment, where this was allowed, provided them with a chance to impress their more senior colleagues. All the party Leaders I spoke with explained that being 'good' at speaking, performing, asking pertinent, incisive but concise questions in committees and Full Council, mattered when they were considering Cabinet appointments. In other publicly accessible legislative spaces, such as the committee and scrutiny spaces, I observed gendered practices of interruption; making audible comments criticising the speaker during their address, or by creating a more antagonistic climate.

Emotion was used as a political resource by councillors differently according to the setting and space. In the chamber, being 'passionate' was acceptable. I observed more passionate and emotive addresses in both the Labour-led councils than in the Conservative-led council. In particular, anger and frustration were expressed most noticeably by men in these chambers. Full Council meetings operated under formalised and formulaic procedures, held according to a rigid schedule. Although they could often over-run (as I found out when sitting in one running so late I almost missed the last bus

back to my accommodation), the opportunities for interruptions or disruptions were less marked than at earlier committee or scrutiny stages of the decision-making process. This is not to say disruptions did not occur; at the Western council, a protester marched outside the front of the Council Hall prior to Full Council. He shouted through a megaphone, loudly criticising the Labour administration for capitulating to the government's austerity programme. Once Full Council started, he moved around the building until he was right outside the Full Council chamber. For the first twenty minutes of the meeting, he kept up a megaphone protest. On another occasion (just prior to my fieldwork taking place so recounted to me in an interview with the Lord Mayor), a feminist protest group had established a protest inside Full Council, unfurling banners in protest of the Council's record on domestic violence services in the area. His description of this protest was dismissive, citing their tactics as 'silly' and therefore illegitimate and ineffectual.

Both the formalised layout of Full Council chambers and the restricted schedule of Full Council limit the opportunities for participation by residents. Where residents are invited to speak, this is usually limited to a very short time; three minutes in the Western council, rarely in the Midlands council and not at all in the Southern council. In each of the three council chambers, the public and press viewing gallery was behind, to the side, or above the councillors; the emphasis of this design being that the public are primarily there to observe the performance of democratic debate, rather than meaningfully contribute to it.

### ***3.3. Pursuing political agendas***

There were Labour councillors who described their political identities, and their work, as explicitly feminist. This primarily manifested in two ways; in terms of promoting feminist-informed or gender aware policies, and/or in terms of trying to help establish more egalitarian political structures and cultures. Both of these forms of work involve intra-party and cross-party work. This work is complicated, and entangled with issues of political allegiances and loyalties, friendships, understandings of feminism and what feminist representation might mean. One self-identifying feminist councillor – Cllr Moon – described her interest and activism supporting domestic violence initiatives. She also described the importance of 'the sisters I have [in the council], we support one another broadly.' She then, however, went on to say that 'there are women I wouldn't spit on if they were on fire, frankly' and that 'some sisters are worse than men [...] there are sort of two groups of women, there are my group and there are their group. Which is sad but

there you are.’ Such factions among self-identifying feminist politicians were not uncommon, and reflected different personalities, personal relationships, and political priorities. Another councillor described the factional environment, locating the cause with a previous ‘woman leader [who] has an unfortunate personal manner, I think it’s fair to say. And actually isn’t very good at taking people with her. She’s kind of, quite aggressive, you know, she doesn’t really listen to anybody and, and because of that things are quite difficult’ (Cllr Jones). I refer only to the Labour party in this section of the chapter because these kinds of factions, differences, collegialities and hostilities were more openly expressed by Labour councillors. In other political parties, these issues were not as vocally or visibly given space to air. I will reflect on this more in a subsequent chapter, in relation to the (in)visibility of conflict and respectability, and in what ways these have gendered and gendering effects.

There were also opportunities for councillors to pursue anti-austerity politics, though this was primarily a concern for Labour councillors I spoke with. For Labour-led councils, it also put the cabinet and leadership in a difficult position in relation to a new wave of councillors elected whilst I was on fieldwork in two of the councils. These councillors identified as more strongly left wing and anti-austerity than some of the more experienced and senior councillors and wished to see the leadership – in both Labour-led councils I was in – take a more oppositional and resistive approach to government’s austerity policies. There was also the concern among new Labour councillors that Labour councils implementing Conservative austerity policies could hurt the party at the ballot box. Partly, this relates to the lack of awareness by voters as to what councils can and cannot legally do; they are legally required to implement a balanced budget, for instance. As one of the new councillors, who had been rapidly promoted to the cabinet in the Western Council (and therefore straddled both positions) described it:

If we don’t deliver the balanced budget, Westminster will sweep in and deliver their own budget. All the work that we’re doing to try and mitigate the impact on the most disadvantaged and most vulnerable people. You think they’d give a toss? They’d cut left, right and centre and not think about, oh it’s going to impact on the older people, people with mental health, they are not going to give a toss [claps for emphasis]. They are just gonna cut, cut, cut til we’re bare to the bone. So I’m not apologising, [the Leader is] not apologising, we as a cabinet are not apologising for the approach we’re taking. But we have been is extremely transparent (Cllr Beatty).

Not being able to deliver a balanced budget can have serious effects, not just on the locality but on the national Labour party. The shadow cast by Liverpool city council's decision to pass an illegal budget - where spending exceeded income - in 1985, demanding the government make up the deficit, is a long one. The significant effects on both the locality and the national Labour party as a result of Liverpool's decision are not those that many Labour-led councils would wish to repeat in a great hurry. For Labour cabinet members, this means that treading a line between resisting some of the government's more insidious austerity measures and staying with their colleagues and voters, whilst simultaneously wishing to avoid coming close to Liverpool's fate, is a difficult negotiation.

For Labour councillors, representing the interests of those they perceive as most vulnerable in their locality was a highly important motivation. The councillor mentioned above identified black and minority ethnic groups in the city as being particularly important to her representational interests. In her city, the representation of black people had been historically low and must be seen within the particular local context; from involvement in the slave trade, the city's historic wealth was predicated on exploitation. Alongside its wealth, the city has areas of severe deprivation, the boundaries of which are drawn along lines of 'race' as well as disparities of wealth. In these areas, with large Irish and Afro-Caribbean and Black British populations, there have been well documented protests against police brutality, poverty, capitalism, racist discrimination in workplaces and racist policing in relation to stop and search powers. Racism, and attendant disparities in wealth, services and equalities, as well as resistance to these, were closer to the surface than in the two other areas I spent time researching. Racism and racial inequalities were also present in those areas, but in this city, the contours of racism could be more easily traced in the geography and architecture of the city; reflecting a history of exploitation, inequality and segregation which the Labour council was trying to grapple with. With twenty per cent of the cabinet from the city's black or minority ethnic communities, the leadership's attention was focussed on redressing historical racial inequalities and approaching austerity from an intersectional perspective.

### ***3.4. Performing representation through emotive narratives***

Engaging in anti-austerity politics as a local political representative is not just about the cabinet trying to 'balance the budget' in as fair a way as possible, however. For councillors, this forms some of their everyday work. One councillor I met, also from the western city, hailed from the most economically deprived ward in the city. A former fire-

fighter and Trade Union representative, he described both his motivations for becoming a councillor, how he draws on his previous experience, and his anti-austerity and anti-poverty work in his ward in this edited interview extract:

We used to have a massive problem with drugs, the health of the people was terrible, so I worked a lot with the doctors [...] we had a lot of funding for that, but now with the cuts, the police can't enforce it so much with the drugs.

I was a full time union official so *negotiating* is a big thing you need. I did, last week, somebody with their council tax arrears and their rent arrears, so they were, I'll say this politely, they had some educational problems, some learning problems. So they didn't understand what was going on, so I acted for them. And I managed to get a *compromise*, sort of to both sides, obviously to the council cos they want their money which they're entitled to, but I think could have helped this person a little bit better, so I was the *in-between*. [...] Seeing the hardships that go on [as a firefighter], a lot of the time we're at people's houses because if they ain't got the money for electric, we had somebody put wood in their oven and set fire to that to keep warm. 'Course it burnt the house down. But that's the sort of thing I've been used to as a firefighter, is people's hardship. You don't get called for nice things (Cllr Nixon, my emphasis).

This extract also shows how much performance is a part of the everyday work of councillors, and specifically the performance of a particular kind of personal narrative. The extract above begins by outlining the context of austerity and cuts to local services, within which he carries out the work of supporting those addicted to drugs in his ward. It ends with a reflection of the kinds of things he had seen in the ward as a fireman. An important aspect to this quote is the way in which a whole litany of hardships are reeled off. Though the quote is edited, the first section regarding health issues of residents was in response to a question about his role, with the latter section in response to a question about how he experienced the working environment of the council. Cllr Nixon started by describing his role as Chief Whip and then relayed the above information about the kinds of casework he gets and how he handles it. I have included both parts of his responses here to indicate what kind of an experience the interview was; in response to a question about the working environment of the council, he moves from a discussion of negotiation skills needed as Chief Whip to how he gained these skills in his time as a Trade Union representative in the Fire Service. He elaborates on this with the discussion, quoted here,

of the kinds of experiences he had as a firefighter. In the wider interview, he listed many more problems ranging from financial deprivation to the low levels of educational attainment in the ward. What I am interested in here is how they were presented to me and what kind of effect this rhetorical move might have. He narrated these experiences with ease and confidence, and such was the list of the experiences that it was a little overwhelming to listen to. The sheer force of his narrative was more powerful by the way in which he told his story in a calm, matter of fact way. In doing so, I had a very emotional response to him as a politician; the accounts were both moving and somewhat overwhelming. It made it difficult to contest the truth of these claims, or to deny the importance of his claim that to be a good representative, you needed to have extensive experience of the place and be a local. Being able to test the truth of politicians' claims to legitimacy is important, but it is made difficult when faced with such a relentless narrative of extreme hardships.

Cllr Nixon draws out his history of trade unionism; a history which he says has helped him negotiate ward residents' interests and resolve their problems. In acting for them, he was able to put his experience of negotiation to gain a compromised solution. Negotiation and compromise are useful words to think about the position of councillors in relation to their representational relationship; a relationship which forms the heart of their work. For Labour councillors in particular, being 'in-between' residents and the council could be experienced in an ambivalent way, especially if the councillor had previously held an activist identity. For some Labour councillors, the transition into formal politics was an uncomfortable one which required them to negotiate between a former identity established in opposition to formal political structures, with a present identity which occupied a position within them. I explore this ambivalence in relation to Labour councillors in more detail in a later chapter. Feeling 'in-between' is not just something cabinet members grapple with. It is the reality for many councillors undertaking their everyday work, and is why this councillor highlights the utility of his Trade Union negotiation experience for the role.

But is not just being the go-between among people – usually the council and residents, as he describes – but as being always in-between competing demands, complex needs among residents and increasingly scarce resources. Living and working within compromise, and having to face the sometimes devastating or frustrating effects this can have for residents, forms a complex part of the councillor role and representational relationship. But it has been made increasingly harder under swingeing government cuts for councillors to maintain a sense of 'in-between' balance; one that

may always be compromised but which might try to maintain a middling sort of position between their representational interests and responsibilities, party allegiances, and fair distribution of council resources. He was not the only councillor to point to the absolute necessity, as they saw it, of having representatives from a local community in order to support that community's most vulnerable members.

## **Section Two: What is unique about councillor work?**

### ***1. 'Hiring and firing' in the 'oddest job in the world'***

Politics is the oddest job in the world [...] I will get sacked always in a room full of people, mostly wildly cheering. So when I lost my seat in [ward name], I lost my seat but somebody had won, so everybody was cheering at my demise. And obviously, as a councillor, you lose your seat you get no pay in lieu, nothing, a week later somebody's on the phone saying 'can we have your iPad back and your pass'. I mean you are literally thrown out on your ear (Cllr Moon).

There are a variety of ways in which councillors I interacted with described their work. As this quote shows, some councillors refer to their representational work as a 'job', albeit the 'oddest job in the world'. As this councillor describes, the oddness is a direct result of the relationship between the combination of 'job'-like elements and markers (such as the issuing of a pass and institutional technology which you have to hand back when you leave), and the uniqueness of the nature of a representational contract and relationship with the electorate. Although there are elements of being a councillor that share much with other forms of work, there are important differences which point to a need for an expanded definition of work which can account for, and value, such uniqueness. As she notes, losing one's political 'job' is usually done in public, under the scrutiny of press, public and members of opposing political parties. Unlike paid employment, which she establishes a comparison to, there is no possibility of redundancy pay, or pay in lieu. Being 'thrown out on your ear' indicates the vulnerability councillors' face which can be a particular barrier to young people or those with caring responsibilities entering local politics. It becomes difficult to plan life around the uncertainty of elected work, especially when this uncertainty is compounded by the relatively low levels of remuneration, large workload and an expectation to be always available to ward residents. I discuss some of the other emotional and bodily vulnerabilities of councillor work later in this chapter. But

the 'odd' hiring and firing practices are not the only way in which representational work is unique. Once in the role, there is usually no clear 'script' or job description a new councillor can follow. I turn to the issues of mentoring and training now, as another distinct aspect of councillor work.

## ***2. Learning the role, training and mentoring: the work councillors have to do on themselves***

Unlike their civil service counterparts, councillors do not receive employee benefits like a pension, training or mentoring. Though some councils and political parties do offer training to new councillors, the uptake of this among my interviewees was inconsistent, as were the views as to the relevance of such training. As one recently elected Labour councillor in the Western city described, their training was viewed as inadequate by some, partly because it was difficult for councillors to make sense of their role initially:

The city council, democratic services, they put on some training. Everyone moans about it - it doesn't cover everything. The reality is, I think, about learning, you don't ask the right questions until you're there. Needing to know what question to ask is almost impossible. You really need a very good mentoring (Cllr Blue).

This statement indicates some of the complexity of a representative role; every councillor I spoke with described this sense of 'feeling one's way', and that they could only really understand their role through on-the-job experience. Whilst this may be true of other forms of work, one might at least expect a formal job description in paid employment or informal written and verbal guidance for other kinds of activities which can be described as work. I then asked the same councillor about whether the Labour party offered any kind of mentoring scheme for new councillors at his council. He responded:

Not really, no. We have people who offer and will help, but I think probably you need someone to sit with you once a week for the first six months or a year, and force themselves upon you. Part of the problem is we're in power so our top people are cabinet members. So most experienced people are now absolutely overwhelmed with running the place. So the people who can then help you, half of us are new, so you're left with only a few people who can help you (Cllr Blue).

Cllr Blue describes how part of the problem of being in power is that the most experienced members tend to sit on the cabinet and so have significant workloads. Lacking any formalised and sustained training or mentoring structures within political parties or the council more broadly, he is helped to get to grips with the job on an ad hoc basis, usually via the Labour members' assistant and researcher provided by the council. Mentoring was described by this councillor as more useful than training and this reflects the discursive and ad hoc nature of councillor work; it involves personal interactions with others in order to solve problems, and these problems are often idiosyncratic in nature.

In this council, the Labour cabinet members tended not to be aware of the difficulties the newly elected councillors were having in 'feeling their way' and learning the job. This is partly down to the cabinet being physically located in another part of the Council hall building, meaning that backbench and cabinet members interacted with one another infrequently. The physical distance reflected a similar separation of attitudes towards learning about the job between some new backbench councillors and both new and more experienced cabinet members. One newly elected cabinet member, for example, mentioned in a Group meeting that for her, 'feeling one's way' and learning about the job was less about formal training and more about having the necessary 'soft' skills of energy, dynamism and entrepreneurial spirit to 'get up and go'. This individualised, entrepreneurial discourse which lays responsibility for doing the job well at individual councillors' feet rather than insufficient support mechanisms reflects wider neoliberal discourses about the relation of self to work.

This more neoliberal discourse and relation to work can be exclusionary (not everyone can, or wants to, work in this way), and individualise a structural problem of adequate induction for councillors. But they can also reflect an entrepreneurial spirit borne from an activist identity, as for the cabinet member just mentioned. As a previous activist, being quick to respond, dynamic and quick to learn enabled her to try and 'make a difference' to people where resources were scarce. Where these more 'neoliberal' individualising discourses emerged out of necessity, as in this instance, we might understand them as a product of unequal structural arrangements (scarcity of resources) as well as productive of forms of positive political action.

Another councillor at the same Local Authority described the support she and her fellow new councillors had received:

In here, you have to go hunt it [support] out. We have a political assistant and a couple of office people, again they are very busy. [They are] managing personal, pastoral issues with councillors, [but] we've got [over thirty] councillors, [of] which half are new. That's an awful lot of people in what is basically a highly dysfunctional organisation. Suddenly you find people don't answer their emails, just don't. Only in the local authority do you find people who think it's perfectly ok to simply not to reply, particularly from councillors (Cllr Lamb).

All councillors I spoke to identified that power should lie with the politicians in a council; the officers and other council employees should, ultimately, support elected representatives. However, some councillors felt that officers had more power than they did. Besides the representational relationship councillors have with their ward residents, officer relationships are some of the most important for councillors in order to enable their work. However, as this comment indicates, within the context of a council facing pressures to cut staff and services, in practice this is not a straightforward relationship. Not only do these pressures impact on the councillors' ability to do their job, which is already difficult and complicated when new, but it breeds a kind of irritability between councillors, officers and support staff. When resources are stretched, it can mean backbenchers come last among officers' priorities, especially when an influx of new councillors increases the demands on officers' time and energy.

### **3. The gendered work of politics**

#### **3.1. Remuneration**

Councillors are financially remunerated but they do not receive a salary. Their remuneration is not large and so often has to be combined with other sources of income. This makes it difficult work to undertake for those who are not retired. The more responsibilities councillors have, the larger their remuneration. A newly elected backbencher, for example, can receive around a tenth of what the political Leader of the council will. There is a link then between payment received and amount of responsibility. An increase in status and seniority is correlated with an increase in financial remuneration. This indicates that remuneration is one way of valuing the increased responsibilities of senior councillors. Councillors at a parish level will rarely receive much in the way of remuneration. At a district level (the next one up), they can expect a small level of income for their work. At the level further up, either a city or county council for example, this rises further still. The appropriate level of backbencher remuneration was hotly contested among councillors, with some considering the low level of remuneration a serious barrier to enabling more women and young people from becoming councillors, whilst others argued against any rises to pay under austerity. From the councillors I spent time with and observed closely, they often worked far longer hours than they were paid for.

#### **3.2. Being 'lucky' and having to 'juggle'**

Councillor work has an association with a predominance of white, elderly or middle aged, men (Charles and Jones, 2013; Charles, 2014; Fawcett Society, 2014; Bazeley *et al.*, 2017). Attracting young people into the work was seen as most desirable by councillors, over and above the desire to increase the representation of women or those from minority ethnic backgrounds. Councillors were equally aware of the barriers to achieving this. This is indicative of how local representation straddles different rationalities of work and politics, and how this complicates inequalities of the work. The ethos of local representative work is that councillors are supposed to do it for reasons other than earning a living. But low level of remuneration and job insecurity are also barriers to equality among representatives. Other issues like a concern for employability skills beyond politics were also raised. More women than men spoke of the desire to wait to stand as a councillor until their children had grown up, again owing to the lack of remuneration, security but also citing the sometimes scant availability of parental support

leave and understanding of familial or caring responsibilities. For those who did become councillors whilst their children were young and/or they were employed outside politics, a number of factors had to align in order to make representative work viable for them. The most important of these was the ability to draw on the support of both family networks and supportive employers. One Labour woman described how it was only possible for her to stand as a councillor because:

I had an amazing boss who was a closet socialist. Because of where I [worked], which was over the road, if there were meetings I used to take it in flexitime right? So I didn't eat into my annual leave, plus he ensured I got my 25 days as well. He was good as gold but not everybody has that luxury, he was very good. But if there was anything going on at work, I would go back and finish it off and maybe stay late. So I did juggle it, but as I say, just occasionally it got just a bit too much (Cllr Green).

This account highlights three crucial factors for those in paid employment wishing to engage in political work; an employer who values representative work (employers can allow time off for public duties, but do not have to pay employees for this), the physical closeness of her office to the council hall, and the availability of flexible working patterns as an employee. Many councillors I spoke with were either retired, worked for themselves or at home, or had benefitted from redundancy arrangements which allowed them to change their primary occupation to a councillor. Redundancy packages and early retirement enabled some women to take up councillor work full time. One Labour councillor recognised her relative 'luck' in being able to do so, compared to younger women who may still need to seek paid employment:

I was incredibly lucky. I was offered a redundancy package where you were allowed to go and take your pension at the same time, and so I went [left employer]. I think I was on about twenty eight grand then, so I went and had a councillor allowance which was about ten grand. But the pension I got, which I was able to access immediately, was six grand. So that took me up to sixteen and by then my kids were through university and that, still cost me a fortune though. Anyway, and grandkids too, but I had to look at the family purse and responsibilities to my husband and to our partnership. But he said 'go for it' and which is why I would get really cross sometimes when people say 'you're all in it for what you can get' and you think 'hang on a minute I've

just taken a cut in pay of about twelve grand a year to do this job that you're telling me off about!' (Cllr Smith).

Being able to draw on two forms of income (the pension and councillor backbencher allowance) coincided with having reduced outgoings associated with having adult children, another enabling factor which means more women of around retirement age feel more comfortable and confident with taking on some financial risk associated with being a councillor. Even then, as her last comment attests to, this is still considered a financial sacrifice, and one that is little understood by the electorate. Although financial security or risks were influencing factors for many councillors, there were markedly gendered ways in which they discussed these considerations with me. As with the above councillor, many women I spoke with were open about how they navigated the various considerations and responsibilities they felt.

#### **4. Councillor work and (gendered) caring responsibilities**

One of the key factors affected councillors across the three sites I was situated in was caring responsibilities. Both men and women spoke to me of the challenges of managing councillor work with the rest of their lives, but it was women who more frequently spoke about specific challenges associated with caring for elderly relatives or children. Given the age profile of most of my interviewees, which reflected the average age profile of councillors more generally as over 60 (Kettlewell and Phillips, 2013), caring for elderly relatives or friends was a common concern. For those with young families, political group meetings that started between 6pm and 7pm once a week and could often run late into the evening could be a source of exasperation, conflicting as they did with familial responsibilities. The same went for Full Council debates which always had the potential to run late, and so regardless of the agenda, a full evening always had to be blocked out to make way for them. There are also necessary resident association meetings to attend, political ward-level meetings, school governor meetings (almost every councillor is a governor at at least one local school), board meetings for various local organisations, and during electioneering, door-to-door campaigning. The vast majority of these meetings usually take place in the evenings, and so a councillor could reasonably expect to be out on three or four nights a week, and more during election periods.

As well as considerations of whether or not they could afford to be a councillor, caring responsibilities also had to be taken into account and this was much more often voiced by women than men. Family relationships and partnerships were frequently

brought into the conversation as crucial to their decision to run for election. Of course, these issues affect all people, but there were more single men, men with a traditionally gendered household where they were not responsible for caring or domestic work, or men without caring responsibilities, than there women in these situations. Domestic and caring support, as the councillor below suggests, were vital for women who had caring responsibilities to be able to manage home and councillor work life:

I've said the remuneration for the hours you're expected to work is not high, and it's not like we work 9 til 5, so people would have to make their own individual [arrangements]. You know, you may have to be next week out at a conference, and I go on Monday night and won't be back until Thursday. I'm expected to do that. And I'm happy to do that. But if I had caring responsibilities... well, when I had a mum and I was still doing this sort of thing, my family took on [some of my caring responsibilities, saying] 'I can do this, I can do that'. You tend to work ad hoc but I suppose it's not really very satisfactory (Cllr Mead).

Both men and women spoke about the need for an understanding partner, with one woman Labour councillor stating that her councillor work was only made possible by the fact she had 'a very understanding family, so my husband, my husband has flexible job so he can work round'. Her husband was a professional, a senior academic, and she stated his work hours were somewhat more flexible because of his position which enabled her own political work (she had also stood for Parliament). For others, the double shift was still very much in operation, no matter their seniority. One cabinet Conservative councillor said of her husband:

He says he's a house husband but he's anything but! He does the garden. But he does walk the dogs for me twice a day if I can't do it. No, I do the cooking, the cleaning and the ironing I'm afraid. Still. (Cllr Jane).

For Cllr Rose, the Labour cabinet member I shadowed who had a four year old daughter, family support was also integral to her ability to do her cabinet role. Her mother was also a councillor, so understood the irregular rhythms of councillor work. Her father was retired so could babysit at short notice. Her husband also worked for the council, so was often close by when she was in the council hall, which made it easier to negotiate childcare arrangements. It was not unusual for her to bring her daughter along to council meetings or into her office when childcare fell through or she had to wait for her husband

to finish work. This echoed the experience of councillors who cared for elderly relatives. As many councillors were themselves of retirement age, this was a more common caring experience, along with having grandchildren, than having to care for young children. As Cllr Mead states above, the nature of the 'ad hoc' work and irregular rhythms of councillor work, mean that support networks, whether familial or otherwise, become highly important to councillors.

