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# The governmentality and accountability of UK national museums and art galleries

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 6 May 2016

Received in revised form 7 October 2016

Accepted 10 December 2016

Available online xxx

#### Keywords:

Governmentality

Accountability

Performance

UK

Museums

Art galleries

Public sector

### ABSTRACT

This study furthers our understanding of the role of governmentality mechanisms in relation to other-forming and self-forming accounts of art organisations, by using empirical data collected from interviews with senior managers of UK national museums and art galleries (MAGs) and from secondary published sources. The findings highlight how governmentality mechanisms had power-effects through the creation of knowledge about MAGs and the resistance strategies of MAGs. Whilst the governmentality mechanisms were expected to ensure the automatic functioning of disciplinary power, in some instances the government directly intervened to over-ride decisions taken by senior managers when these conflicted with political imperatives.

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*What does it mean to govern a ship? It means clearly to take charge of the sailors, but also of the boat and its cargo; to take care of a ship means also to reckon with winds, rocks, and storms; and it consists in that activity of establishing a relation between the sailors, who are to be taken care of, and the ship, which is to be taken care of, and the cargo, which is to be brought safely to port, and all those eventualities like winds, rocks, storms, and so on. This is what characterizes the government of a ship (Foucault, 1994; p. 209).*

## 1. Introduction

Foucault (2007, p. 108) defines the concept of governmentality as “the ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific, albeit very complex, power...that we all call ‘government’ and which has led to the development of a series of specific governmental apparatuses (*appareils*) on the one hand, [and, on the other] to the development of a series of knowledges (*savoirs*)”.

Governmentality not only disciplines and subjugates subjects through procedures, calculations, tactics, and strategies (i.e. apparatuses of power) but also treats them as objects through the different modes of objectivation (Foucault, 1984). Townley (1993) argues that governmentality mechanisms create a body knowledge to objectify those on whom they are applied, and turn subjects located in the governmentality discourse into an object of knowledge. Understanding the modes of ‘subjectivation’ and ‘objectivation’ of subjects in practice requires an analysis of power-relations, and the techniques used in different institutional contexts to act upon behaviour to shape, direct, and modify conduct (Foucault, 1984). Whilst

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governmentality processes are aimed at forming and reforming subjects into docile bodies, they also make subjects observe and analyse their own conduct (Foucault, 1984).

This study attempts to further our understanding of the other-forming and self-forming accounts of UK national museums and art galleries (MAGs) by using a governmentality theoretical lens. It is based on empirical data collected from interviews with senior officials involved in the governance of MAGs and secondary data from the annual reports of MAGs, government publications, and press releases. It makes a theoretical contribution and an empirical contribution to the literature as follows. First, prior studies have used a governmentality theoretical lens to examine the government of others (Spence & Rinaldi, 2014) or government of selves (Manochin, Brignall, Lowe, & Howell, 2011) in specific empirical settings. This study makes a theoretical contribution by analysing how governmentality processes 'subjectivates' and 'objectivates' subjects to make them answerable both to others and to themselves. It illustrates how governmentality mechanisms created knowledge about MAGs, and the power-effects of governmentality mechanisms. Second, whilst prior studies have examined issues related to the governance, accountability and financial reporting of art organisations in specific countries (Caldwell, 2002; Carnegie & Wolnizer, 1996; Ellwood & Greenwood, 2016; Lindqvist, 2007; Oakes & Oakes, 2016), this study makes an empirical contribution through its focus on UK national MAGs which are unique in terms of their funding structure and political accountability.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. The next section explains the governmentality theoretical framework and its key constructs of power, knowledge and subjectivation. Section 3 explains the methods used to collect data for the purpose of this study. Section 4 presents the findings by discussing the governmentality of MAGs (i.e. the ensemble formed by institutions, processes, analyses, calculations and tactics) and highlighting some of the pressures and resistance in governmentality processes. The last section concludes this paper.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Governmentality: power, knowledge and subjectivation

Power, knowledge and subjectivation of subjects are perhaps three of the most significant themes in Foucault's extensive examination of practices such as psychiatry, clinical medicine, penalty and sexuality (Foucault, 1965, 1973, 1977, 1978). Power and knowledge are coterminous and integral to classifying, categorising and controlling subjects, as stated by Foucault (1980, p. 52):

*The exercise of power itself creates and causes to emerge new objects of knowledge and accumulates new bodies of information. . . the exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power. . . It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power*

Power is embedded in hegemonic social, economic, and cultural systems. It comes into play in social systems comprising of families, companies and institutions and are sustained and changed overtime through confrontations (Foucault, 1977, 1980, 1982). According to Foucault (1978, p. 94), "power is not something that is acquired, seized, or shared, something that one holds on to or allows to slip away". Instead power is diffused, relational and it becomes apparent when exercised. Power and control encapsulate interests and are directed to shape values. Whilst they can be visible and coercive, they are most effective when executed subtly in organisational hierarchies through the creation and use of knowledge (Foucault, 1980).

Institutions, processes, analyses, calculations and tactics give power its effects and attempt to render subjects knowable, visible and calculable. As pointed out by Rose (1991) governmentality technologies "have an unmistakable power. . . in the same process in which numbers achieve a privileged status in political decisions, they simultaneously promise a 'de-politicization' of politics, redrawing the boundaries between politics and objectivity by purporting to act as automatic technical mechanisms for making judgements, prioritizing problems and allocating scarce resources" (pp. 673–674). However, Rose and Miller (1992) argue that the apparatuses of governing, which "include the imposition of law; the activities of state functionaries or publicly controlled bureaucracies; surveillance and discipline by an all seeing police" may not be very effective at achieving objectives, because governmentality technologies are primarily concerned with enabling governments achieve action at a distance as opposed to providing freedom to managers to self-govern.

For governmentality mechanisms to have power-effects, Foucault (1977) asserts that subjects must be framed in an enclosure or a space to enable the assignment of responsibilities, and ranked or evaluated for performance (Ferlie, Fitzgerald, McGivern, Dopson, & Bennett, 2013; Townley 1993). Foucault has extensively discussed the governmentality mechanisms that enable the government of others and self in his work on prison (1977), psychiatry (1965) and medicine (1973). Physical or virtual enclosures define organisational boundaries and enable the institutionalisation of governmentality mechanisms (e.g. calculative practices, panopticon, and rules and regulations). Within organisational boundaries individuals are further partitioned in spaces for the assignment of responsibilities. For example, job descriptions often form the basis for performance appraisal and evaluation. Performance measurements, ranking (such as in league tables), examinations (such as testing and auditing) and public judgements not only enable principals evaluate the performance of their subjects, but also enable subjects evaluate their own performance.

Power is purposive. According to Foucault (1978, p. 94–95), "power relations are both intentional and nonsubjective. . . there is no power that is exercised without a series of aims and objectives". Governmentality mechanisms

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