Personal and familial relationships were important to my participants in many ways. For some, it was where their political aspirations were formed and fostered. Having parents or relatives who had been involved in politics in one way or another was not uncommon, particularly at the Labour held post-industrial city where Cllr Rose worked. The mixture of having councillors with generational divide (and so different life experiences) but a sense of unity through familial bonds was an important one. For Cllr Rose, family was vital in a number of ways. It was how she got into formal politics, building on her exposure to her parents trade union backgrounds:

[toddler daughter is playing in the background] Labour had just lost council and my mum and dad, they were both trade unionists back in the day when they worked at the GEC, and so they re-joined the party and became active, and I said oh yeah well go on then [...] they just said they were joining and I said yeah ok get me a membership form and I'll join, sounds interesting [...].  
(Cllr Rose)

Family was physically present at our interview in the form of her young daughter, and was often present in the way she talked about politics. Of going to local Labour party meetings for the first time, she said:

'It was all dead friendly it's just that language [daughter asks for her Mum] yes darling? It's just that opening sentence, I thought [daughter asks again] oh my word, cos I've never been a, [to daughter] yes darling? I've never been a particular political animal in the sense, so I wasn't used to the speak. I mean that would've been quite common in trade unions as well, everyone's brothers, sisters, comrades, so it's not unusual it just took me aback a little bit [daughter comes up to us to show us her toy]' (Cllr Rose).

This extract shows the kinds of clashes, interruptions and fragmentations associated with the work of caring for a child whilst being a cabinet member. When

shadowing Cllr Rose, I experienced her bursts of focussed energy which resulted from having fractured rhythms and rationalities of care and councillor work, and also the exhaustion which this led to. The short vignette below indicates the kinds of overlap experienced by councillors with caring responsibilities:

'...and I got hammered [talking about first election]! I lost by about 300 votes [daughter speaks, inaudible] you what sorry? [to daughter, daughter babbles] Walk round the office darling.

Daughter: Walking, mummy?

Cllr Rose: I can't go for a walk at the moment darling. This is Mummy's work, this is what Mummy does for a job darling.

Daughter: No.

Cllr Rose: It is! [laughs] I don't get to walk round much today. Other days maybe.

Me: If you want to walk and talk we can walk around together?

Cllr Rose: [to daughter] do you want me to walk round the office with you?

Daughter: Yeah. [babbles]

Cllr Rose: [To me] This is her 'I'm getting tired and don't want to stop phase' cos she's going to fall asleep. [to daughter] We can't go in the corridor darling, we have to stay in the office.

Daughter: No. [babbles]

Cllr Rose: No, we have to stay in the office darling, no don't play with the phone sockets. Do you want your wotsits? (White woman, Labour, cabinet member).

As this extract shows, time is experienced by Cllr Rose as a series of interruptions; work interrupting caring for her daughter, and caring for her daughter interrupting work. Spaces which historically demarcated a separation between public and private also take on new meanings. The Council Hall where we met was a distinctly 'legislative', 'public' and 'employment' space, with no crèche facility available and her office being decidedly un-child friendly, hence her warning to her daughter not to play with the phone sockets. As such, her daughter's presence constitutes a body out of place (Puwar 2004); the child's needs are an interruption to the usual rhythms of the place, and her bodily presence a reminder that this is a place unused, and unsuited, to coping with the

demands of caring labour. A child's presence in a legislative space such as this troubles the notion of separate 'public' versus 'private' spheres, spaces which have never been entirely separate in actuality, but which are still often imagined to be. The vignette ends with a negotiation; she allows her daughter to walk around the office whilst she and I finish the interview, and she offers her some food (Wotsits) to placate her. This is a microcosm of the kinds of negotiation which took place on a daily basis as a primary caregiver also undertaking councillor work.

Councillor Rose, as a full-time cabinet member, called on members of her family constantly throughout the week to undertake childcare for her. She depended on her partner, mother and father for child care, often with plans changing last minute as issues arose at the council. This was made possible by a number of factors: her husband working for the council and the proximity of his office to the Council Hall, the fact that her mother was also a politician so understood the rhythms of political life, and her father's retirement making him available for last minute childcare. Despite these facilitations, it was with considerable difficulty that she managed having a young child with political life. The first morning I spent with her, she came into the office late, having spent the morning with her daughter. She had a sore back, she told me, from carrying her daughter around, and was clearly in need of rest. Having recently taken on a new cabinet portfolio, however, she could not afford the time to recuperate. She was able to legitimately bring up childcare issues as a reason for rescheduling meetings, being late or leaving early. At a Labour ward meeting, for example, it was the need to put her daughter to bed that stopped the meeting extending before 8.30pm. Similarly, when I interviewed her prior to shadowing, she brought her child into the interview as she said she had been unable to find childcare that day. Being able to be open about her caring commitments was important to her, as it was for other councillors with children. I witnessed a change in Labour leadership whilst embedded within the council, yet the open commitment to ensuring flexibility for councillors with caring responsibilities did not change. This undoubtedly helped councillor work appear more attractive to those with caring responsibilities, as many older councillors spoke of the impossibility of becoming a councillor whilst their children were still young. As one councillor told me at a Labour-led city council, 'if you've got a family and you're not from a sort of a money background as we're not, it's not really doable.' Though councillors are offered money towards childcare costs, they do not always take this up.

As I now go on to explore in more detail, clashing temporalities marked the experiences of councillors with other jobs and caring responsibilities. The structural

arrangements of the council impacted on what kinds of gendered working conditions councillors experienced. Some improvements had been made to accommodate those councillors with caring or domestic responsibilities. As the Midlands councillor describes below, changes may have been slow, but there have been changes designed to accommodate councillors with caring responsibilities:

It's a peculiar, it's a peculiar sort of state of affairs because as a Councillor you're not an employee. So you're not able to access all of the things an employee can access, so because they, we sort of operate just outside of that [...] it's things like altering times of meetings so that they start at half past 9 instead of 9 o'clock so that you could drop children off and then get in, so it's very small things, and gradually I've seen things over the 8 years that I've been here that have been really positive (Cllr Reed).

Part of the difficulty with the slowness to accommodate change to the gendered working environment has been the 'peculiar' way in which councillors 'operate just outside' of employee status. As a representative, she says she and her colleagues cannot access the same kinds of formalised benefits a council employee might receive. As such, accommodating the needs of those with caring responsibilities has to be done on an informal, party-by-party basis. This explains the disparity between parties when it comes to adjusting and accommodating the needs of representatives; there are no formalised, general rules which they must abide by. When the different people and rhythms of work and home collide in one place, as they frequently did for this councillor, the symbolic separation of public and private begins to lose its relevance and meaning. But this is also not without resistance, nor is it comfortable for those who have blurred councillor work and 'other life' boundaries.

In the county council, for example, a woman cabinet member recounted a recent experience where she had to defend her colleague's right to bring her baby into council meeting:

We have a young female councillor here who's just had another baby [...] the baby's so young it's been coming to council meetings and when someone said something, a man I might add, I said, well, she's very welcome to bring the baby to any meetings I'm having, and she does [...] They just thought the baby would be a nuisance and I said rubbish, and if I've said it's alright, it's alright [...] he said that to me privately. Because I was chairing the

committee, did I think it was appropriate? Of course it's appropriate. [sounds sharp] You know, she's a tiny baby she's got to be with her mother [...] but I don't think she's found it as a barrier. She doesn't work of course. But it's good. And I think we've just sent her on the leadership course for the future, so she's been up to [university name], and her husband's taken time off work to look after the baby whilst she does the course. And she said it [having a baby] used to help her actually, she went out delivering and that, she'd take the baby with her. Baby was worth a thousand votes I imagine! [laughs] (Cllr Faircloth)

This extract shows the clashes between different gendered work expectations; that women councillors who also happen to be mothers can have their attempts to balance councillor work and life be judged not only in terms of their status as councillors, but also as mothers. The question he puts to Cllr Faircloth about the 'appropriateness' of a baby in a council meeting can be read as a judgement on the councillor's decision-making both as a councillor and as a mother. Having a baby in this environment was, for him, a physical body out of place. The baby brought reproductive labour into focus which is normally otherwise hidden, with sexuality, otherness and difference starkly highlighted rather than homogenised or blended into a masculinised ideal councillor.

His remark highlights that women may be tolerated in politics by some men, but that this toleration comes with conditions to 'blend in'. Their chastisement is often spoken of quietly, privately and in the guise of 'respectability' or 'appropriateness'. But this also demonstrates the importance of the 'politics of presence' (Phillips 1995) in redressing this reluctance; when women occupy strategic senior positions in politics and are capable of understanding and supporting junior women with caring responsibilities. Her account indicates an interesting desire to qualify her just-stated implied criticisms of the Conservative-led culture; that despite the resistance of others, her colleague hasn't found it a 'barrier' and that's it's 'good'. In relation to her colleague not working, the 'of course' is interesting in that it indicates the normalisation of the view that balancing councillor work, family life, and paid employment is simply impossible. This was a view echoed by many women in my research, across parties and councils, that having young children and councillor work were simply incompatible. To justify the validity of having a baby in legislative spaces further, and perhaps put it in terms that other politicians might relate to, she concludes that a baby can offer political capital by being 'worth a thousand votes'.

## 5. Clashing temporalities, fragmented rhythms and interruptions

Like other forms of work, councillors experience the blurring of boundaries between different activities. Technology has contributed to this; spending time doing emails in the evening at home, for example, can assist councillors who require greater flexibility over how they work, but simultaneously extends the working day and means one is never fully 'switched off' from work. This reflects the broader changes and attitudes to work discussed more fully in my literature review chapter. Clashing temporalities was a feature of the officer/councillor relationship dynamic. Councillors with caring responsibilities were quick to point out the difficulties of juggling care, councillor work and other commitments. Another councillor at the Midlands council reiterated how the timings of meetings were particularly problematic for her because of her caring responsibilities:

I have twin boys, they're 13, and a husband who works in London, they also do lots of extra-curricular stuff like rugby, hockey, drama and debating and one thing and another. So they, you know, there's a lot of ferrying them around, and if [her husband is] having a late night in London it can be more difficult. I think sometimes it would help perhaps if we binned off morning meetings [...], I had a real problem last year because I was on a scrutiny coordination and in fact it was Tuesday morning and at that point I had so much more in my diary because I was scrutiny chair as well, that actually I simply couldn't get there. For me, if the morning slot was completely free that would actually mean I would have afternoons, some afternoons, in the Council Hall and some evenings either out at meetings or in the Council Hall. But if you can, always, if you can ring fence one block of time in the week, that makes such a massive difference. That's one of the changes I'd like to see but I think it actually suits officers to get us in sometimes in the mornings (Cllr Jones).

The clash of officer and councillor temporalities and priorities comes from the fact that, for officers, the Council Hall is their place of employment, with regular daytime hours in which they prefer to schedule meetings. For councillors, who may also hold down other work and/or have caring responsibilities, meeting the temporal rhythms of work expected by officers can be challenging. This works both ways, however, as senior officers would be expected to attend some or all of the council meetings held outside working hours, for example, the evening Full Council sessions at the Western council (the Midlands and Southern councils held theirs

in the daytime). But council officers can more reasonably expect 'unsociable' hours of work like this to be reflected in their pay or ability to claim flexi-time or time off in lieu. For councillors, the irregularity of working hours was a primary (and arguably unrecognised and therefore unremunerated) aspect of their role.

## **6. Vulnerability, risk and gendered councillor work**

One aspect of the more insidious gendered nature of political work was the disparity in feeling safe at work. The week before I started shadowing a woman Labour cabinet member at the West Midlands city council, Jo Cox MP was murdered on the street in her constituency. Understandably, this shook not just many of the Labour women I spoke with at the time. Councillors, like MPs, understand the need to be seen to be doing their representative work, as I have discussed. Sometimes, this means to be literally seen in their ward; attending meetings with residents, village fetes, public celebrations, going into resident's houses, and holding ward surgeries. Often, this is work they undertake on their own, though some Labour women at the city council decided to hold joint ward surgeries in the aftermath of Jo Cox's murder. Some councils responded by advising councillors to seek security during ward surgeries or issuing panic buttons. The practicality and desirability of such measures was uncertain among councillors I spoke with. The local police had stated that the safety of MPs following Jo Cox's murder could not be guaranteed, due to the nature of representative work. This means the possibility of encountering serious violence remains very real for councillors. One councillor detailed the ways in which she had been threatened during her time as a councillor:

The other thing is, I suppose women are liable to more threats. I mean over the last three years I've had to have police monitoring my emails, I have had threats of rape, kidnap, torture, I've had, again this is all confidential because my grandkids have no idea, I've had my window shot in, and I don't know if that's happening to a male counterpart. It's one of the things that Jo Cox and I [pause] spoke about [pause] quite a lot she [inaudible] September. But [pause, teary] uh. And now I hear Roberta Blackman-Wood is being threatened as well. And um [pause] and it's [pause] god I hate being scared [voice wavering, trying not to cry] but it is frightening when that happens, it really is, you know. And that doesn't happen to men, by and large (Cllr Moon).

Prior to disclosing this, she had been discussing the ways in which local media had treated her during her time on the cabinet. Very swiftly, she connected the media's

symbolic violence towards her, to the ways in which she had been bodily vulnerable. Her experience goes beyond the regularity with which women in the public eye receive threats over social media and email, though such instances are harrowing enough. The violence which she endured in her time as a councillor should be of serious concern to all political parties, across every council; councillors are especially vulnerable to instances of violence because they often live in their wards (unlike many MPs, who spend much of their time in Westminster) and because the majority make themselves as visible as possible, as frequently as possible, in order to fulfil the expectations of the representational relationship. This councillor was a self-described 'tough' woman; she was not afraid of speaking her mind, opposing her fellow Labour party members, or taking decisions which she considered would make her unpopular with colleagues and the electorate. To witness both her strength and resilience during meetings, and then encounter her vulnerability during the interview, shows the kinds of emotional tensions which being a councillor involves; tensions which are formed as a response to encountering both symbolic and material violence and which are carried differently by different bodies. In a particularly poignant moment, she admits that she hates being scared, and then links this directly to her experience of being a woman in politics. Local politics may appear mundane to the casual observer, but this account indicates the complex and harrowing ways in which representative politics can rupture a sense of self. And, as she indicates, these rupturings can be understood by politicians themselves as specifically gendered experiences.

This is not to say, however, that threats only affect women in politics. Whilst I was at the same council, I spoke with a councillor born in India and who moved to the UK as a young man. For a large part of his adult life, he had been involved in politics in one form or another. He conducted anti-racist campaigns within his Trade Union and workplace, seeking to eliminate the racist discrimination associated with unequal hiring, firing and remuneration practices. He campaigned against racist segregation of the working men's clubs in the city. And, as a self-identified Dalit member of the Indian community in the city, he described the hostility with which members of other castes treated him. When he stood for election, he described facing caste-based prejudice from other members of the Indian community in the city, as well as racism from the white community. In a ten year period during his time as a councillor, his home windows had been smashed and he had been assaulted by a group of white men. During our interview, he described the ways in which he navigated his identity and multitude of oppositions during his time as a councillor, which I discuss in more detail in a subsequent chapter. About a year after we had spoken, I read in the local paper that he had received a death

threat, issued in both English and Hindi. It originated from someone who claimed to live in his ward, and the councillor stated his desire to make the threat publicly known, in case he did come to harm. That he should describe it in this way indicates the nearness of violence to some councillors' working lives; both in terms of physical proximity where instigators are usually local people themselves, in terms of regularity of experiences, and in terms of the nearness to a person's emotional surface such experiences can be, as we saw in the previous account.

## **Conclusions**

The combination of different motivations for, and experiences of, councillor work produce different ways of relating to councillor work. For some, where their motivations were to make a difference to their community, this could clash with the professionalised, procedural, utilitarian or performance-related aspects of councillor work. This produced tensions in how they saw themselves and understood their roles. For some, the ways in which they related to councillor work involved a depoliticisation of their relation to the changing social word and political environment; they would adopt a more professionalised approach to work which would enable them to make the kinds of 'tough decisions' required of local government representatives in times of recession. This is not to say that councillors experience *just* a tension or a depoliticisation in their relations to their work. In actuality, councillors experience multiple relations to their work depending on the shifting nature of that work and the kinds of experiences they encounter.

Being expected to 'do' councillor work all day, every day encompasses all aspects of the work, and means it can bleed into other areas of their lives. Technology and social media, for example, exacerbated this feeling of being 'always on', though for some it also allowed some flexibility to manage different aspects of life. Like for many engaged in paid employment, then, this indicates the increased blurring of boundaries between work and other aspects of life. It is in this respect that councillor's activities may exceed Dorothy Smith's notion of work, as that which is 'done in a particular time and place'. For most councillors, their work is done in many places and at any time. Councillors, then, do politics in a kind of extended, yet fragmented, working temporality; days are extended into evenings, the working week extended into the weekend. But the expectation of constant availability coupled with the ad hoc nature of the issues which they deal with, fragment that extended time, and interrupt non-work time. The fact they conduct their work across a range of sites within the ward and at the council hall, with some in public, some in private, makes for a dislocated and scattered kind of working

environment. It can also leave councillors potentially vulnerable to forms of violence. This vulnerability was particularly heightened with my participants around the time of the murder of MP Jo Cox. Quite understandably, issues of safety, vulnerability and a re-thinking of their relationship with their communities came to the fore at this time.

The previous chapter established the kinds of work councillors do, the rhythms of that work, and the kinds of places it takes place in. Over the course of the next two chapters, I explore the different conditions through which political party identities come to be intelligible and legitimated. My intention is to show how gender shapes normative party political identities in different ways, and what some of the gendered effects the processes of identity creation and negotiation have.

## **Data Chapter 2: Authenticity, class and ‘legitimately local’**

### **Case Study Overview**

The Midlands city council is a metropolitan district council located in the Midlands. Once a manufacturing and engineering hub in Britain, noted for its post-war innovations in city-planning and prosperity, its more recent history is one of high unemployment and the decline of local heavy industries. As a post-industrial and working-class city, it retains a long association with the Labour Party and the council is currently run by Labour. The city has a notably higher percentage of black and minority ethnic population (BME) compared to the national average. About two thirds of the population are classified as white British, with the second largest ethnic group described as Asian/Asian British. Historically, the largest minority groups had Indian or Pakistani heritage, but between the 2001 and 2011 census, there has been an increasing population of those with African heritage (the census data available does not break this rather large heterogeneous down further). It is therefore the most ethnically diverse site I studied, and this diversity is reflected in the council’s composition, with just under a quarter of councillors from a BME background (at the beginning of fieldwork). Those from BME backgrounds tend to live in wards located closer to the city centre.

The city ranks relatively high in the 2015 English Indices of Deprivation government report, with income deprivation being the greatest source of deprivation across the city. However, as with most places, the distribution of inequalities and deprivation across the city is not an even one. There are areas of significant deprivation in the city, with approximately one third of children in the city living in child poverty although this indicator varies across the city.

Along with wider socio-political changes such as the EU referendum, the council itself went through a number of changes during my fieldwork period; perhaps most notable of these was a Labour leadership contest (which saw the removal of the woman Leader). Both the media discourse and the internal atmosphere of the Labour party, and the wider council, during this time could be particularly toxic, with relations amongst Labour councillors strained across competing factions.

## Introduction

Part of the ongoing, everyday nature of councillor work is the identity work they engage in. Identity work involves practices which are processual, relational and negotiated among social actors. In this chapter, I explore the processes of identity work that Labour councillors do. I explore some of the complexity and negotiations in terms of their relations with three different, but inter-related, audiences/others. Running through this analysis is an appreciation of the psycho-social dynamics of identity work; that it takes place in relation to others, and in relation to the self. Asking questions about identities in local politics is fundamentally concerned with who councillors imagine themselves to be in relation to others and how those others are defined. In the turbulent political times during which fieldwork was carried out, questions of how identities relate to boundaries of belonging, citizenship, and the nation, urgently need to be interrogated. As well as involving racial and class inequalities, negotiating identities is a form of gendered boundary work, where 'the concept of boundaries describes the complex structures – physical, social, ideological, and psychological – which establish differences and commonalities between women and men, among women, and among men' (Gerson and Peiss, 1985, p. 317). Identity work forms part of the work of a councillor; in this chapter I focus on the identity practices councillors do in relation to residents and how political identities are negotiated within local Labour groups. I use the term negotiation in relation to identity practices as it emphasises the reciprocity and relational aspect of gendered identity work, addressing 'the ways women and men bargain for privileges and resources' (Gerson and Peiss, 1985, p. 317).

All councillors engage in work on the self – identity work – in order to appear intelligible to others, and credible and legitimate as representatives. But the conditions under which this work takes place are different, not least in terms of the variation in the kinds of wards they represent and the kinds of people they seek to represent. Councillors' knowledge and interpretation of their locality frame how they construct legitimate political identities; identities which are not fixed in place or time, but are contingent upon different audiences, places and moments and thus require constant adaptation. Power is fundamental to this discussion. The identity work which all councillors do is about how they relate to norms and power. However, the degree of investment in a relationship to powerful identity norms is patterned differently across political parties. Labour councillors often framed themselves as being *differently* related to power than, for example, the Conservatives did. Moreover, there are distinct identity norms within the local Labour party groups themselves. Labour councillors also engage in identity practices as part of

the local representative relationship. What I show in this chapter is how these different negotiations complicate Labour councillor's relationship to their work and produce ambivalent personal investments in it. These investments are fundamentally affected by forms of masculine power play. I show the complexity of Labour councillors' investments in identity norms by referring to the narratives of councillors who remained sceptical or uncomfortable about processes of professionalization, for instance with the transition from an activist identity to a formal political representative one. I explore how some Labour councillors formulate the representative relationship and claims to legitimacy by articulating and performing a normative 'authentic' local identity. I show how this is gendered and classed in particular ways, and what the implications are of this normative identity.

Firstly, I consider how councillors define and perform 'legitimately local' political identities as part of the representational relationship. I identify certain gendered practices of councillor work which are seen as contributing to a more 'authentic', and therefore valid, political identity. Here, 'authenticity' becomes a kind of identity category or marker of value; one that is more easily and readily claimed by men. I explore how what counts as 'authentic' might be changing in times of political upheaval and in the context of public debates about English nationality and nationhood. I then discuss how these identities are situated in specific places; how notions of civic pride, place and 'localness' contribute to what is considered an 'authentic' political identity for Labour councillors. I explore how these identities are negotiated in the context of relationships between councillors. Before I do this, I will briefly unpack what I mean when I refer to authenticity, in relation to how councillors perform legitimacy.

### **Performing authenticity and making representative claims: revisiting the concepts**

The repertoires of performance that local politicians have access to and their recognition as legitimate are influenced by wider social relations of class, gender, and ethnicity - by the habitus that shapes them (Bourdieu, 1977). As Shirin Rai (2014) makes clear, if the habitus of some provides them with greater resources to draw upon when 'doing politics' effectively, then the issue of performance becomes critical when investigating inequalities in representation (Rai 2014, p.1185). As I argue in my discussion of the literature on authenticity in my Literature Review, authenticity is ambivalent in nature. I am therefore not interested in what authenticity is, but rather what claims to being an authentic politician *do*. I begin by examining an important set of relations which involve identity work and claims to authenticity; the relationship between representative and

represented (Goodin and Saward, 2009; Saward, 2010). I argue that in the context of political change in England at the time fieldwork took place, this relationship was changing. I conceptualise authenticity, then, as a site of contestation within identity work. One result of these changes is that councillors articulated a kind of 'ontological doubt' (Puwar, 2004) about their legitimacy claims, as part of the representative relationship. I discuss this in terms of how Labour councillors engage in discursive and embodied identity practices. These practices are done in relation to two important 'others'; their local ward residents and other Labour councillors.

## **1. Localness as more than place**

### ***1.1. Emotion, history, knowledge and relationships***

In trying to outline what we mean by 'local', and understand the importance and impact of such identity claims, I refer to specific elements like place, emotion, temporality, practical local knowledge, and family. These are elements of a local subjectivity which councillors foreground in their talk about 'being local', and although I separate them here, they are indivisible in actuality. Temporality means, for instance, a councillor's link to their community over a significant period of time. This could mean having grown up in the ward, living within or just outside the ward boundaries, working in the ward, or having family living in it. Time and embodied and emotional ties to a place are interwoven to create 'local' subjectivities which are tied to a particular place. What I am keen to explore in this section is how some notions of 'local' are valued by councillors over others, and what impact this might have in local governance and civic agendas. In the Western city, a Labour councillor described his motivations for getting involved with local politics, and in doing so touched on the ways in which family, place and a relationship with place over time interweave with one another to form a sense of civic duty:

To be honest it was me mum [who encouraged him to stand for election]. All my family live in this [area], I used to live in that house across the road there, for years and years and years. And things was happening bad to the area and I was moaning about it [...] they were closing the swimming pool, and my mum said, 'it's about time you put up, it's alright giving it that [signals talking with hands] you can't do nothing from the outside, go on the inside'. She said, 'bloody get this mob of councillors out, who are useless, and stand' (Cllr Nixon).

As someone who had been brought up in the area, with other members of his family living close by, it was not just the architecture, geography or facilities which formed his sense of place and rootedness in a 'local' subjectivity. As his account indicates, it was his mother who was instrumental in encouraging him to stand for election, and his family who provided a strong, emotional link to the architecture (his former house and local swimming pool) over time. Having grown up in the area, he was able to see how it had changed, and as such had a long and comparative form of tacit local knowledge which he could draw on as a local representative. His mother's proclamation that the incumbent councillors are 'useless', and his own 'moaning' about what was happening in the area indicate how his 'local' knowledge was set in distinction from other councillors. With practical and tacit knowledge of the challenges an area faced, he could argue he was better placed to advocate on these issues. Articulating a local identity helped to form a shared bond with residents, and as such distance himself from any perception of being a remote, out-of-touch politician.

In describing to me some of the challenges the area was facing, he provided a long narrative of the various forms of struggle he and his family had experienced. It was a moving, and perhaps seductive, account:

But you've also got to have empathy. I've had issues with very close family members addicted to drugs and all sorts of stuff, so I understand. One of my lads was kicked out of school for bad behaviour, so I've been through, I've nearly lost me house through lack of money. So around here that background, and I was not always on the right side of the law, so that background in this area... you need, it's a different mind-set around here. You need to know the people before you can come in and try to act for them. So I think that really helps me understand the issues that's going on, cos I've got my mum who is disabled, so I understand the difficulties with disabilities in the area. And to be honest I wasn't a very scholarly schoolchild! I used to spend quite a lot of my time sat at home with my dad shouting and hollering at me cos I'd been expelled, so I understand all the issues with the parents cos I've lived through it all. I mean, financial deprivation, as I say that house across the road, twice I nearly lost it because I couldn't afford the mortgage with young kids at the time. So you need to know the background of the area you're representing before you can represent the people. It's no good someone living over in [another city ward] trying to become a councillor in [this ward], because it wouldn't work (Cllr Nixon).

This interview extract indicates some of the overlapping elements for identifying and articulating a valued 'local' subjectivity, and how it might be productive for a closer representational relationship. In examining how 'localness' and representation interact, I wish to trouble the common distinctions among political scientists between different types of representative relationship; the substantive, descriptive, symbolic, anticipatory, or gyroscopic, for example (Pitkin, 1967; Phillips, 1998a; Mansbridge, 2003). Political theorists and feminist political scientists, though delineating these different dimensions of representation, do not consider them as entirely distinct from one another. Indeed, the local representative relationship indicates how different elements of the representative relationship can be entwined.

The extract begins with his acknowledgement that, for him, the representational relationship is an emotional one. The empathy which he outlines as a crucial emotional dimension is tied to his life history and experiences, such as nearly losing his house, and the experiences of his family. These particular experiences and background bring, he contends, an understanding of the 'different mind-set' of people in the area, and knowledge of the issues local people face. He describes a wide range of issues, including drug addiction, disability, educational attainment, and financial deprivation within the ward, which was one of the most deprived in the city. The geographies and histories of deprivation are immediate for him in ways they would not be for 'someone living over in [another city ward]'. They are emotionally immediate because he has witnessed, and continues to witness, family members who face the impacts of deprivation and the associated struggles against the state. They are geographically immediate because the architecture associated with his own history – his former house, school, and swimming pool, which he points out to me – remains. And, linked with all these – place, family and emotion – time is represented as immediate and repetitive in a particular way; history and present collapse in on one another in a way which is unique to someone who has been brought up in an area and was now bringing up children there.

### **1.2. Narrating 'legitimate local' councillor identities**

Rather than a politician possessing authenticity, it is through their interaction with those around them that authenticity is established. If personal stories have become the 'toolkit par excellence for personal identity construction and [...] the establishment of an *enduring sense of self* (Bamberg 2011, original emphasis), they garner particular importance for politicians seeking to communicate a legitimate connection to their voters.

Stories that politicians related about their backgrounds and their motivations for entering politics were particularly important for councillors seeking to make connections and identifications with residents. On hearing him recount this long and moving list of hardships he had faced, I initially found it difficult to consider the interview from an analytical distance. Rather than thinking about what it was *doing*, as an account, I took his narration of struggle at face value. This produced a positive affective response towards him, as someone who had endured difficulty and was now trying to make a change to his community. In the interview, I felt no reason to doubt the veracity of his claims, or of my genuine feelings towards him as a result of his account. This indicates the persuasive and seductive power of politicians' personal stories; narratives of personal life which get re-told again and again. The power of such an identity narrative can make it difficult for the listener to question the account, and therefore harder to question the speaker. In this way, personal narratives like this one may bestow some legitimacy on a councillor and help them form connections to local people, but they also can be less accountable than other markers of legitimacy.

Interrogating my own affective response to listening to him helped me to think more carefully about how emotion, place, and rhetoric are linked. As an ethnographer interested in the broad range of activities which might be considered councillor 'work', I am particularly interested in exploring the emotion work which councillors engage in. In the following extract, he talks about his passion for education and the kinds of changes he has helped to bring about in the area. His 'localness' allowed him to exhibit a distinct mixture of civic emotions when he talked about his ward. He described wanting to:

Make the place cleaner, tidier and better, that was me first thing [...] it might sound silly but just to change the look of the place. And we also wanted to change the attitude of the people because we had massive non-attendance at local schools [...] we had the lowest attainment levels in [the city] and some of the lowest attainment levels in the country [before he was elected]. Schools used to be half empty; now there's massive waiting lists. One of the things I'm passionate about is educating from babies up. We were in the top two areas for deprivation, because there's financial inequalities in the area [and] people don't eat properly' (Cllr Nixon).

He moves away from the kind of frustration and negative affect he described in the first extract, above, without relinquishing it entirely. There are, after all, many injustices which the ward residents continue to face, such as not being able to eat properly. His position

cannot be fully understood as either a demonstration of civic pride, or of civic shame. He acknowledges the issues his ward faces, not in an exhibition of shame but in a frank admission of the injustices facing deprived areas of the city. Similarly, his desire for change may be rooted in a kind of *potential* civic pride, where his care for the area is based on a deep emotional connection to a sense of belonging and place, but is capable of critically reflecting on the pitfalls, challenges and injustices which it still faces. It is this kind of *critical* civic pride – a balance between valuing an area and its people whilst not being afraid to highlight its problems – which is all too often lost in ideas that conflate pride with prejudice or parochialism. The desire to ‘change the attitude of the people’ is something many politicians seek to fulfil. The wish to change norms and behaviours can stem from many reasons; these may be altruistic in nature, have a normative element guided by political or religious principles, or result from more manipulative and cynical intentions. For this councillor, he expressed a wish to change behaviour in order to increase educational attendance and attainment, with education understood as a social good. Regardless of intention, the effects of politicians trying to provoke behavioural change, as we see from initiatives like the Government’s Behavioural Insights Team (commonly referred to as the Nudge Unit), often result in a complex mix of sometimes both positive change (such as encouraging people to eat more healthily or attend school) and compliance. Social scientists and their methods are also fundamentally implicated in these attempts.

### **1.3. Understanding local legitimacy: introducing critical civic pride**

In making sense of the how councillors’ discursively achieve normative identities tied to particular places, I find it useful to draw on Collins’ (2017) critical notion of civic pride. He defines civic pride as an ‘*embodied* feeling and value that is productive and powerful in a range of ways’ (pg 192, emphasis in original). Collins emphasises the variety of ways in which pride, and specifically civic pride, is taken up as a kind of public emotion; one that may signify:

A positive and invigorated sense of self [...], a person’s or community’s (heightened) status or reputation and [...] reinforce people’s sense of agency or independence. [...] Pride has been an important banner-emotion for a long line of indigenous movements, sexual and racial politics (e.g. gay pride, black pride) and other social movements’ (192-3).

But Collins also emphasises the negative connotations of pride; as that which is conflated with negative affect like arrogance, and as an emotion which is listed as one of the ‘seven deadly sins’ in Christianity. To understand the ways in which civic pride works, individually, collectively and within local government policy, it is important to understand what pride is and what kind of emotional qualities it represents. Whatever pride is productive of, whether it is understood as ‘a virtue’ or a ‘sin’, it has a close relationship to its opposite – shame (i.e. a lack of self-worth, a lack of integrity). There has been much sociological analysis on how shame functions as a public feeling; studies reflect on the politics of (civic) shame in relation to austerity, ‘poverty porn’ media representations, and working class communities (Skeggs, 2002; Tyler, 2013; Allen, Tyler and de Benedictis, 2014). Surprisingly little scholarship, however, has linked these forms of public feeling to notions of civic pride. If pride cannot be understood without acknowledgement of shame, then shame cannot be understood without interrogating pride as a public feeling. In this way, I consider civic pride an important, and neglected, aspect of what Cvetkovich refers to as public feelings (Cvetkovich, 2012).

Following Collins, I consider civic pride and the production of ‘local’ subjectivities as a constitutive part of local *emotional* governance. As part of the production of subjectivities and emotional landscapes of local governance, tacit and practical forms of knowledge are also important. These are forms of practical knowledge about their ward which a ‘local’ will carry, sometimes as embodied knowledge, which can help them understand local issues and contribute to their representational relationship. Local knowledge and emotional qualities combine to ‘shape the political values that underpin civic pride and impact on the ways in which individuals, communities and governments promote and defend their local identity and autonomy’ (Collins, 2017, p. 192).

## **2. Embodied and discursive identity practices**

### ***2.1. Relating to residents through talk***

How best to identify with ward residents was a concern for most councillors. How this concern was manifested depended on the locality and residents’ needs. Some councillors attempted to get literally and figuratively close to ward residents through displays of integrity and similitude. In the Midlands post-industrial council, one Labour member described how he saw representational relationship:

I think it's very important to have that kind of closeness and to get to know people, if only just for political survival. It's more than that, political survival is very cold and very calculating. When you deal with people, when you deal with communities, it's real live issues, real live people and so therefore it's much more important to have that closeness and people identify with you. And that's what you really want, you want people to identify with you, you want to get to a situation in which they almost have a regard for you irrespective of which party you represent (Cllr Red).

In this quote, he describes the importance of a close relationship between the representative and the represented. For him, a fundamental part of building that close relationship is by getting residents to identify with him. This is interesting because it indicates the complicated and reflexive work of identification; he wants residents to see something in him and to identify with him. To do this, he must simultaneously have an understanding or an idea of who they are. If he is successful in this work and can develop that level of closeness, then he argues that a level of trust and 'regard for you' is made possible, even if at other points the councillor and residents disagree. It was not enough to claim honesty or trust, however; it needed to be performed. One of the times this could be performed was during canvassing in the ward, as another councillor also found:

Certainly integrity, I don't think you would get very far if you tried to pull the wool over people's eyes or weren't sincere. When I was canvassing last year it was just before the European referendum and around the time of the doctors' strike so there were quite a lot of hot topics and I found that people respected you much more if you told them where you stood than if you tried to flannel your way out of a difficult question (Cllr Molloy).

This is an example of the reflexive work which councillors do in relation to others (residents). The ability to make oneself intelligible to others was described as a key skill for being a successful councillor who could engage residents. This was seen as particularly important during electioneering and at Full Council. How councillors spoke, the language they used and the ability to be concise were important features of their degree of intelligibility. But what this quote also indicates is how discursive forms of persuasion and political speech are entangled with the physical embodiment of *being there* in the ward; communicating to residents, in this model of campaigning, involves knocking on doors and being physically present in the community. Both words and actions are necessary to uphold a strong representational relationship. But the embodied

norms associated with performing the representational relationship have implications for different bodies.

## ***2.2. From talk to bodies: gendered and ableist councillor expectations***

An important aspect of how claims to legitimacy are made is through the various ways work and activism are conceptualised in the Labour party. Labour party members in my study emphasised how being seen to be a 'good' activist is vital when it comes to legitimacy among colleagues and with voters. What is defined a 'good' activist and councillor rests on certain embodied practices which have gendered effects. Becoming a councillor depends on being an excellent campaigner, which entails relentless canvassing. Canvassing involves being physically present in the ward, moving from house to house on foot. The timing of canvassing is also critical, typically needing to coincide with when ward residents will be at home. This means it is often carried out in the evenings or at weekends. This is more complicated to do if you have caring responsibilities, are employed on shift work, or have mobility issues. What defined a 'good' activist, then, rests on particular gendered and ableist claims, such as being available for evening work regardless of caring or domestic duties, and being able to spend hours walking around the ward during campaigning. In this way, councillors begin their political work with certain gendered and ableist expectations.

Not everyone can work this hard or in this way, of course. And both men and women contributed to the reproduction of gendered and ableist activist/councillor identities. At a Labour local government conference during fieldwork, which I attended with some councillors from the Western urban council, I went along to a meeting for Labour women councillors. The discussion among the group turned to the expectations that other women colleagues had of them, in the context of progressing to cabinet positions. One former Labour leader expressed her frustration that women would turn down cabinet positions which she had offered them because, as she identified it, they either did not have the confidence or self-belief to think they could do the job, or because they were worried about the impact it would have on their families. Whether or not her diagnosis was true, she was seemingly insensitive to the notion that the workload might be too much for those in different personal circumstances to her. For her, it was simply a matter of 'stepping up and joining in'. She then narrated her own experience of 'stepping up' in difficult times, stating that she had managed it alright 'when my mum was ill and she [her mentor in the council] told me to get over myself and stand for it [a cabinet post].' Such role models can be problematic as they limit the political identities and

positions women and men can take up as councillors; what space is there for those who do not, or cannot, embody such modes of doing politics?

In the following section, I go on to discuss in more detail how legitimacy claims are contested among Labour councillors in the Midlands post-industrial city. In this Local Authority, the perception of legitimacy was tied to contestations over what was an 'authentically' local, working-class identity. In this section I refer to images of a 'city kid', 'local lad' and 'tough cookie' as a way of naming how the figure of the 'legitimately local' took shape in this context.

### ***2.3. Performing the representational relationship: re-writing the norms?***

Councillors' understandings of community necessarily and fundamentally include their ward - a particular place, demarcated by electoral boundaries, which they represent. But their sense of community often exceeds such boundaries of place to encompass both wider geographical localities (neighbouring sections of the city or council, for example) and broader identities (their religion and place of worship, or their identification with a BME city or county-wide BME community, for example). Having links to their communities was vital for their representative work and often closely tied to notions of accessibility and physical presence in the ward. One newly elected Labour councillor described the kinds of activities involved in working on the representational relationship with her ward residents:

I think being very accessible to local people is really, really important. So things like having surgeries, having ward forums, going to residents committees, putting out lots of leaflets, being very active on social media, those kind of things, so people know that you're there and they know that you're doing stuff for them. And also it means that when people have problems they know how to get in touch with you, to try and get you to sort them out (Cllr Blackthorn).

Many of these activities have obvious limitations for someone with mobility issues, caring responsibilities or other work. They also form particular expectations of councillor behaviour and work, and can offer quite a limited definition of 'community'. The resident meetings I attended with councillors, for instance, tended to only attract a small group of people, many of whom were regulars, unless there was a very controversial local decision. Surgeries and ward forums offer vital face-to-face opportunities for those who

might need help, but lack the confidence, patience or ability to deal with complex council bureaucracy. Increasingly, councillors turn to social media to reach a wider community in their locality, though when this is run in tandem with other, more traditional representational forms of communication, it can serve to extend and expand councillors' work.

For some councillors, these traditional forms of political organising were seen as exclusionary, outdated and potentially ineffective. As Cllr Blackthorn put it, 'we don't embrace different ways of being a councillor. Or of being an activist!' Emma Craddock's research on anti-austerity activists showed how the masculinised ideal activist capable of extraordinary amounts of direct action (owing in part to being unencumbered by caring responsibilities) led to a kind of 'gendered dimension of activist guilt' among her women participants (Craddock, 2018, p. 140). This guilt, Craddock argues, was a combination of the masculine unattainable standard and feminised and neoliberal discourses of blaming the self for failing to live up to this standard. At a Labour women's network meeting at the Labour councillors' conference I observed, a number of women expressed similar feelings of guilt for feeling like they 'weren't doing enough'. Yet this was not the only emotional response women Labour councillors had to the gendered expectations of the role; the councillor quoted in this paragraph expressed her view with frustration rather than guilt. Likewise, I also encountered Labour women who expressed confidence when narrating their resistance to the imposition of an impossible, masculinised standard of councillor identity.

### **3. Clashing rationalities and regimes in the local Labour party**

#### ***3.1. Making claims to legitimacy: masculinised working-class identities in times of change***

In areas where white working class men have dominated local Labour politics, as in the Midlands city in my study and elsewhere in UK local politics more generally (Jones, Charles and Davies, 2009), the party continues to prioritise class politics over gender and race. Unlike in left-wing activist spaces, however, where some have argued that 'there could be *no* space for analyses and actions that centred race and gender' (Bassel and Emejulu, 2017, p. 64), the Labour party *does* have spaces where such analyses, actions and contestations can take place. This is reflected formally, with the history of women and ethnic minorities caucusing within the party structures. I would argue that the capacity for this contestation has been increased in recent years, as Labour has

become unique among Europe's social democratic parties to benefit from a left-wing populist surge *within* its existing hierarchical party structures, as opposed to witnessing a splintering and (re)formation of left-wing formal political parties into new groups.

In the Midlands post-industrial city held by Labour, the perception of legitimacy is particularly tied to working-class positions and an image of a local 'city kid'. The need to appear 'authentic' inflected a lot of the stories councillors told about their work. In this city, men in particular invoked a discourse of a working-class 'local lad' as a set of traits which are normalised in interactions in particular ways. As a result, some councillors – those more able to access and embody the 'legitimately local' norms – come to be considered more legitimate as representatives than others. Many councillors spoke with warmth and pride about being a 'city kid', born and bred, and how wanting to 'give something back' to their city was a motivating factor to move into politics. All councillors emphasise certain aspects of themselves which they feel are relevant to their electorate in public meetings, even when not entirely based in truth. For example, a male councillor constantly made reference to his trade union and working class roots in order to establish a connection to voters. In one meeting, he repeatedly brought up his experience working 'on the shopfloor' in a factory in order to give credence to his support for an expansion of local industry, when it was later revealed to me that he had in fact never worked in such a position. Masculinity is understood here as the way in which people position themselves in discourse with some more able to access culturally valued discursive repertoires than others. In a discussion on the EU referendum, councillors discussed their confusion at being seen by their electorate as elites when, as one participant put it, 'I grew up in a council house' but are now labelled as elite because they voted Remain. Performing recognisable, authentic 'local lad' identities is, therefore, complicated by the insistence in current political discourse of connecting to an imagined 'left behind'; one that, as we see from Brexit and movements across Europe and the US, constructs an image of a disenchanting white working class as 'the left behinds' and typically ignores ethnic minority working class populations.

### ***3.2. Professionalised and representative: clashing rationalities producing ambivalent affects***

Councillor's different degrees of professionalisation affect their orientation towards the representational relationship and the kinds of legitimating discourses they draw on. Backbench councillors, for example, tend not to work as councillors full-time, unlike cabinet members who do, and who are remunerated to a level more in line with salaried

work. Doing the work of a cabinet member involved both professionalised discourses and work practices like managing budgets and working closely with council officers, alongside the representative work which all councillors engage in. For the Labour cabinet members I shadowed, representative and professionalised functions had different rationalities and practices; differences which could be incompatible and uncomfortably felt by councillors. I witnessed this in particular with Councillor Rose, the woman Labour councillor I shadowed at this time. She was adamant that the party needed to refute left-wing, pro-Corbyn members and policies, and instead work on appealing to swing or right-wing voters. In part this relates to her political position at the centre of the Labour party. She articulated her political approach to campaigning around the EU referendum as pragmatic; that 'you get workers' rights not by ignoring big business'. She argued Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn lacked the commitment to collective responsibility essential to Labour politics. These views were, she claimed, borne of her experience of fighting a difficult seat. Boundary changes meant that her seat was difficult to retain, and she had to work hard to get the Labour vote out. Though Labour ward members had doubled under Corbyn's leadership, she lamented these new members' seeming lack of engagement with traditional organising, such as attending ward meetings. This meant that, 'though my heart is on rent caps and anti-homelessness but [my] head knows it won't be supported'. Though this was presented to me as a pragmatic political approach based on her experience of campaigning, it conflicted with her statement that Labour ward members had doubled under Corbyn.

For Cllr Rose, being 'authentic' in her relations to her voters meant resisting left wing ideas. But it was also indicative of her role as a cabinet member whose role was to make difficult decisions about services in the area. Whilst I was shadowing her, she took on a new cabinet position which involved closing local libraries; a deeply unpopular local decision. We had a number of discussions about it, where she described the local opposition and how she related to it. She would then describe how even though she found it difficult to take the decision, she felt she had to take responsibility for doing it as the cabinet member responsible for cutting costs in that area. I noted in my fieldnotes that I thought she kept bringing it up with me because, as her researcher shadow, she could talk about her internal conflicts and unease with the decision with no political risk in doing so. The competing rationalities of her representative role and her cabinet role produced ambivalent affects and ways of relating to her work.

### ***3.3. Space invaders and making space: ambivalent investments in councillor work***

At the Western council, I shadowed a relatively new councillor, Councillor Beatty, who had been rapidly promoted under a new Labour administration. The council had a gender balance on the cabinet, the largest percentage of women councillors of all three sites, at just under 50%, and had a historically closer relationship to local feminist groups both within and outside political parties. But working class and BME representation in the council was poor, as was a focus on equality issues like health, education, employment, housing and police, which affected these communities. Although the cabinet member I shadowed had been selected and elected with comparative ease and speed, this was a highly unusual journey into and upwards through local government. For another BME cabinet member, the journey to a senior position in the Labour party took years, and repeated attempts to stand for leadership positions. Early in our interview, Councillor Beatty had told me that she had stood with some reluctance, in part due to her uncertainty about moving from a 'militant' activist position to one of formal, institutional political power. As a teenager, she first entered the council hall building as a representative of a city-wide 'race equality' initiative. She described walking into a council meeting where a decision was being made on the allocation of funding to one of the predominantly-BME areas of the city. She described her fury at seeing no-one on the council, either officers or councillors, who looked like her, or who had any understanding of the local area under discussion and the needs of its inhabitants. As a volunteer and public sector worker fighting for greater services and resources for the city's BME communities, she had experienced the frustration of having her organisation's demands for better local services declined by council officers. She was therefore understandably sceptical about the ability of councillors to effect change. She described her experience of Labour's selection process:

The fact that they chose me shocked me and I thought 'ooh', because my other two colleagues are white women, very much Labour, you know, they go to the meetings and they're very much... (Cllr Beatty)

In the extract above, she notes her shock at being selected as a Labour candidate for the ward, and contrasts her position to that of her two other Labour ward colleagues. There are usually three councillors elected for each ward, and their political constitution can vary, but in this case, both of the other ward representatives were white women and Labour councillors. This utterance, though it tails off and she does not actually articulate what it is they are 'very much' like, is very expressive and full of meaning. She is describing a certain kind of ideal woman Labour candidate; one who is white, who is actively engaged with the party and attends all the meetings. What she leaves hanging

in the air is as important as that which she articulates; saying ‘...and they’re very much...’, followed by a pause, indicates there is something to be said about the way in which the white Labour women are, but that for whatever reason, it cannot be said in that moment. In part, my position as a white woman interviewing her may account for her reluctance to say more. But I also think this non-verbal expression hints at, whilst not silence as such, then certainly a kind of quietness or reduced vocabulary associated with how to talk about whiteness and gender in this context; though there may be much to say about them, they are not necessarily easily articulated, or heard, for some.

Whiteness, and its attendant exclusions, takes localised forms. In this council, some of its traces might be felt around the kinds of expressions councillors feel free to make, and the moments, as above, when they feel unable to express what they wish. As with the discussion above, when there is a white majority, discussions of race and racial inequalities may be hinted at, but muted, and fade into nothing. In recent years, the Western urban council has made explicit attempts to understand and tackle issues of under-representation of BME people, and to focus on issues which predominantly affect BME communities in the city. One of the BME cabinet members was the first, and only, councillor to explicitly reference ‘intersectionality’ and whiteness in our discussion about the culture of the council. Deliberately tackling racism, racial inequality and whiteness, both in terms of representation and policy focus, has not been without backlash, however. Whilst I was shadowing her, a BME cabinet member was on the receiving end of a complaint on social media, referring to her apparent interest in ‘diversity politics’ (coded for ‘race’ politics) over ‘socialism’. Though councillors have to deal with numerous complaints, this one was notable for coming from another Labour councillor, and a self-identified feminist socialist white woman. The assumption that a concern with racial inequality moved BME councillors away from caring about socio-economic and class inequalities is both inaccurate and offensive, and reflects similar accusations feminists have received in relation to betraying class politics by focussing on gender inequalities. The consequence of a rhetorical move like this is to seemingly locate the ‘proper’ focus of the Labour party with an imagined *white* and male working class, ignoring the intersections of ‘race’, class, and gender along with other axis of (dis)privilege. As I note in the first data chapter, the present manifestation of behaviours and utterances like this must be seen in the particular local context of this city’s history with racism and race inequality. For many years, BME communities in the city have been neglected and marginalised. As a former important site for the British slave trade, with its attendant racism and disparities in wealth among local people, the city has also seen numerous demonstrations against racist policies by employers, police and local authorities.

Backlashes over BME councillors' actions against racism fail to acknowledge the messy ways in which people experience, and are positioned by, privilege and oppression. Even when she spoke about her lifelong fight against racism and race inequalities, Councillor Beatty acknowledged her simultaneous relatively privileged position as a middle class woman:

My background is not the usual 'I came from the Black community', I was brought up in a very white, middle-class and upper-class area. My parents are very Jamaican working-class, but the opportunity they had to save their money and buy a house outside of the Black community, that's what they did. [...] I went to the local primary school where me and my siblings were the only black kids there [then] I went to a grammar school and it was an all-boys school [but] it had just turned co-educational. So it was me and [X] as the only two black girls at the school [of] like 1200 maybe 1400 boys! [...] I was brought up in that kind of culture. So I've never, ever, and my children will tell you the same, I'm not intimidated by my surroundings. People will say to me, 'did you suffer racism?' and I'll say 'yeah of course I did' but I was an arsey cow [laughing] so it just came with the territory. But I can stand on my own two feet. So when I actually left home and came into the community I found it really, even, difficult people accepting me cos I didn't speak Black enough right? [laughs] Though I can speak Black right?! [laughs] Cos I used to say to people 'don't watch what goes on just because you know I went to a grammar school and I speak the way I speak' - I had the exactly same upbringing that you did. It's like, what goes on behind closed doors, so I may have had a fancy address and house and what have you, but we had a typical Jamaican upbringing, you know? So yeah, race and being in... you know, race and being in a very white environment (Cllr Beatty).

This extract, a response to my question about her motivations for standing as a councillor, reflects on her position as both a perceived insider and outsider to the Jamaican community. It is a narrative which reflects the tensions and dynamics of being positioned between two different kinds of communities; of standing out at the white, otherwise all-male school, but not 'speaking Black' enough in the Jamaican community, of growing up in a middle-class area and attending a grammar school whilst experiencing the Jamaican working-classness of her parents. Balancing these dynamics required an

ability to adjust her speech patterns depending on the space she's in, and arguably the development of a thick skin (or becoming an 'arsey cow', as she puts it).

But she also speaks about moving between spaces characterised by different norms of race and gender without feeling intimidated. She also attributes her ability to move across differently raced social spaces to her middle class background. Research on MPs has indicated that middle class backgrounds contribute to a sense of entitlement to represent among some women (Liddle and Michielsens, 2000a). Whilst this may have contributed to Councillor Beatty's ability to move across a variety of social spaces with relative ease, there were two other important factors which enabled her lack of intimidation; her sense of humour and a lightness with which she wore her councillor identity, and having other BME colleagues from similar backgrounds whose friendship was an important source of sustenance. In talking about her relationship with another BME councillor during his election, she said:

I felt like I needed to have his back because I could see that there were a lot of people around him, err, white people, no disrespect. But I just felt that there were a lot of people around him who, if he did win, would kind of look in, you know, favours to be, you know. [...] And he needs, he needs someone to give him a reality check. Cos being in this kind of environment, even working in here, he needs to have a... yeah I'll dip into his office and we'll have some Black time [laughs]. You know, we're just, we're just ourselves, we are just ourselves. Because you need to understand the power dynamics in the city has shifted, and it's not even that it's in the hands of black people or it's that it's in the hands of working class people, we're just ordinary people (Cllr Beatty).

This extract reveals a number of ways in which whiteness forms the waters in which all the city's councillors must swim. She comments on the kinds of fears she had for her colleague if he did not have other BME people from a similar background around him; that people would be looking for favours, and would therefore not be able to give him a 'reality check'. This suggests that one of the ways in which whiteness is felt is through a lack of collegiality, and an expectation of transactional relationships. The effect of whiteness as a dominant relation is present not just in the content of what she says but also in the way she says it. Her exclamations of 'no disrespect' to me as a white woman highlight our different positions in relation to whiteness as dominance. It is why she and her colleague need 'Black time'; a time and space carved out of the usual rhythms and

white spaces of councillor work where 'we're just, we're just ourselves, we are just ourselves'. Though it is more informal, this is much how a 'safe space' should operate and highlights the importance of separate caucusing and activist spaces.

Finally, this paragraph expresses something of the complexity of class. In the last few lines, she claims a working class identity, despite having previously identifying herself as having a middle-class upbringing with working class Jamaican parents. It shows the variation with which people express their own class identity and indicates the definitional confusion of class, patterned as it is through gender and ethnicity. It is also something which was demonstrably a preoccupation of Labour councillors; that articulating a nearness to a working-class identity was seen as important and even necessary in local politics.

#### ***4. Changes in the Labour party: institutional challenges to the 'legitimately local'?***

Commenting on Labour's attempts to deal with crises of representation via positive action measures, one woman described the situation at the Midlands city council:

And women, we are having AWS seats but the problem is when you've had a, you've had a very much male dominated council for a very, very, very long time, to make that work you actually then lose a generation of men and that's not good either [...] It's not just that AWS are always an imperfect solution to a real problem, it's that sometimes the way that they're implemented makes it worse. And actually to be quite honest with you, there are political people, there are people in the party above the city council level who like to implement AWS badly because then it kind of creates a backlash against them and actually that stops AWS working at parliamentary level (Cllr James).

She articulates a common concern that in order to make way for women, men must lose out. But alongside this principle, she details the very practical ways in which AWS has been utilised as a tool against its very aims. In the Western city also held by Labour, ways of enacting authenticity, legitimacy and authority are changing. Here, there is commitment, at least from Labour, to increasing women's representation over a number of years. There is also significant appetite for increasing the number of BME and women representatives through commitment to reinforcing all women shortlists; identifying and supporting potential BME candidates and implementing further cultural change around

work/life balance, flexibility and support for those with domestic and caring responsibilities. At the Western urban council, councillors may be more able to adopt pro-feminist identities as a result of the deliberate emphasis on equalities and diversity work from the Labour leadership, as well as the more established women's movement in the city (both within and external to the Labour party) which has been active for a number of years in terms of helping to support women candidates become and remain elected. Combined with the election of a large number of new, younger councillors during the course of my fieldwork, this has meant the cultural climate is far more supportive of women and BME candidates coming forward, and has opened up more possibilities in terms of the range of behaviours associated with doing politics.

## **Conclusions**

In this chapter, I argue that becoming a councillor is not a comfortable process for many Labour councillors, who attempt to be seen as both an activist and a representative, and as such have complicated and ambivalent relationships to power structures in local politics. Hegemonic, 'authentic' Labour councillor identities – which are gendered, classed and raced – are constructed via political performances and in talk; the relentless campaigner, for example, is brought into being as much through actual canvassing as it is through (not always truthful) boasts to colleagues about how many doors they knocked last night. For activists outside formal party politics, legitimacy may primarily rest with the *doing* of certain kinds of activities (Craddock, 2017, 2018). But in political parties, legitimacy is as much constructed and negotiated through talk as it is through action, and often primarily so. This accounts for the compulsion to stretch the truth of one's own history, as I noted in the 'shop floor' councillor's earlier account.

I contend that the desire to claim an 'authentic' working class identity, both towards ward residents and other party members, influences councillors' priorities, decision-making around campaigning, and interactions with the public and media. Not only is this identity norm marked by class in particular ways, but it is masculine and white. As a norm, the image of an 'authentic' working class masculine identity operated within both Labour dominated councils, though in localised forms and with different effects. This is to say it functions as a kind of ideal type – a cultural norm – that influences practices; I do *not* claim that it is possible, or desirable, to locate or define an actually 'authentic' Labour party or working class identity.

Women's participation in local politics, and in formal politics more broadly, has long been bound up with a struggle for gendered legitimacy. Research has shown that the notion of an 'ideal activist' in left-wing activist groups, imagined as an 'extraordinary individual' capable of unreachable standards of activism (Bobel, 2007), is actually male (Craddock, 2017, 2018). Puwar (2004) similarly shows how the 'somatic norm' of a Westminster politician is also male and white. The figures of the extraordinary male activist and the white male representative are both present in the normative ideal of an 'authentic' Labour councillor. The 'authentic' and legitimate Labour councillor is gendered as white and male because of how the identity is narrowly defined by certain kinds of discursive and embodied practices. These practices are done in relation to two particularly important 'others'; ward residents and other local Labour councillors.

Gender norms, changeable over time and space, influence ideas about how a politician should behave and what kind of person they should be. As political legitimacy is a socially constructed and relational process, in order to understand it we must recognise how norms of gender, class and race influence this process. In the case of women leaders, for example, their legitimacy is often perceived in ways that focus on their gender presentation (Gardiner 2015). I argue that the culturally valued Labour councillor identity needs to be widened to include other forms of activism and political performance. Like Craddock (2018), I consider a key element of this re-evaluation needs to be a notion of care-ful political motivations and practices; where there is less attachment to the kinds of physically demanding, and physically and discursively close relations to ward residents. As alternative forms of campaigning and communication open up other opportunities for councillors to manage the representative relationship, so too must the possibilities and risks they offer to women councillors be interrogated. This extends, for example, to the possibilities of normalising social media communication as opposed to holding surgeries, which may enable some women to combine care work with councillor work more effectively. However, the potential risks exposures to online harassment and abuse, plus an expectation of always being available online, must also be factored into any such analysis.

Interrogating these stories not only reveals the challenges and opportunities afforded to representatives by the political cultures and climate in which they carry out their work, but also indicates an enduring yet evolving paradox within representative democracy itself; that the figure of the 'real people' is one constructed by the system of representative democracy itself. As parties appeared to merge ideologically in the UK and representatives increasingly came to be drawn from a professional class who

reproduced themselves, the image of the unrepresented peoples came to the fore. Arguably, the notion that representative democracy forges an image of who is unrepresented is not a new phenomenon and is a perpetual consequence of the limits of representation. However, as my participants noted with varying degrees of alarm, the image in current political discourse in the UK predominantly focusses on white working class lives as the unrepresented.

## Data Chapter 3: Respectable and reasonable political identities

### Case Study Overview

As a county council, the southern council forms one of the 'upper tiers' of English local government, with a comparable policy remit to metropolitan and unitary authorities. Its geography comprises significant rural areas, some major urban areas and a coastal border; a varied landscape which produces a range of local industries and socio-economic needs. However, whilst there are areas of deprivation within the county's urban, coastal and rural communities, overall the county is a wealthy one. It is the least ethnically diverse and most middle-class dominated area, and this is reflected in the councillor composition. Just fewer than a fifth councillors were women and all councillors were white. The Conservative party have dominated local politics for many years, with UKIP and the Liberal Democrats forming the main opposition.

The county is considered one of the least deprived 'upper tier' local authority in England, and contains the least deprived local authority district in England. The county has a large rural, wealthy and aging population; 22% of the total population are estimated to live in rural communities characterised by older and wealthier groups with far less ethnic diversity than their urban counterparts. As of the 2011 census, 89% of residents were white British, with the significant ethnic minorities described as Asian (2.6%) and mixed race (1.5%). The county's links to military life are not just historical, however. With a naval base and army camps, the county is a significant site of contemporary British military activities and life. The county economy focusses on four key areas: aerospace and defence, financial and business, ICT and digital economies, and logistics. The employment rate is higher than the national average, with the Ministry of Defence as one of the largest local employers in the area, along with aviation and engineering companies.

The largest conurbations within the historic county boundaries are administered by separate, Labour-held unitary authorities. During my fieldwork, this partition caused significant tension in relation to English devolution; the different city and county councils were trying to come up with a devolution plan for the area, yet their priorities differed significantly. The Labour-held cities centred on ports along the coast and so were important sites of employment and industry, bringing wealth to the area. However, the ports depended on well-maintained arterial routes through the surrounding countryside for the transportation of imported and exported goods; a mutual dependency which

reflects just one aspect of the complicated local picture of English devolution. At the time of my fieldwork, the county council was going through the public consultation process for their second attempt at a devolution proposal which sought to encompass all urban and rural areas under a Combined Authority structure. This proposal was in response to plans put forward by the port cities in the area for their own Combined Authority, in a Southern version of the 'Northern Powerhouse' devolution model. But the diverging priorities of the rural and urban areas, and a lack of coherent identity within the region, undermined each potential devolution deal.

## **Introduction**

In this chapter, I try to make sense of the less visible, unmarked aspects of political cultures which inform councillors' accounts of their experiences as politicians. As part of my research, I spent time shadowing, observing, interviewing and interacting with Conservative party councillors. At times, it felt as if nothing of interest was really going on. This was a view reinforced by Conservative councillors' own statements about not being very politically minded people. It was in contrast to experiencing an intense and heightened emotions of the Labour-led council I had just left. This presented a new challenge; how to reflexively explore this 'niceness', 'nothingness' and self-proclaimed 'non-politicised' identity. As feminist sociologists of work and organisations have long indicated, organisations are never neutral, but are instead constructed for a highly gendered, classed and raced 'ideal' worker (Acker, 1990, 2006). To explore the unmarked, I needed to make sense not only of activities, actions and words, but also of the silences, absences, the unacknowledged and non-identities that formed the 'background terrain of the normal' (Scott, 2018). Though being attentive to the unmarked is important in each research site or project, in the Conservative-led County Council, the unremarked was, paradoxically, productive in more pronounced ways. As Susie Scott argues:

Nothing is always productive of something: other symbolic objects come into being through the apprehension of phantoms, imaginaries, replacements and alternatives, which generate further constitutive meanings. A sociological analysis illuminates these processes, revealing how much nothing matters (Scott, 2018).

'Nothing' is still a space, and one that can be filled with possibilities. It is also, as Scott intimates, rarely a true kind of absence, but rather a way of conceiving a particular space,

(in)action, or self that contributes to the way the social is formed, and power within that field is maintained. Studying Conservative councillors in a Conservative-majority council was productive in a number of ways, which I explore in this chapter.

I consider how Conservative councillors engaged in different identity negotiation. I argue that whilst these are also complex and contested, there are different ways in which Conservative councillors define who they are in relation to others, and who those others are. As with the previous chapter, I show how two aspects of councillors' relational identity work are manifested and contested; firstly in relation to their locality and residents, and secondly in relation to those they identify as a political other (Labour and UKIP councillors). I consider the non-political identity expressed by many of the Conservative councillors who I encountered; that they were not ideological or 'doctrinaire', as the Conservative Leader of the council repeatedly informed me. I then consider the ways in which this particular Conservative self-proclaimed 'non-doctrinaire' political identity was normalised under a regime of neutral, respectful, moderate behaviour and language, and in what ways this was marked by gender, class and race. I draw out some of the exclusions, contradictions and opportunities produced by this political identity, allegedly unmarked or neutral, but which is actually middle-class. One effect of the latter is the construction of a localised, normative Conservative political identity as reasonable, respectful and professional. Though this has political implications and exclusionary effects, I argue that the professionalised discourses and practices do allow some women to experience the culture of the party as easier to navigate than I found within the Labour party. This was surprising to me, as the Labour party have far greater history of (albeit contested) equalities work, and have better (albeit imperfect) procedures in place to deal with abuse and discrimination. Although the local Conservatives I spent time with had little recourse to such measures, some women could feel comfortable and at home.

### **Encountering epistemological challenges**

To make sense of the subtle processes by which certain behaviours and identities become normalised and valued, I first had to interrogate my own position as a researcher. This was particularly complicated in the case of the Conservative majority county council, and I see some of these complications and contradictions reflected in the experience of councillors themselves. In some senses, my position was that of an outsider; as a feminist, socialist researcher in a Conservative-majority council, my politics were oppositional to many. But in other ways, whilst I could not be considered an 'insider',

my identity markers reflected those of many of the councillors and fell within their scope of recognition; as a Southern-accented white, middle-class woman who knew the county well due to family ties to the area, I was able to move through the spaces with relative ease, and experienced a warm welcome and inclusion from councillors. Their positioning and recognition of me as similar was uncomfortably felt. This is not least because, were I from a different background, with less knowledge of the locality and a different accent, the access, trust and welcome may have been very differently experienced. I was uncomfortable my own politics conflicted with the fact that this was a field in which my habitus as a white, Southern middle-class woman meant I knew how to behave and my own 'middle-classness' was the norm, even as my own feminist politics were not. In other councils, my middle-class habitus was visible and out of place, especially in some Labour spaces where particular masculine, working-class identities dominated. In the Southern county council, I was quiet, discreet and did not challenge their opinions. Conversely, because I was not a disruptive presence I think I was included in more activities.

I think this reflects broader experiences of working in a culture which you oppose, but are part of. My background makes me a part of this field and I know how the 'rules of the game' work here, but many are rules which I reject and resist. My discomfort, experienced paradoxically as a result of being welcomed and included into an environment I recognised but disliked, acted as a kind of analytical springboard through which I was able to consider more carefully the complicated and contradictory ways in which wider patterns of dis/privilege can be experienced by local politicians. An example of this is how one of my interviewees, Cllr Granger, explained progression routes within the Conservative Group, 'basically if your face fits, would sum it up.' When asked what a successful 'face' might look like, I expected Cllr Granger to reference whiteness and being a man, as she had been the only councillor to explicitly link gender to the political culture in our interview. It also seemed obvious considering the overall composition of councillors and the dominance of white men on the cabinet. Instead, she replied, 'well it's a nut I haven't cracked. You see people progressing up the chain, others stagnating.' I realised that what may seem 'obvious' to a critical feminist researcher, is not experienced in the same way by a woman who is bound up within the doxa of the local Conservative party and its cultural expectations. This is not to imply that I consider such Conservative women as operating under 'false consciousness', but rather that when one is invested in an institution and its culture, and when one's habitus aligns with the doxa of the institution, inequities which might appear wholly obvious to an outsider (or, more accurately in my case, an insider/outsider) will be experienced as mystifying. This is an

example of the range of contradictory experiences I also found difficult to untangle and make sense of as a result of my own insider/outsider relation to this particular council.

As a feminist researcher attempting to be continually reflexive about my situatedness and positionality, the Southern county council was a frustrating research site. The frustration manifested in a desire to 'strip back' the layers of 'reality' to 'reveal' what was hidden behind the niceties, despite this going against my epistemological instincts. I think this speaks to the ambivalence left-wing feminist researchers like myself encounter when examining Conservative politicians, and Conservative women especially; that Conservative women's role is problematic because of a lingering assumption among researchers that feminism is only, really, aligned to the left (Berthezène and Gottlieb, 2018). This has the potential to impact ethnographic research in important ways. As Campbell and Childs point out, there can remain a sense of suspicion and derision of 'Conservative women's politics as the politics of the falsely conscious [...] [that] what they need – and we parody here – is some good old fashioned consciousness-raising.' (Campbell and Childs, 2015b). I thus aim to explore Conservative women councillors' experiences, attitudes and actions in way that disentangles what I observed from my own dispositions, despite our political differences.

All women Cabinet members I met in this council participated in the implementation of austerity measures and cuts to local services predominantly affecting other women. I wish to avoid gendered dichotomies or assumptions about women substantively representing other women; there is little homogeneity among women councillors, as with women more broadly. Councillors may organise to resist austerity and be elected on the basis of doing so. They may take a pragmatic approach to implementing cuts, trying to minimise harm done to their communities wherever they can. Or, they may support the cuts to a greater or lesser degree. Some research indicates that Conservative women, both party members and supporters, tend to be to the left of the Conservative party men on economic issues (Campbell and Childs, 2015b). Despite David Cameron's commitment to a feminisation of the Conservative party from 2005-2010, which saw an increase in the number of Conservative women MPs, this has not equated to enduring or consistent pro-feminist or pro-women policy. The party's commitment to a decade of austerity in the UK has disproportionately impacted women, and especially minority ethnic women (Campbell and Childs, 2015a; Sandhu and Stephenson, 2015; Vacchelli, Kathrecha and Gyte, 2015; Bassel and Emejulu, 2017).

I now turn to the ways in which Conservative identity claims are manifested and unfold in practice, through observations during my time shadowing the Leader of the council, as well as interviews.

### **Conservative as non-political identity?**

During my interviews and encounters with Conservatives, I was presented with the image of the non-‘doctrinaire’ Conservative politician. It is an identity which was claimed by a number of Conservative politicians I spoke with, across research sites, though I focus on those from the Conservative majority County Council here. On the one hand, an unwillingness to conceive of councillor work as motivated by political ideals may obscure the ideological roots of political policies such as austerity. On the other hand, research indicates that councillors often do not think about local politics as ‘political’, where politics is understood in relation to Westminster-style conflictual party politics. Women in particular distanced themselves from practising politics in this way or as seeing themselves as particularly political (Jones, Charles and Davies, 2009). I explore the gendered dimension of a ‘non-political’, supposedly unmarked political identity shortly.

When I first met the Leader of the council, Councillor Arnold, it was to interview him at his home in a wealthy, rural part of the county in Southern England. His house and expansive gardens bordered a national park. I got lost trying to find it, hidden as it was down a lane where the houses were set well back from the road, and he greeted my late arrival with some impatience. His posh accent and the surroundings made me feel suddenly very aware of my dented and scraped old car, strewn with papers and sandwich wrappers inside. I was flustered, and the niggling feeling that I had committed some other impropriety, besides being late, stayed with me as the interview unfolded. During the interview, he used arcane phrases like ‘brother’ when referring to other people, not only gendering each referent as a man regardless of their actual gender identity, but doing so in a way that seemed both benignly intimate and slightly threatening at the same time. He questioned my phrasing when I asked about his ‘journey into politics’ and interrupted me several times. I felt like my presence and questions were an irritant, which I could not wholly understand, considering he had agreed to the interview and I had provided an overview of the project before meeting him. In order to calm myself down, I let him talk. He was expansive on most topics I asked about, but particularly that of his own political identity and that of his fellow Conservatives. He said this:

Conservatives, was it Hailsham [who] said that the wise ones like Church and their gardens, and the foolish like fox-hunting, something like that. But they're not dogmatic, doctrinaire people, for the most part. That's not to say that [this applies to] the special political advisors who become obsessed with issues and get themselves around ministers, sort of hopping around ministers like bees round a honey pot, but, [this is] if I were to talk [about] the Conservatives in this village, I mean (Cllr Arnold).

His recognition that there are Conservatives who 'become obsessed with issues', primarily those who work as Special Advisors to Government ministers, serves as a distinction between Westminster Conservatives and the rest of the party. As with other political parties, the local party is often defined in distinction to the centre (Jones, Charles and Davies, 2009; Charles, 2014). Cllr Arnold first acknowledges their existence, but then dismisses their behaviour as merely obsequious 'hopping around ministers like bees round a honey pot'. This serves as a more powerful way of minimising their importance than if he were to simply claim that *most* Conservatives were non-political people. Instead, he straightforwardly emphasises that Conservatives are 'not dogmatic, doctrinaire people, for the most part'. This is exemplified in the reference to Hailsham, with fox hunting coming to stand for the kind of issues-based politics that might stir passions and cause fierce debate or protest. He uses the quote to signal his agreement with Hailsham that those who are passionate or driven by societal issues like fox hunting are 'foolish', whilst those who prefer to abstain from such politics are 'wise'. He is positioning himself, and most other Conservatives, as reasonable and ordinary, whereas those who take to political issues are unreasonable and out of the norm. He emphasises gardening and Church; seen as ordinary and moral pastimes, which are evocative of a definite kind of expression of middle-class Englishness. This is not an empty, neutral position. Rather, it is expressive of an identity, disposition and attitudes that are central to the history of a kind of rural British Conservatism, status quo middle-class identity. It is echoed in the sentiments of John Major PM's speech depicting a vision of 'Little England' as 'the country of long shadows on county grounds, warm beer, invincible green suburbs, dog lovers and pools fillers' (John Major 1993 speech). Ironically, this evocative description was directed towards Conservatives on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Britain joining the European Community, and it still finds political traction from this Conservative councillor almost 25 years after Major's speech, and in a very different political climate

It is these nuances of middle-class class culture – the apparent ordinariness, respectability and reasonableness – which inform the way local Conservative councillors

think of themselves and their version of politics, and construct particular hegemonic political identities in the council. Donna Haraway indicates that binaries are not just constituted by extremes but 'also by that which floats in between these two poles' (Muhr, 2011). Excess, as I use the term here, is a way of othering councillors like Labour and UKIP councillors in order to shape an identity which seems to 'float' unremarked and normalised between such apparently problematic extremes. But it can also be used productively for thinking outside binary terms (Borgerson and Rehn, 2004). In part, the Leader can distance himself from 'excessive' behaviour because he has no need for it; with a Conservative majority, though he may need to be persuasive, he does not have to demonstrate 'excessive' emotionality or behaviours in order to be heard or garner support from the Group. But I argue this positioning of the Conservative self as moderate, and others as excessive, is also deeply located within the socio-historical development of the British middle-classes; that reaching respectability, legitimacy and virtue involved finding balance between the opposites of working-class and upper-class cultures. Tjeder (2002) argues that the development of middle-class 'cultural capital was [located] in their own self-image built on the idea of moderation, of being different from the supposedly unrestrained proletariat as well as the debauching aristocracy' (Tjeder, 2002, p. 67). Though speaking of historical Swedish middle class masculinities, there are striking resemblances in his description with the development of British middle class (masculine) Conservative identities.

He was not the only Conservative councillor I interviewed who resisted the idea of being considered a political being. One of the Conservative women in the county council described her entry into politics:

So I decided these are very nice people, I share their values, their thoughts on things and it's very rude not to join up. So I joined up, still went to social activities. Then one day out of the blue I got a letter saying would I like to stand as a district councillor. I ignored it, I thought someone was having a joke as I've never been a political animal (Cllr Sloane).

Though Cllr Sloane did not consider herself a political animal, she acknowledged that she found an affiliation with her Conservative friends' values and this was her gateway into standing for election. More than the attractive values, however, was their 'niceness'. This is another important dimension to the kind of political identities which were valued in the council; pleasantness, niceness and politeness where all emphasised as the way

politics was 'done around here'. When I asked her if she could identify the values she shared with her friends, she stated:

I'm not sure I'd use the word values. I got on with them because I liked the people. They came from, they were people who were used to thinking, and people who had views on things. [...] They were not just loud mouthed without thinking it through. They had a view, they were able to reason it through, and at least they were able to substantiate it (Cllr Sloane).

This claim to a Conservative identity again places its emphasis on being reasonable as opposed to dogmatic. This adaptable and pragmatic approach to practising politics is arguably in sync with the historical Conservative value of reforming in order to conserve (Campbell and Childs, 2010). The way she describes her Conservatism reflects various Conservative political theorists and historians who have also approached Conservatism less as an ideology than as a habitus which adapts to different circumstances and reflects or responds to the political issues of a given moment (Berthezène and Vinel, 2017).

The county was described as a 'particularly nice part of the world, nice in terms of the environment but also in terms of the quality of the community and the life. [These] are fragile flowers that could easily be wiped out' (Cllr Davies). The nice-ness that we earlier saw reflected in a description of other Conservative councillors, is also applied to this description of the local environment. As with the earlier references to notions of pastoral rural Englishness, there is power in the image he conjures of a delicate or precarious place; that this way of life, the environment and the community are 'fragile flowers' always at risk of being 'wiped out'. The *quality* of life echoed in these accounts is a rural, middle-class English identity. By suggestion this way of life is precarious, he positions it as being under threat and therefore something which Conservatives, like the Cllr Davies in this quote, seek to protect.

## **Gendered and classed Conservative identity formations**

In this Southern county council, led by the Conservative party with a significant majority, there was little support for implementing any measures to improve women and BME representation, reflecting a problematically gendered logic that candidates should succeed on 'merit', without interrogating what 'merit' might look like, and how that image might serve to exclude. Likewise there seemed little interest in making changes to the working environment and practices which might make the job of a councillor more conducive to those with caring, domestic or other employment responsibilities. Many of the councillors came from business backgrounds, and the working practices reflected this; presenteeism was commonplace, and the expectation to work long hours without complaint was also rife (though this is common across parties and councillors). There were far more noticeably 'traditionally' gendered, middle-class ways of practicing politics. Women played an active role in policing these practices. Cllr Sloane, for instance, issued strong condemnation of any emotional display during meetings. During our interview, she spoke with withering contempt for a former woman cabinet member who 'used to get so upset all the time' (Cllr Sloane). Here, women were referred to as 'ladies', men were 'brothers', all were 'friends'. Laughter, jokes and liberal use of the word 'friend' during cross-party exchanges were used to undermine or display congeniality when in fact there may be conflict. Emotion was used as a political resource by all councillors, regardless of party or council. I had grown used to seeing anger and frustration expressed by all parties in the Midlands city council whilst in the backstage arenas away from the public gaze, a politics of 'respect' was often emphasised. In the County council, however, the politics of 'respect' was more pervasive. Although these patterns varied across spaces, the politics of respectability was undeniable as a way of channelling ideas of how to be, what to say and how to say it. Although on the one hand, respectful interactions in political spaces is something to be desired and which feminists have fought for, I argue that 'respect' in this instance indicates a conformity to certain norms of behaviour which actually does not permit differences to be aired at all, especially those that would be critical of the white, male, middle-class dominance of the space.

In public, women on the whole adhered to the style of 'respectable' politics. Even when complaining in private interviews to me about gendered differences in terms of political styles, women Conservative councillors spoke cautiously:

I think women tend, and this is very much a generalisation, to get on with it. They will get on and do the work. Men are perhaps more verbose about what

they are doing. Again tales out of school so I hope it's confidential (Cllr Faircloth).

There was certainly no public space to have a conversation about gendered styles or cultures. A number of councillors, when told about my research focus, raised their eyebrows in polite concern. I felt a silent pressure not to conform to the stereotype of the 'emotional' or 'angry' feminist, and shame when could I feel myself bowing to this pressure in small ways like altering my dress or removing the word 'feminist' or 'gender' from my project description when asked. I told myself, surely my feminist heroes would never have conformed to such pressure. But I wanted councillors to take me, and my research, seriously; I intuitively felt this would not be possible unless I 'dialled down' the feminism.

Dress codes in the council were also very formal, with every man in a suit, and the women dressing in formal skirt suits and having very professionally done hairstyles (somewhat resembling Margaret Thatcher in one case). This was the council where I felt, as a researcher, I had to pay particular attention to what I wore, investing in a smart pair of trousers for my shadowing as I had none. I was uncomfortable in such attire, but it helped me to move through the space with greater ease. Having a Southern English accent, with family ties to a nearby area, along with my whiteness (there was only one BME councillor on the council) and middle-classness facilitated the ease with which I could move through the spaces. 'Dialling up' my conformity with the somatic norm by altering my dress or expressions in relation to my research felt like ontological complicity with that norm, with attendant feelings of shame and betrayal to my research and feminist self. These conflicted feelings evoke the loneliness of someone who can 'feel' the brick walls (Ahmed, 2007b; Ahmed, 2017b) of an institution but be complicit in reproducing them. It was not as though there was no contestation, but just that this was done differently, in less open, public spaces which meant there was often little to hold onto in terms of counteracting inequalities among members.

Councillor Granger, a Conservative woman with many years' experience as a councillor, described dealing with her colleagues as the biggest challenge. She said this was because 'a lot of them are highly political, and I'm not. You know, frightened of the newspapers and things, which I can't understand, all this paranoia' (Cllr Granger). She also claimed to be apolitical, and she directly linked her interpretation of the norms of behaviour with gender. When I probed her description of her own identity as 'not political'

in contrast to the other 'political' members (who had, conversely, identified themselves as non-political), she said:

Oh I would fit with my party's policies of course, that matters. It's just the little boys that we have [laughs]. I sit in group meetings looking at the ceiling and looking at my nails while they all go on about 'oh there was this article' and blah blah blah and they get all wound up. I'm just not interested. There's a lot of, it amuses me, a lot of banter at Full Council between different parties, which I enjoy quite frankly but only as a spectator sport [laughs]. You've got the 'hearty hail-fellow well-met' and you've got the 'well, I don't want to interfere, but could I just say, excuse me please', you know. Men and women do both and quite honestly I think they're both effective in the end (Cllr Granger).

Her way of dealing with the culture of the local party was to disengage at party political meetings, 'looking at the ceiling and looking at my nails'. To her, it was the men who were getting too emotional over political work. The banter and different political styles were, in her view, performed by men and women. But getting emotionally 'wound up' over press was something the 'little boys' did. Her infantilising reference to men and how they amused her indicate that the dismissal of emotions in politics is performed by women as much as men. What is more, it works to draw a boundary around what it is acceptable to get emotional and care about being important to councillor work; press coverage, in her view, was not a legitimate reason to get emotional.

The conflict and posturing that went on in debates was what she identified as party politics, which was often what men engaged in. In contrast, she and other women Conservatives spoke about not engaging with it unless they had a point of contention over a ward resident or cabinet portfolio concern. For this councillor, she understood her work as caring about and for her community, which was not seen as political work, and prioritised being in the community rather than the Council Hall. This echoes the findings of research in other UK local government spaces (Charles and Jones, 2013; Charles, 2014).

### **Majority rule, privacy and dissent**

When I began my research, each council had a different political party majority. This changed as my PhD progressed, particularly at the Western urban council, where the change to a Labour majority happened relatively soon before fieldwork commenced. At the Midlands post-industrial council and at the Southern rural council, however, Labour and the Conservatives respectively had a historical dominance. This shaped the dominant behavioural and identity norms significantly. In the Southern rural council especially, where the Conservative party ruled with a large majority:

Because the reigning party, if that's the right word, the party in administration, are the Conservatives, they have the majority on the floor, I don't think, honestly – this is going to sound very strange – I don't think politics comes into it. We all just do the best we can, the best way we see things (Cllr Grey).

Here, she is defining politics solely in party political terms. As a Conservative councillor sitting on the County Council cabinet, and with years of political experience at both County and District level, she was describing the political culture of the County council in this statement. In one sense, she describes a situation common to any council or level of government where one party has majority; when there is a majority, there is little need to 'play politics' in order to get decisions made. This means the majority party tends to dominate the way business is conducted, the values and ethos which are prioritised, and the kinds of behavioural expectations among councillors. In this way, a party with a large majority has a significant impact on the political and organisational culture of local government, and so shapes the experiences of all councillors, whether or not they are a member of that party.

Her statement indicates the kind of values and ethos that governed all councillors' behaviour under the County council's Conservative majority; that what was valued and respected was a way of practising politics that did not necessarily see party lines, or see councillors as political, and most importantly of all, did not see councillors as ideological. There are two ways in which Conservative councillors achieved this non-political identity for themselves. Firstly, by positioning themselves in relation to what they were not. Many Conservative councillors I spoke with valued people who were ostensibly not emotional, political or ideological, though they were all of these things, just in particular ways. Secondly, they emphasised qualities such as respect, politeness and rationality as those worthy of esteem.

As Cllr Arnold, the Conservative leader, told me, the county council has had a 'pretty secure, stable Conservative administration for quite a long while [which] colours the level of behaviour' (Cllr Arnold). He described his personal experience as Leader in relation to the behaviour among members as 'very good, everybody's been extremely friendly, actually over the other side of the political fence, nobody's been rude to me or snubbed me, but everybody has been polite and welcoming and very helpful' (Cllr Arnold). He linked the majority the Conservatives enjoyed to both the culture of politeness and to the maintenance of discipline among Conservative group members. In terms of Group discipline, they did not have as extensive consultative and democratic forums and processes as the Labour party, but policies were discussed as a Group, with the leadership listening to members' concerns. Describing the decision making process after I had attended Full Council with him, he stated:

We discuss the main issues and check that the members are prepared to support it. We have a policy if the majority of the group, and normally things are unanimous, but if the majority determine on a particular issue [...] then the theory is they [individual members] can abstain in a council debate, but they mustn't vote against what the majority of the group has decided. We've got no sanctions, actually, when it comes down to it, what can we do? Threaten to withdraw the whip? Where does that get you? Nowhere at all. So it's a question of getting people to come with you, and for the most part they do that without any great problem at all (Cllr Arnold).

As he notes, there is little else the party leadership can do in order to curb disquiet or opposition among a political group, besides withdrawing the whip. This would only be done in exceptional circumstances, and likely as a result of some public indiscretion. All political party leadership depends on fostering particular cultures in order to promote unity. For Labour, this involved more democratic and less hierarchical decision making processes, though the expectation remains that at the end of these processes, party unity is upheld in any public facing arena, despite any lingering personal oppositions to a particular proposal. For the Conservatives, it was a respect for, and greater investment in, party hierarchies and a culture of politeness and rationality, that appeared crucial for maintaining group discipline and unity. Cllr Grey described her experience of respectful politics, including with members of the opposition:

Even the opposition here, and this probably won't do your research a whole lot of good, we all have a great respect for each other. If they come to me

with a health-related problem in their division, they will come to me, I will find out the answer and they will write to say thank you. We might have a fierce debate on the floor but we have that respect for one another (Cllr Grey).

This was not an unusual experience from councillors in different sites, and from different political persuasions; as others researching national politics have found, the public-facing confrontational style of politics often bears little resemblance to cross-party friendships and alliances which enable daily political work (Crewe, 2010, 2015). In all meetings I witnessed in the county council whilst shadowing the leader, Conservative councillors were polite and acquiescent towards the leadership. There was little opposition expressed openly during meetings, beyond polite suggestions to policies. I suggest that such behaviour is intimately tied up with a particular Conservative identity; an identity that, on the surface, appears as defined by that which it is not, but which nonetheless conforms to strict behavioural norms and modes of political expression. What is particularly interesting in this quote is her suggestion that her observations would not do my research 'a whole lot of good'. This statement indicates the expectations she had of me and my research; that I would be looking to find instances of conflict among councillors. This assumption on her part perhaps demonstrates the cultural dominance of the idea of formal politics in England as defined by a Westminster-style adversarial model.

One way in which I noticed this identity manifest itself was via the preferred approach to communicating concerns via private email or meetings as opposed to voicing dissent within Group meetings. Whilst I was shadowing him, the Leader would regularly be interrupted by councillors knocking on his door to discuss a matter arising from a previous meeting. In part, this might reflect some councillors' desire to be 'seen' by the leadership and foster warm relations with a view to being considered for progression in the future. But it also signals a value placed on private deliberation over public, open and oppositional politics. Though the interruptions annoyed the Leader, they were encouraged as a preferred way of dealing with issues from all members, Conservative or not. When discussing the Conservative approach to decision-making procedures, he stated that he was far more open to making changes to a proposal if approached privately. He said:

Sending private notes, sending an email to say, so if opposition member says, 'look we're really worried about this, can you think about it?' Well, we're

reasonable people, we'll think about it, we're not doctrinaire or dogmatic (Cllr Arnold).

This intimates a more general preference for informal communications as opposed to engaging in heated debate, persuasive arguing or open opposition both within and without their own party. Corridor politics is important in all organisations for getting work done, and many councillors' preferred informal modes of communication. But again, he emphasises his reasonableness as crucial to getting things done and making decisions with others; being 'reasonable', in this instance, is performed and expressed via a preference for informal methods of communication and deliberation. Not only might a dependency on this approach be deemed 'unreasonable' by politicians of different persuasions, but for a researcher, such privacy makes it difficult to understand how decisions are made; they are not visible to an observer if dealt with over email and via private one-to-one meetings. The value of shadowing the Leader, in this case, meant that I could be exposed to some of the 'private' approaches and deliberations, as he would typically discuss the contents of his inbox with me each day and allow my presence during most of the one-to-one meetings requested by councillors who wished to bring up grievances. My difficulties, prior to shadowing, reflected the difficulties other councillors had in understanding the transparency of the decision-making process and how decisions were made around the formal structures of the political management process as in the vast majority of cases, councillors told me, decisions have already been made before they reach public debates.

### **Engaging in equality talk**

Describing his political beliefs in more detail, the Council Leader stated that:

I'm definitely a pro-European Conservative. And certainly, whilst I accept the free market and capitalist system is the best way to create wealth, I certainly would accept that, equally, you have to devise systems that make sure that not very many people, and indeed nobody as far as possible, is left behind in that system (Cllr Arnold).

The articulated belief in a kind of 'benevolent' free market capitalist system, where 'not very many people, and indeed nobody as far as possible' is left behind by inequality within the system, is contradicted by both later statements and actions. Speaking about the benefits of a large Group majority and the ways in which the

discipline of the Group operated, he referenced the Council's closure of 80% of the county's Sure Start Children's centres:

Was it Thomas Hobbes who said 'when all else fails, clubs are trumps' so, I know that this is going to be a difficult decision, let's say re-organising children's centres, closing some of the buildings down. You get a lot of people who say 'this is an outrageous idea and it's going to be the end of the world', [so] it's helpful to know that when we get to the council chamber and have to ratify that decision, I've got [a majority]; people who, for the most part, are going to be very good and put their hands up [to vote with the Leadership]. And we just say 'clear off'. I hope we don't do it in such an autocratic way, but that helps, to know that you have got a good majority so it makes it easier to take decisions that you know to be right but you know are not necessarily going to be immediately popular (Cllr Arnold).

By calling on Thomas Hobbes in this narrative, Cllr Arnold evokes an air of reasonable gravitas to the decision-making. This has the effect of abstracting out political decisions to intellectual discourse. He does this by frequently citing others, which has the effect of externalising his ideas so they seem truer, less personal and idiosyncratic. Commentators and scholars have highlighted the deeply political nature of choosing austerity as a response to the 2008 financial crisis, and its harmful effects on families, young people, migrants, women, and BAME women in particular (Annesley and Himmelweit, 2010; Sandhu, Stephenson and Harrison, 2013; Sandhu and Stephenson, 2015; Bassel and Emejulu, 2017). Funding for children's services in some areas of England has been cut by almost 50% since 2010, with more than 500 children's centres across the county closed since 2010 (Barnardo's, 2017; Gayle, 2018). This has a direct impact on women and those with dependents, in particular those from deprived areas of the county, as well as causing job losses to those working at the centres. During my fieldwork, this council was going through the public consultation process regarding the closure of these services.

Besides indicating the obvious strength of the Conservative majority, the Leader's statement demonstrates a number of features of the way the Group was run. Firstly, the framing of any opposition as overly dramatic and irrational, and that closing essential services is not 'the end of the world'. It also shows how one aspect of being a 'good' Conservative councillor in the county council is the ability to conform to the Group and not abstain. This is a view that he, as a Leader, would share with Leaders of other parties

I spoke with, but the lack of openness and opportunities for dissent to be expressed is a particular feature of the Conservative party. By prioritising informal communication and individual meetings with councillors, the leadership individualises opposition and makes it more difficult for collective dissent to appear. Finally, it shows the belief and investment in the public performance and narrative of 'there is no alternative' to austerity; that the rational, 'right' thing to do is to take difficult decisions. It is a narrative that has been dominant for so long in the public discourse during Coalition and Conservative-led governments in recent years and is intended to lend a legitimacy to those implementing austerity, even if there is more dissent than he is willing to admit to.

### **Conservative councillor resistance to Conservative government?**

As a wealthy county, with closer relationships to government ministers than any other council I visited, many councillors were, to some degree, cosseted against severe resistance by residents to the council's cuts. However, opposition to the cuts was made by the leadership, both privately to government ministers and publicly via local media. The county was also an influential member of the Local Government Authority (LGA) 'because we're a big authority, we pay them a lot of money, we have a lot of votes, so I think they like to keep [the council] fairly happy' (Leader). Accompanying the Leader to an LGA meeting in London whilst I was shadowing him, I witnessed the deference with which he was treated by other county council leaders. Whilst the LGA is a cross-party organisation, the LGA County Councils Network is dominated by Conservatives as they hold the majority of English county councils. At the Network's meeting, there was a high level of organisation and professionalisation. As a group, the Conservatives in the Network constitute an influential lobby, sharing their experiences of ministerial relations with one another. A new minister had just been appointed to the Department for Communities and Local Government (now the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government), and so there was a lot of discussion about Leaders' encounters with him.

The Leader of the Council (a former MEP) and Deputy Leader (a former MP), in particular, had a level of both formal and informal access to some government ministers which I did not witness at other sites. For instance, the Deputy Leader cut short our interview in order to travel to London for dinner with a government minister (he declined to say which one). In the council cabinet meeting following the Leader's trip to the LGA conference, discussion formed around the new ministerial appointment, and who had possible ties to him. Though it might be a reach to consider the county council as

seriously influential, as a Conservative party heartland, the Southern rural county leadership did occasionally offer warnings to government over measures considered too damaging. This was especially the case over education, an area where the county outperformed many other areas of the country and this accounted for their resistance to forced academisation of schools. As the Leader, Cllr Arnold, described:

We were in conflict with Nicky Morgan on a number of issues, academisation in particular. But I suspect she's got a little effigy of me and sticks pins in it. I mean, trying to say to her, 'for God's sake, don't force schools to become academies'. If they want to let them, there are good academies, there are bad academies, there are good community schools, there are bad ones. But to force everything down this doctrinaire line didn't seem right and I can see that's going to come up with grammar schools (Cllr Arnold).

When asked as to the effectiveness of their oppositional lobbying, and if the government took notice, the Cllr Arnold concluded that, 'Well, yes and no is the straight answer. [Forcing schools to become academies] was dropped from the law. But it wasn't dropped from what they were trying to do. So we had a bit of influence but not compelling.'

These instances of negotiation with government were for the most part undertaken by the Leader and Deputy Leader in formal capacities. But for those councillors who represented deprived wards in the area (and as such witnessed more of the effect of the cuts), the belief in austerity measures as valid was not necessarily seen as incompatible with being a responsible, engaged and caring councillor. This contradiction was notable in my interview with the Cabinet member for adult social care. She described her ward as including both affluent areas and 'one of the most deprived areas in the country'. When asked about the challenges of her role, encompassing both her ward-level work and Cabinet role, she highlighted the current financial climate:

I think to have been in this position [Cabinet member for adult social care] that I'm in ten, fifteen years ago, when we were awash with money, it would have been lovely. I think right now it's quite frightening at times, quite scary about how we're going to manage (Cllr Faircloth).

I then followed up with questions about what impact she could see in her ward and how she felt about the (Conservative) government's cuts and austerity measures. After a pause, she said:

I think you can take the Conservative out of it. As my role as a councillor, I work for the local people and part of that [is] I've got a ward that's in the top ten [for] deprivation and actually we need to change people's [ward residents] minds and attitudes (Cllr Faircloth).

She considered the real issues to be linked to poor attitudes to work being passed from generation to generation, lack of educational attainment, and poor health caused by 'bad' lifestyle choices. What she does here is to individualise the problems; an approach which has a long history in Conservative ideas about poverty and the state's role in contrast to Labour's collective approach. Whilst the individualisation of problems and solutions has become extreme under neo-liberalism, this political distinction has a long history. For her, it is not a question of austerity but individual attitudes; if people are willing to change their attitudes, then everything will be fine. It is ideological in the sense that Conservatives individualise problems whilst, Labour takes a collective approach. This is echoed in the individualised ways which Conservative leadership dealt with opposition within the local party. I also saw her response, along with the earlier quote about not doing my research any good, as attempts to frustrate and patronise the interview process. Her assumptions about what would or would not do my research any good highlight the complications of reciprocity with which every ethnographer encounters; how much of yourself and your own beliefs do, or can, you share? She may well have inferred my political views and feminist values from the kinds of research questions I was asking. No doubt as a cabinet member used to giving press interviews, she was also practiced in responding to probing questions about the decisions the council took.

## **Conclusions**

In this chapter, I analysed how Conservative councillors created a narrative of the Conservative-majority county council as reasonable, nice, ordinary and respectable. I argue that the ordinariness of this identity is actually a specific manifestation of rural English middle- and upper-classness. The reasonableness, respectability and niceness contribute to a culture of professionalism within the county council. I documented my own discomfort with this culture stemming from my insider/outsider habitus within and against it. In some ways, however, my awareness of the potential 'roadblocks' to my time

as researcher there made the culture easier to navigate. I also recognise that some of that discomfort associated with an insider/outsider position stems from an awareness that both myself and the women I spoke to were *attracted* to the culture of professionalism, its niceness and its respect. It was a culture in which the women I spoke with thrived and were more at ease in their roles than in either of the other councils, which I found equally compelling and unsettling because of the exclusions it produces (for example in terms of it not being acceptable to express a full range of emotions or dress in a way that is comfortable). It is a culture in which some women – namely white, middle-class women – can feel comfortable and at home.

## **Data Chapter 4: Against municipal walls: abuse and complaints in local politics**

### **Case Study Overview**

The western urban council is a unitary authority with an unusual administrative structure featuring a directly elected mayor and a mixed-party cabinet. The council has been historically Labour-run, with Liberal Democrat and Green Party competition in more recent years. Women make up almost half of all councillors, there is gender parity on the council cabinet, and the council has the most developed relationships with local women's and feminist groups.

A place of contrasts and growth, the city is historically less ethnically diverse than the Midlands city and is also larger and wealthier overall. With a higher employment rate than the national average and a relatively young population, local industry is dominated by aerospace and engineering and creative and digital industries. However, like in other English cities, the most affluent areas directly border those of extreme poverty and deprivation with pockets of severe deprivation. It is also becoming increasingly ethnically diverse, with the proportion of the population recorded as belonging to a minority ethnic group almost doubling between 2001 and 2011. But these figures belie the centuries-old Black history of the city; a history which has been often hidden, side-lined or misrepresented and only confronted in recent years.

A maritime city, the locality grew wealthy from importing and exporting goods, and played a major part in the transatlantic slave trade for well over a hundred years. The city's slaver merchants were responsible for shipping over half a million enslaved Africans to the Americas. Well-known local slave traders are commemorated with statues or road names around the area, and many local landmarks and historic buildings were funded by slave merchants or slave ship owners. Centuries later, some of the descendants of those enslaved Africans arrived in the city as Caribbean migrants from the 'Windrush' generation. From the 1950s and 1960s onwards, the city's black citizens played an important role in challenging and changing discriminatory British laws, with protests at racist recruitment policies helping to shape the UK's first Race Relations Act. Protests against poverty, poor housing and racist sus laws in the 1980s highlighted the continuing inequalities and discrimination experienced by many of the city's black communities. The city's controversial past in relation to race, slavery, discrimination and

inequality, continue to shape the local politics in the present; not least with regards to how the notion of 'local' is contested and negotiated by black councillors.

## **Introduction**

In recent years there has been a striking rise in the amount of abuse women and minority ethnic politicians face, with a rise in reports of assault, intimidation, and abuse towards politically active women (Kuperberg, 2018, p. 673). Global movements like #MeToo and #TimesUp aim to tackle abuse and harassment in workplaces, and increasing attention is now being paid to harassment of politicians and intimidation of politicians in public life (Committee on Standards in Public Life, 2017). In British politics, women politicians are increasingly raising their own experiences, prompting the resignation and suspension from political parties of a number of men MPs (Krook, 2018b, p. 65).

In this chapter, I explore how institutions respond to the abuse of councillors, and how councillors negotiate their experiences of the abuse itself, and the subsequent complaints processes. The range of experiences which could fall under the category of abuse are myriad, including sexual harassment, harassment and abuse online, and bullying. Though there have been recent attempts in feminist political science to investigate and theorise abuse and, specifically, violence against women politicians, I draw on a 'broader social meaning' of abuse (Boyle, 2019, p. 23) as conceptualised in wider feminist literature and which I discussed in my Literature Review chapter. I concentrate on forms of abuse councillors receive at the hands of their colleagues, as this was the dominant form of abuse discussed in interviews. There are other forms of abuse councillors receive from different sources, in particularly online. These warrant further investigation but I focus on councillor-to-councillor abuse because it came up most in interviews. There are two issues at play; the abuse itself and the ways in which relevant institutions handle the abuse. I focus here on what happens when abuse is made visible to institutions via formal or informal complaints; there are likely to be many more instances which occur but which go unreported and unresolved. My attention is to what complaints about abuse *do* in political parties.

In this chapter, I connect different party political inequality regimes and return to an analysis of councillors as a whole. This is because abuse towards councillors is an issue which cuts across party politics. There are different kinds of abuse councillors receive, in much the same way that women MPs face threats and abuse online (Dhrodia, 2017; McLoughlin, 2018), from their constituents (Jones, 2019), and from their

colleagues (Krook, 2018b). Councillors also face abuse online, through media, and from their ward residents, but in this chapter I concentrate on one aspect of abuse; the abuse women councillors receive from their fellow councillors. I focus on this particular aspect because this was how my participants primarily discussed issues of vulnerability, risk, discrimination and abuse with me. In this chapter, I do not just concentrate on the instances of abuse. I am also concerned with how they are or are not dealt with. There are different kinds of institutional response to a councillor's complaint about an abusive colleague; through council-wide structures and procedures, and/or using political party procedures. When political parties handle complaints, there is a further distinction between formal and informal processes and ways of handling complaints. I begin my discussion with how one political party used informal processes to deal with a woman councillor's complaint about a fellow Labour colleague. Later on in the chapter, I discuss more formal party political processes. Whilst I separate these processes and procedures out in my discussion, it should be noted that there is often much cross-over and evolution between formal and informal ways in which political parties handle complaints about/among their members. There appears to be little in the way of a blueprint with how to handle the abuse of councillors, especially when that abuse comes from fellow councillors. This makes it a complex phenomenon to trace, both for researchers and, most importantly, for councillors themselves who often feel individualised or abandoned by inadequate support structures.

Before I go on to discuss participants' accounts, I set out the key contextual issues which have contributed to making it increasingly difficult for councillors to seek formal support for abuse and complaints of abuse over the last few years. Following the contextual section, I move on to analyse instances of abuse complaints where political parties have taken responsibility for resolving the issues. I primarily focus on party dynamics and structures in relation to complaints about abuse among councillors because this is how the majority of participants discussed their experiences.

### **'Petty, partisan and malicious': (re)framing complaint and its regulation**

Because the different institutional response to abuse was an integral part of how councillors experienced abuse, I reference the processes and texts which inform these responses. These texts are the councils' individual Codes of Conduct for members and the party disciplinary procedures, the latter of which are often invoked verbally. I begin by tracing the recent history of members' Codes of Conduct, in particular focussing on the changes to their universality and applicability, instigated by the Coalition government

in 2012. These changes, via the Localism Act 2011, constituted a move away from centrally prescribed Codes of Conduct and national standards boards and towards locally-produced documents and complaints procedures. These changes were framed at the time in terms of doing away with 'frivolous and malicious complaints' in relation to councillors' behaviour (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2011).

Whilst these changes have been differently understood and taken up by Local Authorities when subsequently producing their own Codes of Conduct, they were instigated with Conservative political intentions and ideologies around what constitutes 'common sense' behaviour for local councillors, and how issues of complaint and compliance should be understood and dealt with. Following Dorothy Smith's (2014) work on incorporating texts into institutional ethnographies, I consider the locally-produced Codes of Conduct as active texts which are performative, and which link the particular local circumstances of how they are read and enacted with wider gendered and raced discourses and relations of ruling. This is an important point worth emphasising; it is the ways in which policies and documents are *enacted* or taken up (or not, as the case may be) by actors which is of interest to me here, rather than a document analysis of the texts themselves.

In 2010, the Coalition government announced in its Programme for Government (HM Government, 2010) that the nation-wide 'Standards Board regime', which regulated the handling of English councillors' conduct (the devolved nations set their own local government standards), would be abolished. A long-standing Conservative commitment, this came into force in April 2012, via the Localism Act 2011 (Sandford, 2016). It removed the statutory requirement for Local Authorities to have a nationally set Code of Conduct and a standards committee for investigating complaints against councillors, including those made by fellow councillors (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2011). As part of wider efforts by the then-Government to devolve local decision-making, though not necessarily fiscal control, to Local Authorities, the national 'Standards Board regime' was removed in favour of the establishment of *local* Codes of Conduct and an 'independent person' to investigate alleged breaches (HM Government, 2010, p. 11; Sandford, 2016, p. 5). The Localism Act removed the statutory requirement for local authorities to have a standards committee, and for those unhappy with the way in which a complaint was resolved, there was no longer a national authority to which they may appeal. Whilst the previous standards regime, Standards for England, was able to suspend councillors, the changes implemented in 2012 meant that councillors in breach of Codes of Conduct can only be censured or removed from a position of authority they

may hold, such as sitting on a committee (Sandford, 2016, p. 8). The rationale behind these changes was outlined by the Conservative Minister for Local Government at the time, Bob Neill MP:

The Standards Board regime led to an explosion in petty, partisan and malicious complaints that dragged down the reputation of local government, as well as suppressing freedom of speech. (Ministry of Housing Communities & Local Government, 2012)

Framing *all* complaints as ‘petty, partisan and malicious’ is significant because it serves to position the majority of complaints against councillors as malicious, and thereby a threat to (local) democracy. This sets a particular tone for how councils should respond to complaint. Discrediting and undermining complaints and complainers, but as we will see, discrediting (and therefore stopping or slowing) complaint and complainers is also carried out via more pernicious responses to, and handling of, complaints. Bob Neill described the removal of statutory requirements around members’ Codes of Conduct and regulatory boards as striking a ‘common sense balance between electoral accountability and personal privacy’. He invoked his own experience of being a former councillor to legitimise the need to do away with ‘expensive and frivolous investigations’ by regulatory boards (Ministry of Housing Communities & Local Government, 2012), ostensibly therefore enabling councillors to concentrate on their representative work. Occurring as it did during the height of ‘there is no alternative’ austerity politics, the potential savings to the public purse were also highlighted as a meaningful motivation to abolish the Standards Board for England. The Department for Communities and Local Government, as the sponsoring Department, estimated a saving of £1.5m in the year of its abolition and thereafter an estimated £6m per year (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2011, p. 11). The desire to be rid of ‘expensive and frivolous investigations’ into ‘petty, partisan and malicious complaints’ concerning elected representatives can be understood as part of a broader Conservative party approach to suppressing forms of redress more broadly, as witnessed with the introduction of employment tribunal fees in July 2013, since deemed unlawful by the UK’s Supreme Court.

It is worth pausing here to briefly reflect on the prevalence of the word ‘conduct’ in relation to council Codes of Conduct. Originating from the Old French ‘conduit’ meaning a pipe used to convey liquid (Oxford English Dictionary, 2018), the word ‘conduct’ retains this connotation in relation to the conveyance of appropriate behaviour,

and emphasises a leadership or guidance quality. Hence, councils' Codes of Conduct are also about *how* members are directed, with the wording of the Code frequently asking members to be 'committed to behaving in a manner that is consistent with the following principles'. Codes of Conduct compel councillors to (be)*have*, or be in possession of, certain qualities already, where such qualities are understood to be inherent and intrinsic whilst at the same time aspirational, communal and formally delineated.

The local Codes of Conduct for each of the three Local Authorities I was researching varied only slightly in length, number of clauses and sub-clauses, and their content. Some were readily available on Council websites, others were very hard to find. The Codes of Conduct for all three councils primarily focused on issues relating to pecuniary interests, transparency and accountability. Only one council's code made explicit reference to issues around equality, and even then it occupied the last position in a list of eight other principles; I have drawn on two experiences of complaint at this council, which I discuss later in this chapter. It is important to note the formal inclusion/exclusion of 'equality' issues because their relative inclusion or exclusion shapes what can be said and thought of as complaint; that two councils do not even include 'equality' as a formal principle means expressing a complaint in these terms becomes doubly difficult. As we shall see, however, the formal inclusion of 'equality' at one council certainly does not guarantee complaints made on these grounds are taken seriously. Codes of Conduct may address complaint *procedures*, even leading to the production of new procedures, but they do not take into account the failure of procedures to alter conduct, including, and especially, the conduct of those tasked with resolving complaint.

In my analysis, I explore this area in relation to three instances I witnessed during my fieldwork, one in each council, where councillors instigated or were implicated in complaints procedures. I consider how council-wide modes of regulating behaviour are actually taken up by councillors in their everyday representative work; what the effects and limitations of these active texts and procedures might be; how they work alongside party political disciplinary procedures; and what regulating complaints about sexual and racial harassment and abuse actually looks like in local politics. In mapping out the experiences of both formal and informal complaints involving councillors, I also draw on Sara Ahmed's evolving work on complaint, where 'the experience of identifying and challenging abuses of power teaches us about power' (Ahmed, 2017a); specifically, how power is safeguarded and challenged in the everyday life of, and institutional cultures surrounding, local politicians.

## More than one snap: the disjunctures of abuse complaints

For one Labour councillor, Cllr Mack, her account laid bare the difficulty she experienced in being a complainant of harassment by a male councillor and the kinds of 'brick walls' (Ahmed 2017) she encountered: 'I sort of fight my case, my corner, pretty effectively but I also think that there are other people who are falling by the wayside and walking away just because, you know, you have to fight so hard.' In her experience, the Labour party was exceedingly slow to respond to her complaint and in her position as complainant she was doing the kinds of work necessary to make the political institutions of council and party she inhabited more accommodating to others. She outlines her experiences with reference to herself as a 'tough' person which enabled her to take a complaint forward:

I would say I'm unusually tough so it [the abuse from a colleague] doesn't upset me [...] I'll be honest with you, we actually had a situation, and I actually want, really want to say this, I had a situation where one of my colleagues had some kind of a *personality disorder* and actually became quite bullying and quite harassing. And he wasn't just doing it to me, *he was doing it to lots of other people*. But I was really the only one who was prepared to make an official complaint. The Labour Party didn't deal with it well, it actually took *11 months* from the... it's been, *it was going on for four years*. But it took *11 months* from an occasion where I thought I was actually going to be physically assaulted to them [the Labour party] actually taking some kind of action. And he, even then, he was allowed to continue as a councillor with certain, under a whole raft of conditions [...] So you know he's sexist. [...] This *particular guy who seemed to have a particular problem* with people who were either women or people who are black and minority ethnic, but *you have to be quite forceful* to actually keep, you know, [taps table for emphasis] to actually sort of take the disciplinary process forward [pause]. It doesn't, it doesn't work as it should. And it was only when *I was able to show* that the Labour Party did have a duty of care that they actually did anything at all. At that point they did act quite swiftly but I had to *actually prove that to them* which was really quite extraordinary I think' (Cllr Mack, my emphases).

It is hard not to experience abuse, or the institutional response to it, in individualising ways. Despite noting that he was abusing others, her reference to a 'personality disorder'

and 'particular guy' with a 'particular problem', casts this experience as an exceptional instance. The rhythms of this passage reflect the individual, ongoing and repetitive work of institutional complaint. It took nearly 5 years of enduring the abuse, trying to handle it herself, and then fighting to be taken seriously by the party. She emphasises how, during this time, she had to work to get her complaint taken seriously. Trying to get taken seriously at work can involve both conforming to and contesting an institution's prevailing gender norms and language (Breeze, 2013). To be recognised and have one's concerns perceived as legitimate, for instance, requires speaking the language of the institution and knowing how to navigate institutional processes. But it can also require breaking new ground, resisting institutional language and norms, and contesting the frameworks for dealing with abuse as they currently stand. The extent to which 'new ground' must be broken depends, to some extent, on the political party's existing structures and procedures; the Labour party, for instance, having a greater tradition of organising around issues of equality than the Conservative party.

She quite clearly defines the problem – that he is sexist and racist – but has to do the work of proving this to the party. These accounts all emphasise the uneven temporal pattern of instances of harassment; one that is characterised by periods of long, drawn out attempts to cope and get used to it, followed by a kind of 'snap' experience like feeling threatened by assault or a moment where the councillor realises 'I really can't carry on like this'. Sara Ahmed (2017a) , in her evolving work on how academic institutions deal with complaints about harassment and abuse, notes that when people describe the process of learning to endure and get 'used to' abuse and how it is (not) dealt with, is one of the ways that normative institutional structures reproduce themselves over time. Describing how it feels to be a feminist worn down by the repeated frustrations one comes up against, describes a moment of 'feminist snap' where new energy is found to keep going. She stresses a need for feminists to 'collectively acquire tendencies that can allow us to break ties that are damaging as well as to invest in new possibilities' (Ahmed, 2017b, p. 162). I think this councillor's account indicates a somewhat messier process than a notion of a linear journey from 'getting used' to something and then 'snapping'. Common in all these accounts is that the process of living through harassment and complaint is uneven and messy; it involves resisting as well as getting used to it, recording the harassment in order to help one day end it, *at the same time* as undertaking work on the self to 'toughen' up in order to endure it. It involves speaking in the voice of an institution to get taken seriously, whilst at times needing to challenge that language and framework where it is not fit for purpose. Enduring abuse and complaint might therefore be understood as involving two key features; the time and energy

involved in enduring many breaking points and the ability to draw on multiple discursive resources and rationalities.

### **Endurance and energy: finding the resources to negotiate abuse and complaint**

For some women, their resources of resilience and energy stemmed from experiences outside of politics:

I'm quite lucky in the fact I've always known that I've got the ability to make things work, to work really hard, if they aren't working I can problem-solve and find a solution and use all of the skills that I've had from a management point of view, from an organisational and a personal HR managing point of view (Cllr Bridge).

Elements of neoliberal self-management emerge in some of the women's accounts such as this, where the mobilisation of skills acquired during professional experience enables her to feel empowered to resolve political issues. For one councillor, it was the combination of structural changes in political life, like altering meeting times to accommodate those with caring responsibilities, with the work on herself to manage time more efficiently, that enabled her to cope with the demands of a cabinet post: 'I mean, over the eight years I've been a councillor [...] partly it's due to me managing my time better and changes within how things are structured' (Cllr Moon). But the individualisation of problems and solutions fails those who cannot, or choose not to, embody and perform strong, resilient and capable political identities.

Of course, there are those unable, or unwilling, to occupy such tough identities and it was unclear, therefore, how alternative political identities could be successfully performed in the council. For example, Cllr Moon later went on to discuss the ways in which friendships among some women politicians were performed:

EA: And in what way do you and the other women support each other?

Cllr Moon: We have laughed together, we have cried together, always very privately. Cos you never cry in public. Ever. Erm [quietly] no, I've got no time for whingeing women.

'Whingeing women' is a highly pejorative phrase to describe those other women councillors who may not be able or willing to occupy a 'tough persona'. The compulsion

to do so may be explained by the historic and still entrenched masculinist cultures of politics in this council. This council's particular expression of masculinist culture is rooted in the historic need to protect local industries from a variety of real, and perceived, threats (ranging from the decline of local manufacturing to hostility towards immigrant communities). Becoming a combative politician was, and still is, considered necessary, particularly as a Labour dominated council operating under a Conservative government. However, the dominance of this approach to doing gender/practising politics leaves little room for those who do not want, or are not able to, do so.

The lack of alternative political subjectivities which could be legitimately embodied provided challenges for both women and men. As Cllr Mack described when discussing her harassment case, it was her male colleague who found the situation more difficult to cope with:

I never actually dealt with anything like that myself for myself before and it, it, it saps energy, it means that you're having to spend so much time dealing with that issue that you're not able to, you know, it's eating up the whole time and energy and enthusiasm and it really is a drag so yeah, it was a massive problem. My other ward colleague, bless him, he's a sweetheart [laughs], so we still work really well together but he's, you know, he's possibly not quite as tough as I am, so you know he found it more difficult even than I did (Cllr Mack).

There were so many self-identified women occupying this 'tough' persona to the point where delineating behaviour along gendered lines would simplify both women's and men's expressions and behaviours.

### **Abuse and complaint: intersections and dislocations**

In some interviews, councillors acknowledged sexism, racism and abuse but relegated those behaviours to a different (less progressive) time. As one woman cabinet member, Cllr Beech, mentioned of a former leader, 'I think because of [the council Leader's] age I don't think he actually realised he was being as discriminatory as he was. And if he did, he'd just shrug it off, you know'. She went on to explain that, in terms of misogyny:

I don't think it's to do with the party, I think it's to do with gender makeup and an old guard, if you like, of those that are sixty-five plus. Not all, but there are

some. And there are some cultural issues with women being in positions of power as well (Cllr Beech).

She identifies the problem resting with older men who have a class-based trade union tradition and, with her problematic reference to 'some cultural issues', men councillors from ethnic minority backgrounds. The latter point works not only to shift the issue of problematic behaviours to another time, but also to the figure of a *racialised*, male Other. The Other in this example was men from South-Asian heritage, as there were no Black councillors at the Midlands council during my fieldwork. By referring to the 'old guard' of men – those over sixty-five – she also positions these problematic behavioural norms as belonging to the figure of an *aged*, male Other. These othering discourses serve to elide the continuing exclusion practices by those in the *present* as opposed to just by those in the past and by those who are *younger* than sixty-five as opposed to just the 'old guard'. I argue that this demonstrates a lack of reflexivity and understanding of the continued dominance of whiteness in council spaces, as well as myriad intra-community differences across different ethnic groups in the city. However, this is also not to say that her diagnosis is entirely hollow; as I discuss shortly, an Indian male councillor also described the significant opposition he and his wife faced from the city's Indian community when they stood as councillors. Other councillors also conceded that things were better than they used to be, and although I remain cautious about unreflective notions of historical progress when it comes to fighting injustices, this is not to say we should not acknowledge and celebrate changes that have occurred for the better.

Cllr Beech went on to say that, 'I think because generationally, I mean, if you looked at the average age of councillors in [the council] I think you'd probably come up with an age of at least 60. When I started I was the youngest and I was here 8 years ago, so I was 36 [laughs] [...] But it is changing, and it's positively changing as well.' Whilst this change, towards a more diverse range of ages among councillors is very positive, the language of progress over time can obscure present, continuing, inequalities. It was noticeable that these narrative devices were most often used by cabinet members, and so their more senior position within the party almost certainly influenced the desire or need to displace issues of inequalities onto another time, another culture, another generation.

I now turn to explore in greater depth the experiences of one of the men I interviewed in the Midlands city council, Cllr Desai. His narrative shows the complexity

of a BME councillor's experience with complaint. A British citizen born in India from a Dalit background, Cllr Desai described how:

Within the Indian community there is a problem, there still is in many places. That's why you see in Indian community there's so many temples on the name of the castes and so on. That inequality still goes. But that's internal Indian community. Here, outside, we were not allowed to be members of working men's groups (Cllr Desai).

The intersection of caste inequalities and racist inequalities served to make his journey into politics a long, difficult and broken one, with members of the Indian community working to have him deselected as a councillor because, as he explained, 'Many of them [those from upper castes] could not tolerate that a person like me, coming from the back [lower caste background], is in the front'. He recounted the explicit racism of employment, trade unions and social organisations in the late 1980s, and explained that when he was first elected, 'the only people who come to the council with a different colour were the sweepers. The ladies come to clean the toilets or sweep the places, and that's it. There was not a single officer in the council house with colour like mine or darker. Not a single person' (Cllr Desai). This has changed thanks in large part to BME councillors' campaign for equality and diversity policies within the Labour party and council.

As we know from other spheres, (Ahmed, 2007a, 2009, 2012), doing diversity work is not only exhausting but can position those doing the work as other, as troublemakers, as disloyal. As Cllr Desai recalled, 'I said to one guy in the front side of the Labour party [...] I spoke to him and he said, "oh [...] we treat everybody equally, we don't need a party policy on anything [anti-racist] like this". So that was first rebuff.' After garnering strategic support from councillors who were resistant to the leadership of the time, he explained that the leadership could no longer ignore the call for establishing a policy on race equality. He went on to describe the frustration he and colleagues experienced as part of this campaign:

So the draft was prepared, it was so weak, prepared by an officer who was also Labour party member secretly [laughs] [...] he wrote the equal opportunity document. And I went berserk when I read it. There was nothing in it. Very little other than a bundle of words. So when it came to the Labour Group in the evening for discussion, before it goes further in any form, cos everything's discussed behind the scenes, and [leader of the council] was

chairing the meeting. So I went berserk with it, I thought, “No, this is not the document which I will accept”. Then there was some disquiet among us. [A colleague], she was my election agent, she whispered in my ear, she said “if you keep shouting like this, they will throw you out of the Labour Group and the document will still be there or they’ll take it back, it may not come back again so quick”. So better accept it, we’ll work at it’ (Cllr Desai).

The energy and resilience it requires to maintain a campaign like this are valuable resources for political life, and may have to be mobilised more frequently by those who do not embody the historical somatic norm (Puwar, 2004). This example also demonstrates another way in which political parties, including those who are most concerned with addressing inequalities, reproduce certain values and norms by the partial and selective adoption of equality policies and initiatives. This is then used to demonstrate the progressive credentials of the Labour party, even as they remain unsatisfactory to those they affect most keenly. His statement also indicates the complexity relating to how different bodies are marked as (in)appropriately emotional in politics. In this example and the earlier example involving Councillor Beatty, it is both Labour men – one who identified as British Asian, the other as white – who are disciplined or calmed down for their emotional outbursts or exchanges. When I was observing Full Council meetings at the same council, there were a number of instances in which councillors – both men and women – would shout. Largely, this was done in order to express a Group response to a point made by an opposition party which they wished to collectively deride. This indicates, then, that shouting is permissible only in certain places within the council (Full Council) and when it is in relation to the opposition, but not within one’s own party. In relation to engagements with the opposition, there is little risk to individual councillors when objections are raised collectively and loudly. But as the above narrative indicates, loud, emotional objections, particularly as a minority member seeking to make changes within the party, carry significant political risks. There are a combination of factors at play which contribute to marking councillors as differently emotional; whilst gender, class and race certainly matter, factors such as the timing of the exchange, whether it took place in a formal or informal council space, and what political aim they were trying to pursue, make a difference to whether or not they are perceived as legitimately emotional.

Perhaps one of the most significant risks is that, through the process of complaining, one becomes synonymous with the figure of ‘complainer’; where a ‘complainer’ becomes a subject position (Whitley and Page, 2015). As the previous

narrative indicates, occupying this subject position may have consequences for equality initiatives or progressive ideals; the figure of the 'complainer' may mean proposals are taken less seriously or, conversely, when a project is considered radical, a complaint may be treated as reactionary.

### **Multiple breaking points: how time shapes the experience of complaint**

One of my more difficult interviews in the other City Council was with a Labour councillor who appeared sceptical of every question I posed, in particular around issues of gender. He was quite clear that,

I think the culture's fine, I don't really see, you've got to separate, this is where I think mistakes are being made here. You've got to separate, you know, personality clashes from culture (Cllr Flint).

He was not alone in raising the notion of personality difference as something which could explain away and minimise any potential inequalities within the council. 'Difficult' people or personalities were often invoked in interviews as an individualising tactic; as something that could be acknowledged but then decoupled from the wider behaviour and culture, meaning that certain questionable practices could be more easily overlooked and potential sites of inequality ignored. By identifying 'personalities' as the source of the problem, traditional masculinised modes of practising politics were individualised and more easily dismissed. Cllr Flint went on to suggest:

I think the culture in the council, you know I'm not aware there's a massive issue, I might be aware there are issues to deal with in terms of people and personalities [...] I'd be surprised if it was perfect but I'd be surprised if there were real problems. That's separate from party political or political issues with personalities, that's different. That is different (Cllr Flint).

By (dis)locating their narratives into alternative times and spaces, councillors do the work of acknowledging inequalities, but then positioning them as either overcome or existing elsewhere. This reflects a similar process of disarticulation which I discussed in the previous chapter on Conservative party identities, where an identity as 'reasonable' depends on positioning others as excessive. The instances of misogyny and abuse described in the post-industrial Labour-led council interview accounts were depressingly frequent at this City council, and the instances were overwhelmingly in relation to fellow

councillors, usually from the same political party. One councillor articulated the extent to which harassment is normalised by political parties and the culture of the council by recounting the bullying and harassment she received at the hands of a colleague:

I think you just have to *develop a thick skin and not get upset* by things. And you also have to, you know, you sort of *learn* that rather than responding when something like that happens you know you've got to *stand back* from it and, you know, start *recording* what's going on and then you know you have to go through a *disciplinary process*. And when the process isn't working you've got to *fight that too*, you know. And it's part of being older, being tougher, not sort of letting yourself go 'ooh well I think it'll just get better', when in fact you know it isn't going to. Having said that, I was at fault really because I let it go on *far too long*. It was, I kept thinking, there were lots of small things that were happening and it wasn't until the *second time*, it was actually the second time I thought I was going to be assaulted that I actually thought, actually, *I really can't carry on like this*. I should really maybe have *taken action 12 months ago* (Cllr Jones).

Learning not to respond, standing back and developing a thick skin are all strategies of resilience employed to deal with the circumstance. She also makes herself to a degree accountable and responsible for what took place. Her resilience-building work, rather than serving to just protect her or resolve the issue, also does the work of further normalising the situation and individualising the problem. There were other women at this council who also articulated a 'tough cookie' persona as a means for survival in masculinised political environments, doing the discursive work of re-centring themselves as agentic subjects in the face of masculinist and misogynist political cultures. In this account, the discursive work is notable in the italicised words; she emphasises the need to *learn*, to *stand back*, to *record* and *fight*. These are all methods by which the slowness with which institutions deal with complaints (where slowing down is a strategy for stopping complaint) are felt and responded to. This is a learned process and an emotional and embodied one; her emotional 'skin' must become thicker, she must learn to control immediate responses in order to stand back from both emotional and physical harm. I understand her need to stand back as both a metaphorical and potentially literal necessity, in the context of the threat of violence she describes.

Whilst working on the self to build resilience or toughness may be a necessary survival strategy for some women councillors, it unwittingly (re)produces the dominance

of certain 'tough' identities as necessary for political work. There is, therefore, less room for alternative modes of behaviour, such as softness, and less scope for greater collegiality. Cllr Jones was very aware of this limitation:

I mean the sexism issue, the bullying and harassment issues actually weren't dealt with, which I think is a real problem, because while I am a tough cookie it affected me and I thought, well actually, if this is affecting me what would it have done to someone else? (Cllr Jones).

When she describes how the 'bullying and harassment issues actually weren't dealt with', this *not dealing* with the issue acts as a form of dismissal, where being dismissed is understood as 'either not taken seriously or not regarded at all in the context' (Campbell, 1994, p. 49). The *slowness* to respond is a key component of this mode of institutional dismissal. Delaying tactics, then, have discriminatory effects and contribute to how organisations reproduce themselves as being for certain kinds of people (Ahmed, 2017b). The lack of immediate and effective action taken by the Labour party to deal with the harassment indicates the limitations of documents such as members' Codes of Conduct or political party disciplinary procedures. Though doing this 're-centring' work may be necessary for maintaining a sense of self, and for political survival, the councillor rightly questions the necessity of having to do this. Resilience and becoming tougher is a response to highly unfair and unequal structural arrangements; a personal solution to a structural problem. Another woman Labour councillor also described the need to develop a thick skin:

And if you're a woman in politics you have to be tough. I used to get up every morning and think 'I'm gonna look in the mirror and a rhinoceros is gonna look back' because my skin got thicker and thicker and thicker. And that's just the way it is (Cllr Moon).

That a woman is required to work on herself and build her own resilience rather than have recourse to organisational forms of redress (despite such formal procedures actually existing) is one way that inequalities are continued. But 'being tough' also disrupts some inequalities by enabling certain bodies to continue to stay present in places where they are considered to be 'out of place'. I consider a particular expression of working-class femininities as particularly salient to this kind of toughness. In the Midlands post-industrial council, a masculinised working-class identity relating to the tradition of masculine trade union and Labour party politics, was a key part of most of my

Labour interviewees' identities. I noted the kinds of performative elements to this identity construction in a previous chapter, with one aspect being a kind of robustness expected from both men and women. Along with the need to construct oneself as agentic in accounts of abuse and harassment – a protagonist in our own stories – it is the importance of classed identities which also affect the ways in which women are expected to cope with forms of abuse.

### **Informal practices, uneven outcomes: when complaints are kept 'off the books'**

Different political parties, in different localities, deal with complaints in idiosyncratic ways. This comes within the broader climate of complaint I discussed earlier, where deliberate steps have been taken by the Conservative government to curb a 'culture of complaint'. But complaints about abuse are also understood to constitute 'threats' to institutions in different ways. Sometimes, complaint is perceived as a threat to institutional or individual reputations (Whitley and Page, 2015). In left-wing and activist spaces, complaints about abuse can be treated as reactionary; cast as a threat to the 'proper' progressive project (however that is imagined in particular spaces) (Emejulu and Bassel, 2015). It is the expectation inequalities are less likely to be found in institutions which are 'assumed to be more progressive that enables racism [and other forms of inequality] to progress' (Ahmed, 2017b, p. 170). Labour councillors spoke with a sense of disappointment and frustration about the ways in which their complaints were handled by the party. I contend that the feelings of frustration indicate a gap between what is expected or supposed to happen to complaints in progressive institutions, and what actually happens. I unpack this further in the subsequent analysis. I was curious how the expectation of criticality or radicalism can serve to protect gender and raced power hierarchies by dismissing complaints as disruptive to, or even a betrayal of, the goals of the group. I now go on to discuss one of the examples which emerged from my fieldwork. This relates to what happens when Codes of Conduct are *not* called into use, and issues of abuse are instead dealt with via informal disciplinary procedures as a 'private' political matter.

Complaints may be handled informally by political parties; with disciplinary measures conducted face-to-face as opposed to over email (which would leave a written record), and addressed at informal times such as during a coffee break in a meeting. As in other work organisations, party leaders preferred to deal with complaints informally, at least initially. Councillors described in interviews how they also sought help from the party, rather than to go through council-wide procedures. This was how, for example, the local Labour party in the Western urban council chose to deal with Councillor Beatty's

complaint about her colleague's behaviour in the episode I discuss in the previous chapter on the Labour party. In this case, an informal method was seemingly judged appropriate for 'private' intra-party issues; with minimal paper trail, minimal meetings, and an implication that the incident was not to be taken seriously. There are risks and implications with this approach, not least the implications for (re)producing behaviour which fails to take abuse and discrimination seriously. The space, then, between what is supposed to happen and what actually happens with complaint in institutions is an amorphous one.

### **Formal disciplinary procedures and 'public' complaint**

An alternative way of dealing with complaint is via formal channels, and is more likely to be used when a public complaint is under consideration. Here, the members' Code of Conduct is brought into the complaint process. In contrast to informal party political mechanisms, the approach is more rigorous, involves a (non-partisan) Monitoring Officer from the Council staff and has a far heavier reliance on formal documents and procedures. But there are also risks and implications. In the following section, I outline an incident of this nature, also involving Councillor Beatty. It involved a public social media post which she was the subject of, authored by another Labour Councillor, Councillor Susan. Because it was a 'public' social media post, and because the complaint about Councillor Susan's conduct came via an external organisation, rigorous procedures involving the Monitoring Officer and Code of Conduct were invoked.

The Labour leadership at the Western urban council were the only councillors in my study who asked if I would be taking an intersectional approach to my study. The (relatively new) leadership made their desire to foreground equality and diversity initiatives explicit, and in particular address the needs of the BME population in the area, too long ignored. After having spent time with some councillors who admitted little interest or knowledge about intersecting inequalities, it was exciting to hear a vision of potential civic pride that addressed equality and diversity so clearly and centrally. But whilst it may have been refreshing for me, two BME councillors spoke to me during fieldwork about the resistance they were receiving as a result of felt that they, as Labour BME councillors pushing for race equality. During an informal chat I was having with one of the councillors in the cabinet corridor, he diagnosed whiteness as the major challenge in terms of addressing issues of inclusion and exclusion in local politics. He expressed awareness of scholarship around gender and politics, and how he thought race was all too easily lost as part of this research. All localities in England are characterised by

differently stratified racial inequalities. In this particular area, there was a long and storied history of resistance from BME communities to racist discrimination. In other councils, racial inequalities certainly existed but were characterised by different manifestations. As the following account indicates, some of this resistance had to take place within Labour, where race was ignored or belittled as nothing more than 'identity politics'.

Later that day, Councillor Beatty and I had a moment together in an otherwise busy day of back-to-back meetings, and chatted whilst she sorted through her email inbox. This is part of the usual temporality for councillor work, moving between the more immediate, performative work of meetings and engagements, to the slower-paced and often drawn out problem-solving labour involved in case work, much of which is carried out via email. Scrolling through her messages, she highlighted some of the diverse issues she was dealing with, until she paused and beckoned me over to read an email over her shoulder. She explained that this email would explain why she and other BME councillors were sceptical of those in Labour who claimed 'progressive' political identities. The email concerned a complaint made against a white Labour councillor, Councillor Susan, by an external body. Councillor Beatty had been copied into the email because she was the subject of accusations made by Councillor Susan. In the email, the external body provided evidence of a social media post in which Councillor Susan named BME Labour members, expressing concern that they did not fully understand socialism. The post proffered that because their background was in 'diversity politics', they approached politics in a more consensual way than Councillor Susan would like, seeking to 'talk' rather than taking 'action' on issues of austerity. Councillor Susan had talked about her feminist and socialist politics when I interviewed her. Her post was understood as an expression of frustration that class politics were not being prioritised by the Labour group, whilst race inequalities were. She connected the focus on other issues as leading to a dilution of the council's opposition to austerity measures. In the responses to the post, many commentators complained of a racist inference that caring about racial inequalities and under-represented Black communities was equated with 'meaningless' diversity politics and repudiation of socialist principles. There were others who defended the post as misunderstood based on their personal knowledge of Councillor Susan's politics, articulating frustration at the ways in which a Labour-run council was seemingly capitulating to the Conservative government on austerity measures.

On this occasion, the Council's Code of Conduct was brought into play during the process of complaint. Out of all three Local Authorities I studied, this council was the only one whose code of conduct explicitly addressed 'Equality' and the social media post by

Councillor Susan constituted a breach of this clause. The Council's Monitoring Officer took over the handling of the issue, and Councillor Susan was asked to issue a formal public apology, which she did. The role of Monitoring Officer is much like that of diversity practitioners in other institutions, where part of the role's requirement is to enable the transformation of the institution, whether the institution is willing or not. As a council employee, and therefore non-partisan, the Monitoring Officer works with the wider council processes (encompassing all parties and members), and the individual's political party mechanisms. That this was a public, visible complaint meant it had leaked out from the boundaries of party disciplinary procedures and risked implicating the wider council and leadership, who had made 'Equality and Diversity' a source of pride. The leadership therefore needed to exhibit a robust defence of this position by supporting a rigorous complaints procedure, what Ahmed might call 'complaint pride' (Ahmed, 2017a), in order to demonstrate the seriousness with which these issues are dealt. On this occasion, because of her proximity to the leadership, and because it was an external organisation who actually instigated the complaints procedures via their formal complaint letter, Councillor Beatty did not become the problem. She declared herself as 'not getting involved'. Because of the trust she expressed in the leadership to take the complaint seriously as part of a wider, vocal commitment to tackling racism in politics, she was able to distance herself. This protected her from the more harmful effects of going through a long-winded complaints procedure and the possibility of being transformed into the problem, or perceived threat to the institution, itself.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I sought to address how issues of abuse are experienced and negotiated by councillors. I focussed on forms of abuse councillors receive at the hands of their colleagues, as this was the dominant form of abuse articulated during interviews and shadowing. There are two key issues documented here; the events of abuse themselves, and the ways in which relevant institutions handle these events when they are revealed. I concentrated on what happens when instances of abuse are made visible to institutions via formal or informal complaints. I discussed these experiences with reference to the kinds of processes and texts which formally delineate what is deemed acceptable behaviour by councillors. These texts are the council's individual Codes of Conduct for members and the party disciplinary procedures, which are often brought into play in informal ways without leaving a paper trail. My emphasis in this chapter has not been on the documents themselves, but on how they are brought into play and enacted by councillors. I do so because how texts are enacted helps us to identify how wider classed,

gendered and raced discourses and relations of ruling shape, and are shaped by, interactions among councillors.

When an institution fails to properly account for instances of abuse, the complainant can experience a second kind of injustice. The kinds of effects my participants describe reflect the ways in which institutional arrangements around abuse significantly affect the ways in which councillors negotiate a (gendered) identity within local government. For some, such experiences necessitated the development of a kind of 'toughness' which in turn led to their difficulty in managing an appropriately delineated (gendered) councillor script. For others, both the experiences themselves and the institutional handling of the case resulted in significant loss of trust with their colleagues, a draining of energy and motivation, and great potential risk to their ability to realise their political aims, such as campaigns to counter institutional injustices. As Ahmed (2007a, 2012) shows via her work on diversity practitioners and more recently in related work on complaint/complainers, when the complainer *becomes* a problem to be 'managed' or 'dealt with', institutional violence takes place; having issues of 'Equality' not formally recognised through the language of Codes of Conduct and party procedures is the first step towards this. I believe the language of violence is appropriate here because focussing on complaint reveals a paradox of identity and legitimacy in institutions; that by declaring a breach of conduct – that another member has demonstrated *not having* certain institutionally directed behaviours or traits – one can risk *becoming* the problem as perceived by the institution, or necessitating the development of another (often tougher, often more resilient) form of subjectivity to survive.

I argue that the lack of effective measures with which to address councillor abuse obfuscates the effects of abuse, and individualises the problem for councillors. This means that 'through tactics that relocate the problem away from the individual and the institution, [...] harassment disappears: the problem never appears as a problem of sexual harassment. Instead, it appears as a number of other shifting problems which include the problem of the women who complain and the harm caused to [political] reputations' (Whitley and Page, 2015, p. 34). Though Leila White and Tiffany Page are referring to sexual harassment in the context of UK universities in this quote, the effects of 'disappearing' abuse via ineffective institutional response to complaints are strikingly similar to some of my participants' accounts. Moreover, I contend that formal modes of complaint and redress have increasingly become more difficult for councillors. Their experiences are situated within a wider context of a political inability to take abuse, and processes of complaint, seriously.



## **Conclusions: Mapping layers of inequality and reflecting on non-dualistic thinking**

In this concluding chapter, I map out the contributions my institutional ethnography makes to current academic knowledge about inequalities in English local politics. I also claim that IE can provide an important, and currently underused, research framework with which to investigate political (and other) institutions more broadly. I argue that IE enabled me to explore multiple layers of inequality and illustrate some of the deep paradoxes and complexities of political life. Using IE can therefore offer important insights into how inequalities are (re)produced, challenged and changed in institutions. It does so by being attentive to the ongoing and everyday way in which inequalities are experienced and negotiated by social actors. Perhaps most significantly for sociological researchers, however, IE is an approach which does not lose sight of the intransigence of institutions or how wider social and political structures shape and are shaped by social actors' everyday experiences. This is especially important for capturing how institutions (and the social actors that constitute them) encounter wider societal changes, and was particularly important for my research, set, as it was, in the context of changes in work alongside dramatic political changes in UK politics. It is IE's orientation towards how actions coordinate and are coordinated by wider relations of ruling which offers an original and useful approach to sociologists concerned with exploring the 'middle ranges of agency' (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 13); those spaces and complex interactions between structures and agency.

In this chapter, I seek to demonstrate the importance of IE by tracing the complexities and paradoxes which my ethnography explored, especially in relation to how institutions that are openly concerned with equality can be the most difficult for minorities to negotiate. I therefore bring together the different levels of analysis which I have mapped out throughout this thesis to analyse how men and women councillors engage with practices and processes of inequality. From this, I consider the concluding reflections and analyses arising from my research questions. I draw attention to how councillors operate as though bridging the boundaries of politics and work through their everyday activities. It is this position, navigating the different regimes and rationalities of politics and work, which makes the negotiation of inequalities in local politics complex. I also consider what my findings indicate for theorising about political representation and work more widely.

The structure of this chapter proceeds as follows: firstly, I return to the original research questions and review findings in relation to each question. I start with a summary of councillors' work, how that work is strange work, and how it is changing. I then discuss what processes of inequality I found were present, highlighting some of the paradoxes associated with the everyday negotiation of inequalities. I end this section by focussing on the wider regimes of inequality which shape and are shaped by councillor work, and how it is possible for some people to thrive in local politics whilst others do not. Finally, I summarise how I went about answering these questions using Institutional Ethnography and reflect on some of the methodological conundrums which IE posed.

In the following section, I elaborate on my contributions further. I trace these contributions in line with my research questions, weaving in threads of analysis from each empirical chapter to show how I answered each question.

### **Different regimes, different rationalities: understanding councillors' political work**

In this section, I return to the research questions. To answer each question, I explore different levels of analysis, centring and decentring different types of identity (worker or representative) as appropriate. I draw on analysis from each empirical chapter to respond to each question in turn. I weave through, and highlight, my contributions to knowledge as I do so before summarising at the end.

As part of my thesis, I explored the nature of councillor work, focussing on practices and cultures. I moved between an institutional and an individual level of analysis, asking how councillors experienced their work and how it felt to do it. I decentred party politics in order to show how councillors in different political parties are workers with similar working conditions. To show the complexity of councillor work, I highlighted the different regimes and rationalities which councillors navigate in relation to their political parties and the council more broadly.

In my first empirical chapter, I considered how we can understand practising local politics as a form of gendered work and make the case for (re)valuing councillors' diverse activities as work. By conceptualising practising politics as work, the research was more able to capture the nuance and complexity of councillors' working lives. I showed what kind of 'work' it is that councillors do, how they understand their own roles as work (and more), and what aspects make it a distinctive form of work. My discussion outlined what kind of work councillors do in relation to their public-facing work like case-work, their office-based work in Council Halls, and their party political performance-based work. Key

to the discussion in this chapter is what makes councillor work unique, in particular in relation to the representational relationship, training, pay, selection and stepping down practices, and the ways in which temporalities clash. As part of this, I draw attention to how Council Halls are places of inequality and difference, and how the rhythms of councillor work can be both enabling and restricting. I argue that part of analysing councillor work involves attending to the buildings, walls and spaces where political performances are carried out; what Puwar (2010) refers to as the *archi-textures* of legislative arenas. It is the combination of performance and material space that work together to give meaning and legitimacy to local politics, and particular kinds of ideas and representations of the local and the nation. Taken together, these different aspects provide an exploration of the unbounded work of being a councillor.

In this chapter I argue that there are different ways of relating to councillor work; through professionalised, procedural, utilitarian or performance-related discourses. I suggest that this mix can produce tensions in how councillors saw themselves and understood their roles; for instance between how to combine a former activist identity with expectations of an elected representative. These tensions are discussed in relation to competing claims over legitimacy which I explore in a later chapter. For some cabinet councillors, adopting a professionalised approach to work enabled them to navigate and justify their position in relation to austerity; that they were, they argued, just doing a (difficult but necessary) job.

As part of this chapter, I note how technology and social media have complicated councillor work, enabling flexibility for some whilst exacerbating a feeling of being 'always on' for others. This is seen in parallel to the changes occurring in paid employment in the UK, where technology facilitates the blurring of boundaries between work and other aspects of life. I argue that it is the expectation for councillors to be always available (whether they are on social media or other forms of technology or not) which exceeds Dorothy Smith's notion of work, as that which is 'done in a particular time and place'. For most councillors, their work is done in many places and at any time, often in a fragmented way across a range of sites within the ward and at the council hall. It is the geographically scattered working environment and the uneven and irregular rhythms of work which are both enabling and restricting to councillors in different ways. Being able to conduct work over social media, for example, enables some to be more flexible and therefore concentrate on other aspects of care or paid work, for instance. But alongside this more positive and enabling change, new ways of doing councillor work also open councillors up to new forms of abuse. The sense of being vulnerable at work was especially

heightened at the time in which I carried out my fieldwork. It is this peculiarity which also opens them up to forms of vulnerability and violence, which I return to in Data Chapter 4.

### **Against municipal walls: negotiating everyday inequalities in councillor work**

I explored how councillors, as gendered social actors, differently experience the working practices and cultures of local government and political parties. Once again, I de-centred the differences across party political lines to focus on a discussion of councillors as a whole. I focussed on what happens when those who are not the 'somatic norm' (Puwar, 2004) of local government come up against the institutional walls (Ahmed, 2017b).

In Data Chapters 2 and 3, I explored the processes of change and continuity in councillor work in more depth, specifically in relation to how councillors negotiate normative cultures and identities, whilst also trying to do things differently. Over the course of these two chapters, I analysed the different sets of conditions through which different political party identities come to be intelligible. I showed how gender and class in particular are crucial to creating normative party political identities in different ways. In Data Chapter 3 I consider the ways in which Conservative councillors do political identity work. I show how this differs from Labour in a crucial way; Conservative councillors created a political identity through a partial dis-identification from others and more limited articulation about who they considered themselves to be. This manifested itself in how councillors' talked about and performed their work; they did not consider themselves 'political' and embodied a kind of professionalised persona. This identity was moralised in particular ways as that which set them apart from the more 'politicking' parties. Much like the figure of the 'ideal worker', it was also imagined as gender neutral. In my exploration of this form of hegemonic political identity, I show how it is in fact gendered and classed in particular ways.

Having encountered dramatic times and tensions in the Labour-led Midlands council after the EU referendum vote, my first impressions of the Conservative-led county council was that nothing very interesting, or rather, nothing recognisably political (as I had come to expect it) was going on. In part, my impressions came from that strange, un/comfortable position of being an insider within; my background made the site at once familiar, whilst my oppositional politics made it strange. There were institutional walls here, but they felt smooth and slippery, harder to grasp and interrogate. The nuances of a certain kind of rural English middle-class culture still found expression through

Conservative councillors at the county council; what was valued was a form of professionalism and a way of practising politics which claimed not to see party lines, or see councillors as political or ideological. Rather, councillors emphasised qualities like niceness, ordinariness, respectability and reasonableness as the norm. As a majority party, these culturally valued characteristics dominated the kinds of behavioural expectations among the wider political groups. They achieved this normative identity in part through articulating these characteristics as valuable, but also by positioning themselves in relation to what they were not. Others were seen as politically excessive and the normative 'moderate' Conservative identity was deployed as a political resource in particular in relation to the council's UKIP members, who were the main source of concern to the Conservative party at the time around the EU referendum.

The images of middle-class rural Englishness which my participants aligned themselves to have a history within Conservative party rhetoric, as I note in the chapter. Alongside class, this moderate and professional identity is also, like the image of the ideal (but male) worker, a distinctly masculine and raced identity. As I discuss later on in Data Chapter 3, some Conservative women councillors identified their male colleagues as far from moderate and apolitical and criticised the competitive masculinity which dominated the party. One older Conservative woman in particular highlighted the exclusionary nature of the party's culture, and her response was to disentangle herself from it and keep her distance. Yet for other women, the expectations of a professional identity and the downplaying of politics and ideology provided them with space to flourish in the council. These women were typically white, middle-class and had professional backgrounds themselves, and so their habitus enabled them to more easily play according to the 'rules of the game' without having to think about it. This is despite the Conservative local party structures being the least active in terms of actively seeking to recruit women and BME candidates; having far fewer party structures to promote women and BME members' interests or caucuses; and having far fewer opportunities or processes in place to deal with sexist or racist behaviour. This was not the only council I studied where professional discourses, behavioural expectations and practices enabled certain women to thrive in local politics, but it was the council in which this mode of behaviour and interaction was more distinctly normalised. As such, this chapter indicates the complexity of Conservative politics of inclusion and exclusion within the party; whilst professional discourses and identities may have enabled some women to flourish, what are the possibilities for those unwilling or unable to reproduce these norms? Women are in the minority in a council and lack support structures within the party. There is perhaps

little other choice than to detach in order to survive and keep doing the aspects of councillor work they feel passionate about.

They did this, I argue, through a combination of different narratives, performances and practices that drew on alternative forms of community knowledge and capital. What this enabled some women to do was to claim an alternative legitimate identity, though one that was still near enough to the norm to be recognised as legitimate without entirely re-writing the codes of legitimacy altogether. I discussed how alternative forms of legitimate identities were brought into being through explicit cultural and structural changes to the administration's priorities (such as explicitly seeking out BME candidates). I also discussed women and BME councillors' own tactics of legitimacy claiming, such as taking to social media for community engagement and campaigning and managing case work. I argued that some of these activities reinforced exclusionary practices such as women feeling they had to campaign twice as hard as their male and/or white counterparts. However, I note that these alternative practices of constructing legitimacy none-the-less provided opportunities for them to demonstrate alternative ways of doing gender, performing class and practising politics.

In Data Chapter 2, I focus on Labour party identities, and how they are being negotiated in response to political changes. To explore this, I consider how a certain kind of normative 'authentic' classed local identity is idealised by Labour councillors, and how this is gendered in particular ways. In doing so, I show what kinds of political performance are valued or challenged in times of political change. In concluding this chapter, I argue that becoming a councillor is not a comfortable process for many Labour councillors, who attempt to be seen as both an activist and a representative, and as such have complicated and ambivalent relationships to power structures in local politics.

Some women councillors described and performed a 'tough' working-class femininity which also involved emotional displays of passion and forthrightness. There was little room in either the 'local lad' or 'tough femininity' normative types for alternative forms of emotional expression like softness. Typically, these identities were claimed via a discursive and/or emotional performance. For some men, I note, these practices involved the public rehearsal of emotive personal narratives; narratives which emphasised hardships endured or association with 'the right kind' of local employment (such as working on the shop floor) as a 'marker' of a particular local masculine, industrial working-class identity. I argued that the affective power of these emotive narratives affords less space to critically engage with, or question the legitimacy of, such narratives.

They were also identities which many other councillors could not claim. When legitimacy is closely tied to a normative identity, there is a legitimacy gap for those representatives who cannot align themselves to the norm. Though powerful, I do not claim that dominant representations of 'local legitimacy' are static or impervious to change. What I discuss later in the chapter is how women and BME councillors were attempting to re-write the narratives of what a legitimate local identity might be.

Furthermore, I argued that what is deemed legitimate and valuable Labour political identities needs to be substantially widened to include other forms of activism, emotions and performances. For some women and BME councillors, social technologies offered new opportunities to do this. However, I argue that this also opens up new forms of risk to local politicians. As is clear from the amount of online abuse women politicians receive, and in particular BME women politicians (Dhrodia, 2017), there needs to be much further work conducted on and by political parties as to the extent of the risk to councillors.

I pick up the thread of risk and vulnerability again in Data Chapter 4. This chapter is primarily concerned with what instances of abuse against politicians – and the attendant complaints processes – do to both councillors, political institutions and the co-constitutive relation between the two. Global movements like #MeToo and #TimesUp have shone a spotlight in recent years on sexual abuse in the workplace, and increasingly attention is now being paid to the kinds of abuse politicians receive (Krook, 2018b, 2018a; Restrepo Sanín, 2018). There were two issues which councillors identified in relation to abuse: the abuse itself and the ways it was handled by their party. My analysis was primarily attuned to understanding what happens when councillors who have received abuse make a complaint, either formally or informally. It is vital to investigate instances of abuse and their subsequent complaints because the 'experience of identifying and challenging abuses of power teaches us about power' (Ahmed, 2017a).

I explore this in relation to the kinds of rules and procedures which are available to councillors who wish to make a complaint on these grounds. With the removal of the local authority Standards Board regime – labelled as unnecessary and expensive by the Minister at the time – the forms of redress councillors can seek out are limited to the council's individual codes of conduct for members and the party disciplinary procedures, the latter often being used to deal with complaints initially. In mapping out the experiences of both formal and informal complaints involving councillors, I argue that when a political institution or organisation (like political parties or the council themselves) fail to properly account for instances of harassment, bullying or abuse, the complainant

can experience a second kind of injustice. I argue that the rupturing of identity serves to help (re)produce institutions in gendered ways as being for certain kinds of people.

What this chapter shows is that the process of living through abuse and complaint involve uneven and messy emotional and embodied processes, typically over long periods of time. The ways in which the complaint time is stretched out by institutions constitutes one way in which organisations discriminate through inefficiency, reproducing themselves as being for certain kinds of people and not for others. In offering one example of the way in which the relationship between feelings/emotions and significance/being taken seriously are manifested, the issue of complaint is also deeply personal as well as institutional; it has the potential to delve 'deeply into what the significance of a life can be' (Campbell, 1994, p. 63). The processes of abuse and complaint are punctuated by moments of 'snap', times of endurance and fluctuating energy levels which can be amplified or diminished depending on the bodies and positionality of those who are experiencing them. Complaint might therefore be understood as involving many breaking points. It is identifying these multiple breaking points – the 'snap' moments in time – as those moments which afford political potentialities to transform what hitherto have been experienced as private troubles into professional and public issues. More than this institutional reproduction, because of the:

relation of feeling to significance, when our feelings are trivialized, ignored, systematically criticized [this] can lead to a very serious kind of dismissal – the dismissal of the significance to a person of her own life, in a way that reaches down deeply into what the significance of a life can be to the person whose life it is.' (Campbell, 1994, p. 63 my emphases).

It is not just how institutions reproduce themselves, then, which motivates my concern with this subject matter, but also the ways in which abuse and the institutional responses to it potentially minimise a person's life. It seems vitally important, therefore, that we seek to address and overcome instances of abuse in political life.

### **Civic boundaries, emotional governance: how wider inequality regimes shape and are shaped by councillor work**

Finally, my thesis considered how councillors are constrained and enabled by different class backgrounds, gender identities and racialisations; how their habitus and doxa shape their experiences. I also explore how notions of civic pride shape the inequalities

councillors experience. I made the case for a closer examination of the emotional side of local politics, and how this intersects with particular representations of the local. In this respect, I argue for an interrogation of civic pride alongside other public feelings like shame, in particular as the latter is applied to working-class communities. I argue that civic pride should be considered as an important part of local emotional governance (Collins, 2017) and as a form of public feeling (Cvetkovitch, 2012).

In Data Chapter 2, I concentrate on how Labour councillors across the two Labour-led local authorities enacted and negotiated forms of legitimacy and authenticity. Labour councillors have complicated and ambivalent personal investments in relation to culturally dominant political identities. This can come about from an uncomfortably felt move from an activist identity to a representative one. I argued that in the post-industrial Midlands city, the need to appear ‘authentically’ working class was a preoccupation of many of the Labour men. I used the image of a ‘local lad’ to describe how this ‘ideal type’ was tied to masculinity, class and place in specific ways. As such, the notion of the ‘local lad’ (or ‘legitimate local’ in other councils) resonates with the kinds of exclusionary cultural norms found in the gendered, classed and raced figures of other depictions of ‘ideal types’; the masculine ‘ideal worker’ in organisations (Acker, 1990), the white and male ‘somatic norm’ in politics and the civil service (Puwar, 2001, 2004), and the masculine ‘ideal activist’ in left-wing activist groups (Bobel, 2007; Craddock, 2018). The Labour councillors I spent time with drew on a complex mix of professional, political and activist norms, images and expected behaviours. Because councillor work straddles different aspects of work, politics and, in the case of Labour councillors’ case, activism, the negotiation of inequalities is made more complex.

In this chapter, I drew on an additional dimension which complicates the image further; the emphasis on being local and ‘having the right kind’ of connections to particular places. Articulating ‘localness’ was important to all councillors who sought to bridge the gap between representative and represented. How they articulated their connections to place – what I refer to as civic pride in the chapter (Collins, 2017) – and what they emphasised in these articulations, necessarily differed between councils. I argue that the specific dimensions of civic pride and normative local identity shape, and are shaped by, wider gender, class and race norms. Here, I argued that the dominance of the ‘local lad’ identity in the Midlands council is defined by particular discursive and embodied practices, which, importantly, were practised by both men and women, though with different exclusionary effects.

In summary, my thesis shows how councillor work is strange work because their everyday activities span different regimes and rationalities of work and politics. This strangeness complicates how councillors experience and negotiate inequalities; providing working conditions where some people can thrive, whilst others cannot. I draw this conclusion by examining the different layers of work and inequality outlined above. I have also explored how wider inequalities, changing conditions of work, and dramatic political changes affect councillors' everyday negotiation of inequalities. As a result, this thesis offers a timely contribution to contemporary sociological analyses of changes in politics and work. I was able to explore more of this complexity by using a feminist IE research framework. IE enabled me to explore the experiences of minorities who have come up against entrenched institutional norms and cultures. It also enabled me to see some of the paradoxes of political life; especially how institutions that are openly concerned with equality can be the most difficult for minorities to negotiate. My thesis argues, therefore, that feminist IE enables researchers to hold on to the complexity and contradictions of institutional life.

I will now outline how I went about my research, and discuss the further complexities and questions which my methodology asked.

### **Reflecting on the boundaries of IE**

In my methodology chapter, I argued for the use of an explicitly feminist institutional ethnographic (IE) approach, following Dorothy Smith's notion of IE as form of emancipatory research; a 'sociology *for* people' rather than just about them (Smith, 2005). I researched three councils over the course of a year: a Midlands post-industrial city council with a Labour majority; a Western urban city council also run by Labour; and a Southern rural county council with a Conservative majority. I interviewed 56 councillors about their experiences of standing as a candidate, the working environment of the council, the kinds of work they do, and the challenges and opportunities they have experienced. I also shadowed 5 councillors and conducted observations at both private political group meetings, public council meetings, and ward-level private political meetings, public engagements and events.

There are undoubtedly many ways in which scholars could approach a sociological study of local government. As I am interested in how councillors practise politics and work, and the kinds of inequalities which get (re)produced through the everyday nature of this work, I needed a methodological approach which would allow me

to focus in-depth not only on what councillors said, but what they did. As I understand practising politics as a form of work, using an approach that foregrounded race, class and gender inequalities as some of the key organising principles in work was vital. Using Dorothy Smith's notion of institutional ethnography enabled me to maintain transformative feminist research principles and focus on practices and processes of power and inequality (relations of ruling). In my discussion of IE, I noted that one of its key strengths is its malleability, with Smith identifying the notion of ethnography as one to be 'used simply to signify an in-depth investigation of social actualities from a particular standpoint' (Stanley, 2018, p. 20). The observations, shadowing and interviews which my IE approach involved allowed me to examine how inequalities are shaped in discourse and practices. An important dimension, however, was to account for the different cultural communities which occur in different political parties. Where one political party has a majority, they have much greater influence in shaping the overall culture and practices which all councillors encounter. As such, it was important to me to identify different research sites that had different party majorities as well as different gender composition. This enabled me to more clearly show just how close and complicated the relationship between work cultures and political cultures are. Political parties share certain values, practices and procedures across local government sites, but they also have important local dimensions. I therefore concentrated not just on differences between the UK's two main political parties, but also some of the localised dimensions within these parties.

Mapping is an essential concept within IE, and involves 'proceeding from the actualities of the everyday world' (Stanley, 2018, p. 19) by following the activities people do and the ways they articulate and attribute meaning to those activities. This enables IE researchers to see how wider relations of ruling are taken up in practice (Nichols and Griffith, 2009). Although I included women and men from a range of ethnic backgrounds in my study, the study did not exclusively map the experiences of BME councillors, or those with disabilities or trans\* and non-binary gender identities. Whilst I consider these experiences, where they occur in my research data, to be vital and necessary, I am conscious that my project's scope could only ever do limited justice to the particularities of how different people move through the world and encounter its limits and possibilities. What I have tried to do instead is analyse how the institution shapes these limitations and possibilities for those councillors from ethnic minority backgrounds who became research participants, interviewees and those I shadowed. It would have been possible to write another PhD on the particular ways any one social group experiences life as a councillor, or indeed how only one institution shapes particular experiences. Though

elements of these aims are fundamental to, and necessarily embedded in, my research design (by focussing on in-depth methods and prioritising BME councillors in who I approached for interview and shadowing), another study would be able to do better justice to the specificities of how bodies racialised as not belonging to the somatic norm (Puwar, 2004) encounter local political institutions. I hope that this aspect forms part of my future research ambitions.

### **Methodological conundrums: epistemological ambitions vs. fieldwork actualities**

Whilst this approach allowed me to trace the complicated relationship between work and politics and how this relationship manifests itself in different ways in local councils in England, there are additional complexities and conundrums associated with my research framework which I seek to reflect on here. These both relate to the diverse possibilities of research within this field, and the subsequent choices I made in regards to the lines of analysis I pursued, as outlined in relation to my research questions above. The first of these reflections relates to the somewhat uneven nature of the kinds of analytical problems and questions which my approach threw up, and how to go about making sense of these as a whole. This became apparent during that necessary process of translation; moving from what is observed and heard during fieldwork, to analysing and writing the social as a bounded piece of work. A different ethnographic approach, one more closely aligned with a more traditional approach of analysing one institution, would have allowed for greater immersion in the field to better explore the intricacies through which inequalities are (re)produced in one site. This would be an important avenue for further research on local government, building on the ethnographic work taking place in other political institutions and levels of government; unfortunately still a limited approach to studying formal politics (for some examples see G. W. Smith, 1990; Crewe, 2010, 2014; Coulter and Schumann, 2012; Murray, 2012; Busby, 2013; Charles and Wadia, 2017).

The other noteworthy reflection on my methodological choices to highlight was my decision not to include documentary analysis into my (admittedly already expansive amount of) research data. For some institutional ethnographers, this choice might seem an anathema, where the inclusion of texts form an important part of IE. However, part of my attraction to Dorothy Smith's own ethos is her reluctance to prescribe the limits of what constitutes an institutional ethnography. Though not a method which could reasonably have been included in my thesis project, a text-based approach would undoubtedly form a useful and important part of further ethnographic research on political

institutions. It would be especially valuable for further study into the ways in which political parties deal with the kinds of harassment, bullying and abuse that politicians receive from both external sources and within their own parties. I very much hope that this will also form the basis of my own future research.

In my methodology chapter, I drew attention to Eve Sedgwick's (2003) attempts to think, create, and write in ways which might, 'explore promising tools and techniques for nondualistic thought' (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 1). I described how I sought to approach ethnographic research with a similar aim, whether that was thinking about how to frame and conceptualise gender beyond the limits of the gender binary, or in working through the connections between and among analytical themes. In regards to the latter, I was interested in exploring what Sedgwick describes as 'the middle ranges of agency', being the only place that might 'offer space for effectual creativity and change' (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 13). But what might such an exploration be like for feminist ethnographers undertaking empirical research? Sedgwick argues that seeking out the 'middle ranges of agency' entails bringing forth the spaces between 'abstractly reified form[s] of the hegemonic and the subversive... [or] arguments about whether a given period was one of "continuity" or "change" [...]' (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 13). I stated in my methodology that I would try to resist reinforcing binaries between agency and structure, and continuity and change, and therefore seek to avoid smoothing out complexity. I sought to do this when participating in the messiness that is ethnographic fieldwork, and the even messier process of translation from fieldwork to a written object. To think or research in this way requires one to first become accustomed to, and then comfortable with, doubt. Despite experiencing plenty of doubts and attempting to work with them, I do not think I have been particularly successful at embodying 'the art of *loosing*' (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 3 emphasis in original) or in my attempt to trouble dualistic thinking. In part, this reflects the ubiquity of binary categorisations through language and (gendered, raced, and classed) social norms which shape how we all frame and make sense of the world. It was difficult, for instance, to discuss gender in non-binary ways in this project, in part because of the ways my participants talk about themselves and others. They, like us all, are gendered social actors who still operate in a binary world, where the language or other resources one might try to use to trouble or overturn binaries is far from being evenly distributed. It is why, for instance, I received many confused looks when I asked my participants how they would identify their gender. My difficulty with how to trouble dualistic thinking and research practice also reflects the assumptions about power which IE makes. Dorothy Smith's feminist IE and my own epistemological position is fundamentally concerned with how marginalised groups encounter institutions where

they are not, and have not historically been, the norm. In this sense, implicit to my research design are assumptions about domination and subordination. Whilst I believe in troubling these and showing how they relate in complex and surprising ways, these underlying assumptions about power have shaped my research. Though I spoke to and shadowed councillors across different positions, my research focus has always been on inequalities, and in this respect I took a deliberate standpoint on entering the field.

Moreover, it is precisely my *inability* to embody a Sedgwickian 'art of loosing' which provides an important analytical point about the difficulties of negotiating entrenched institutional hierarchies and structures. It is hard to think beyond binaries or to think differently about power when participants are telling you about the sexist and racist bullying or harassment they receive. This is not to say that my analysis does not show the ways in which these institutional walls are resisted, or how councillors negotiate change and exhibit their own agency. I highlight these dimensions throughout. But if, as I argue, these instances amount to the kinds of institutional blockages or walls within local politics which Ahmed describes (Ahmed, 2012; Ahmed, 2017b), then it is difficult to conceive of institutional power dynamics in a way that does not refer to institutional hierarchies and normative cultures. It is also hard to study and write beyond binaries in this thesis precisely because English politics is established on a number of binaries, not least between the two main political parties which I focussed my study on. The very existence of a binary field of English politics had important implications for the affective relationship I had with some participants. My own left-wing politics meant I aligned myself with the experiences or beliefs of some, and not with others. This meant that at times my critical engagement with what councillors said could initially be uneven, and I could be more willing to receive and accept what left-wing councillors told me than what right-wing councillors did. I could never entirely relinquish the binary affective relationships I had with my politician participants, as this reflected commonalities and oppositions between my participants' political views and my own. Nor do I think this is a problem which *should* be overcome. Rather, I had to be careful about applying the same analytical and critical framework to what each participant said.

### **Moving forward: troubling binaries, retaining complexity**

This is not to say I abandon any attempt to work beyond binaries, but rather that the difficulties I experienced with trying to do so in this project attest to their social intransigence. It also reveals the paradox of trying to produce a PhD in an academic context where scholars are compelled to produce ever more 'outputs' to survive (Pereira,

2017). Even as PhD students, there is increasing pressure to conform to this model of constant production; giving your time and energy to other (sometimes pleasurable or necessary) 'outputs' whilst still being expected to complete in a strict timeframe (Ablett, Griffiths and Mahoney, 2019). As I stated in my methodology, I cannot ignore the neoliberal, performative UK university context in which I produced my PhD (Pereira, 2016). Yet allowing for the kinds of expansive, binary-breaking work I wished I had been able to incorporate more fully into my study also requires significant dedication, time and energy. It is therefore perhaps a worrying testament to the intensification of PhD life that some of the possibilities of scholarship risk being crowded out of PhD time, as that timeframe is increasingly filled with activities oriented towards the competitive academic job market (Ablett, Griffiths and Mahoney, 2019).

Finally, as a feminist ethnography, my research has at its heart a desire to see change within politics. So, whilst much of this ethnography describes and analyses some of what there is to know about councillor work, it holds at the centre a feminist imagination of possibility; of transformation of present actualities into better futures. Bringing a feminist imagination to bear on my ethnography is in itself a political act, if we take seriously the notion that, because 'we can imagine beyond what we can know [this] both enables and obligates us to live according to ideals of freedom as we also struggle to bring such a world into existence' (Cornell and Seely, 2016, p. 13). In terms of inequalities in political institutions, work is already being done to imagine what a different, more equal, workplace for politicians might look like; one that 'is free of prejudice, domination techniques, and sexual harassment, but which also takes into account the caring duties of politicians by providing crèches and family facilities, as well as parental leave for male and female legislators' (Lovenduski, 2013, p. 301). Alongside these practical considerations, my thesis offers a contribution towards understanding where inequalities in local politics are to be found, in what ways they are complex, and therefore provide further evidence and insight how alternative political realities can be imagined and brought into being. Central to this claim is my argument for the need to explore the nuances of local political life, and the different layers of inequality, using ethnographic frameworks.

Despite – and indeed, through – the complexities I identify here, my study has provided valuable insights into the ways in which people negotiate institutional inequalities, what the effects these inequalities have, and how they encompass moments of change and continuity in institutions. Partly, its value lies in its methodological novelty within the field of gender and politics. By turning an ethnographic lens onto local

government, an approach that still remains woefully underused (notable exceptions include Welsh and Halcli, 2003; Gains, 2009; van Hulst, 2010), it demonstrates the potential for extending the body of research into political institutions further. But I have also tried to maintain a commitment, albeit perhaps a modest one, to analysing the key themes of my analysis in a way which highlights the paradoxes, ambiguities and complexities of councillor work. In this way, whilst I may have failed at the 'art of loosing', I think my study provides significant contributions to thinking about political work, as well as providing a useful framework with which to study institutions. This framework is one that is able to keep hold of the everyday-ness and ongoing nature of negotiating institutional inequalities, yet also does not lose sight of the rigidity and intransigence of institutions, even as they (and the social actors which make them) come up against dramatic changes.

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## Appendix A: Research sites

<b>Midlands post-industrial council</b>	<b>Western urban council</b>	<b>Southern rural county council</b>
West Midlands urban. Ethnically diverse and historically working class city.	Urban. Less ethnically diverse than Met Council, larger and richer (although with areas of extreme poverty).	South East mostly urban with significant rural/one area of mainly rural according to Defra Rural Statistics (major conurbations in the County have their own authorities). Least ethnically diverse. Wealthiest area.
Women make up ¼ of councillors	Women make up over half of all councillors.	Women make up just under 1/5 of councillors.
20% councillors with BME background.	10% councillors with BME background.	1% of councillors with BME background.
Labour party has overall control. Woman leader during part of my fieldwork.	No overall political control (Labour as largest group) at the start of fieldwork, quickly changed to Labour control.	Conservative party have overall control. White male Conservative leader since 2013.
Women constitute 30% of cabinet. 22% cabinet with BME background.	Formerly a mixed political composition, changed to full Labour cabinet under Labour Mayor. Women constitute 60% of cabinet. 20% cabinet with BME background.	Women constitute 20% of cabinet. No BME representation on cabinet.

## Appendix B: Gender and party composition of councillors at the time of commencing fieldwork (February 2016)

Political party	Southern rural county			Midlands post-industrial			Western urban		
	Women	Men	Total	Women	Men	Total	Women	Men	Total
Labour	1	3	4	13	26	39	18	19	37
Conservative	12	35	47	1	13	14	3	10	13
Liberal Democrats	1	15	16				3	6	9
Green Party							6	5	11
Independent	1	2	3	0	1	1			
UKIP	0	7	7						
Other	0	1	1						
<b>Total by gender</b>	15	63	78	14	40	54	30	40	70

<b>% of women councillors</b>	<b>Rural county</b>	19%	<b>Post-industrial Midlands</b>	26%	<b>Urban Western</b>	43%
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## Appendix C: Sample Interview Schedule

### Political background:

- 1) How did you get into local politics? How were you selected for your ward?

Probe:

- Were you asked to stand? If so, who by?

### Council work:

- 2) Tell me about your job as a councillor

Probing questions:

- Important aspects?
- Enjoy?
- Challenging?
- Different from what you expected?

- 3) What qualities are needed to do the job well?

### Working Environment:

- 4) What's your experience of the working environment at the council
- 5) Tell me about your experience of decision making processes, in relation to an area you work on

### Political culture

- 6) What's been your experience of the political culture of the council?
  - What's deemed acceptable behaviour for a councillor?
  - Can you think of a time you had to make a special effort to be heard / listened to / taken seriously? How did you feel about this (e.g. were you able to respond?)
  - Do colleagues seek your opinions on problems?
- 7) Does the political culture here impact on your work as a councillor?
  - Does it enable you in any way or restrict you in any way?
  - If it's not a culture you feel comfortable with, how do you cope with that? And how do you feel about having to have coping strategies?
- 8) Do men and women behave differently in the council?
- 9) What are debates like in the council? How important are they to you? What's the atmosphere like in the chamber? What do you do during debates? Do you feel able to speak on any issue? Do you get put down?
- 10) Are there different types of political styles in the council? E.g. consensual or combative?
- 11) In what ways does this affect how council business gets done?
- 12) Is this different to how things work in your party?
- 13) I've noticed in other councils that there's often a difference between what's officially depicted about the culture of the council and what councillors really have to say about it. Would you say that happens here?

### Working and domestic arrangements

- 14) How do you manage councillor work with the rest of your life?
  - Prompt for job (FT/PT, type of work), other caring responsibilities (e.g. parents), other forms of community work, if they have children at home and their ages

- 15) Do you think the working practices of the council support domestic or caring responsibilities?
- 16) Is there a crèche?
- 17) What times of day are meetings scheduled etc.?

**Relationships and power:**

- 18) Who is important to you in order for you to successfully carry out your work?  
(cabinet, leader, officers, CEO etc)
- 19) Do you have links with civil society organisations?
  - Which ones, and in what capacity?
  - Is your involvement linked to your current work as a councillor in any way?
  - How long have you been involved with them?
- 20) What's been your experience of the way in which people tend to progress in the council, from councillor to a member of the cabinet?

**Representation and political interests:**

- 21) What's your experience of initiatives designed to improve the representation of women or ethnic minorities in the council/party?
- 22) Who or what do you think you represent as a local councillor? (particular groups and issues)
- 23) Do these issues affect men and women differently?
- 24) How do you define yourself politically?
- 25) Would you describe yourself as a feminist? If so, how would you describe your feminism?

## **Appendix D: Sample Participant Information Sheet**

Researcher: Elizabeth Ablett, Doctoral Researcher, Sociology Department, University of Warwick, Coventry, CV4 7AL

Email: [REDACTED]

### **The project**

My research explores what it's like to work as a councillor in a number of different local councils, comparing the experiences of approximately forty councillors from different localities and political parties. I am interested in hearing about what type of work you do as a councillor and what your experiences are of the type of political practices and cultures in your council.

### **What happens if I agree to participate?**

We will arrange a one-to-one interview, at a time and location convenient to you, where I will ask some questions but the format will be relatively open. Interviews usually last about an hour.

### **Why take part?**

Participating in research and having the chance to talk about your experiences is often an enjoyable and interesting experience. Politically, it is important that research into politics places the direct experiences of councillors themselves at the forefront.

### **Confidentiality**

Should you sign up to be interviewed, you are free to withdraw from the project at any point without giving a reason. The interviews will be audio recorded, transcribed and analysed, and parts may appear in academic publications. Only I will have access to both tape and transcription, which will be held securely. I will do everything possible to maintain your anonymity, in particular by not identifying you by name, though I cannot guarantee that your comments will be anonymous to everyone.

### **What happens with the results?**

The interview data will be analysed and written up for my PhD thesis. The findings from this research will be used in conference presentations and in academic publications. I will be happy to send you a summary of my findings should you wish to receive one.

### **Questions**

Please don't hesitate to contact me should you require further information or would like to discuss the project in more detail on [REDACTED]. If you have any concerns relating to this study, please contact my supervisors Professor Nickie Charles ([REDACTED]) and Dr. Maria do Mar Pereira ([REDACTED]).

Elizabeth Ablett  
ESRC Doctoral Researcher in Sociology

## **Appendix E: Sample Informed Consent Form**

Informed Consent Form

Researcher: Elizabeth Ablett, Doctoral Researcher, Sociology Department, University of Warwick, Coventry, CV4 7AL

Email: [REDACTED]

This consent form is designed to check you are happy with the information you have received about this study, that you are aware of your rights as a participant and to confirm that you wish to take part in the research project.

- I have received information on the research project.
- I understand the researcher will do everything possible to maintain my anonymity, in particular by not identifying any individual by name and keeping the interview tapes and transcripts confidential. However, I understand and accept that it is not possible to guarantee that my comments will be anonymous to everyone.
- I am willing to participate in an interview on this basis.

Signature:

Name:

Date: