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‘You’ll see that everywhere’: institutional isomorphism in secondary school subject departments

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Abstract

This paper asks why spatially separated school departments might exhibit, in different ways, very similar practices. Data from an ethnographic study of three secondary school geography departments in England is discussed through a concept of ‘isomorphism’ (homogenising forces), drawn from New Institutional Theory. Similarities across these departments are analysed in terms: of coercive isomorphism, including the strong regulatory role played by examination boards and Ofsted; mimetic isomorphism, in which similar approaches are adopted in response to situations of high uncertainty, based on spreading good practice; and normative isomorphism, including the implications of closely guarded educational routes, the professionalization of teaching, and wider social trends including the increasing use of Google as a source of knowledge for lessons. It is argued that evidence of homogeneity across spatially separated departments raises interesting questions about teachers’ practice, with implications for departmental and school leadership.

Keywords: school organisation; department leadership; isomorphism; school geography

Introduction

Why might spatially separate school subject departments exhibit, in some respects, high levels of similarity? This question was prompted through an ethnographic study of three secondary school geography departments in which the data indicated significant areas of homogeneity of teachers' practice. Neo-institutional theory (NIT) offers categories through which these similarities might be described, clarified, and challenged. Drawing on NIT to analyse the ethnographic data, I argue that similarities between departments might be understood as examples of coercive, mimetic, and normative isomorphism. The departments presented are, in many respects, highly situated, and the individuality of teachers' conceptions of their subject is significant. Against this heterogeneity, the existence of similar themes, discourses, and priorities across departments is surprising. In this discussion I do not take a normative position in relation to isomorphism: being more or less similar is not assumed to be necessarily good or bad. The discussion is, however, premised on an assumption about the importance of school subject departments for students, teachers, and schools. Of particular relevance to those leading and managing schools is evidence of the significant role that departments play in shaping school effectiveness (Reynolds 2010; de Lima 2008; Harris 2004; Busher and Harris, 1999; Sammons 1999; Sammons et al. 1997). Understanding more about the department as a unit of analysis, particularly aspects of departments that seem to present a tension or point of interest - here, why highly individual teachers might construct departments with highly similar features - is a useful task for research. Homogeneity of practice is also of interest because policy initiatives often seek to do just this; to disseminate 'good practice' in such a way

that many departments adopt the similar recommendations/practices (Hopkins and Higham, 2007; Fullan, 2004).

The paper begins with a discussion of literature on school subject departments, arguing that as a unit of analysis the department is important, underexplored, and well suited to exploration through ethnography. The particular ethnographic approach taken in the current study is then outlined, followed by analysis of the ethnographic data through the theoretical lens of isomorphism. Dimensions of isomorphism – coercive, mimetic, normative – are argued to offer one explanation of the similarity found across these departments. The aim of the paper is to explore the question about similarity across departments by offering a framework from NIT through which a broad survey of ethnographic data might be undertaken. This aim is primarily exploratory and so the purpose of the paper is not to make a strong argument that such isomorphism does exist across all of these departments. Rather, empirical data are included as an initial move towards that argument, and, more importantly, to provide examples that might illustrate the potential of the framework for describing and explaining important aspects of departmental practices. The importance of departments is argued to make the findings significant to those interested in school leadership and management.

Researching school subject departments

There is growing research interest in departments, building on the work of Ball and Lacey (1984) and Siskin (1994), and including attention from school effectiveness research (Harris 2004; Sammons et al. 1997). Specific subject

departments have been given some attention, including Physical Education (Sirna et al. 2008) and Science (Melville & Wallace 2007; K Burn et al. 2007). Burn et al. (2007) also offer a comparison of departments across different subjects. More recently, and building on this study, Childs et al. (2013; McNicholl et al. 2013) have explored how the 'cultures of the subject departments influence the learning of SCK [Subject Content Knowledge] and PCK [Pedagogical Content Knowledge]' (Childs et al. 2013, 36) in four school subject departments; two science, one history, and one geography. The ethnographic study of school geography departments on which the following discussion is based offers a development of existing research on teachers' conceptions of their subject, in particular the work of Brooks (2007, 2006), taking forward her suggestions for research to explore the social context (that is, school subject departments) in which teachers' subject knowledge is developed. Even in established fields, such as science education, in which sophisticated accounts of the Nature of Science (NoS) have been developed (which is not the case in geography education research), recent ethnographic studies of departments illustrate the benefit of in-depth research which is able to explore practices, habits, spaces, and interactions at the departmental level (Childs et al. 2013; McNicholl et al. 2013). Throughout this literature, departments are conceived of as complex, being constituted through social interactions within the context of a formal educational institution with its associated hierarchies, power relations, micro-politics, expectations, and norms.

Methodology

The complex, social nature of departments is one reason why others studying departments have adopted an ethnographic approach. For example, McNicholl et al. (2013) argue ethnography allowed them to represent the ways in which teachers 'made sense of their experiences as learners as well as describe the social organisation in which they worked, the structures and patterns of social behaviour in their departments' (p.158). The current study is described as ethnographic because of the way in which my extended participation in the departments is used as the main research tool. During the year of fieldwork I organised resources, made tea, taught lessons, observed lessons, and spent time with the teachers. More formally I also interviewed the teachers (generating 150,000 words of transcribed interview data), conducted departmental focus groups, took photographs, collected documentary evidence, and analysed Virtual Shared Areas (VSAs). The design was iterative, in that all methods were intended to feed into one another and allow the refocusing and further exploration of emerging areas of interest. This iterative design was facilitated by the 'recurrent time mode' (Jeffrey and Troman 2004, 542) framing of fieldwork visits during the year. Three departments – rather than just one – were included in order to explore potential differences. Ethnographers often argue that a prolonged period of fieldwork is essential, although what counts as prolonged, and for whom, is contested. Classic ethnographies of education (in the British sociological tradition) established one year or more as an accepted length (Walford 1986; Ball 1981; Willis 1977; Hargreaves 1967), a pattern followed by more recent educational ethnographies (Fournier 2012; Fong 2011; Benei 2008; Abu El-Haj 2006). However, Hammersley (2006) suggests that 'months rather than years' (5) are now most common, and

arguments have been made for spending anything from just two to three days on ethnographic fieldwork (Brockmann 2011; Jeffrey & Troman 2004). Fieldwork time is explored by Murchison (2010) in three senses: total length of time spent in the field (that is, the total number of days/weeks/years the researcher is present in the field – I spent seventy four days present in the field); breadth of time spent in the field (the length of time between first and last visits made to the field, regardless of the duration of visits between the first and last – in this study, seven months); and, finally, the number of visits to the field (total number of separate visits made to the field during the fieldwork – in the current study, this is the same as one; that is, seventy four visits).

The three departments studied across the year of fieldwork in the timings described above are referred to under the pseudonyms Town Comprehensive (TC), Beach Academy (BA), and City Academy (CA). Further discussion of the methodology and study design may also be found elsewhere (Puttick 2014, 2015, 2016).

Neo-institutional theory

NIT is presented here as a useful lens through which to explore processes of homogenisation or isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) within and between departments. DiMaggio and Powell argue there exists ‘startling homogeneity of organizational forms and practices’ (148) among institutions in well-established fields. In the early stages of development fields are often characterised by diversity, however, ‘once a field becomes well established...there is an inexorable

push towards homogenization' (148). They describe the development of a field in relation to connectedness, seen as

the existence of transactions tying organisations to one another...[for example;] participation of personnel in common enterprises such as professional associations, labor unions, or boards of directors, or informal organizational-level ties like personnel flows. (148)

On their definition, secondary school geography should be seen as an established field. Connections between teachers are made and sustained in particular through journeys for the knowledge that forms the content of their lessons (Puttick 2014).

In making journeys for sources of knowledge to use in lessons teachers interact with others, and these interactions seem to affect the kinds of information accessed, and beliefs formed about the subject. Historical journeys, some of which are not repeated, such as those to university for undergraduate degrees, may also play a significant role. Interactions with fellow subject teachers are more frequent, happening every day in person, and mediated through virtual shared areas (VSAs). Engagement with teachers in other schools also happens regularly through online spaces; interactions based around the giving and (mainly) taking of resources.

Teachers see and use presentations of other teachers' work, and their beliefs about their subject are constructed in relation to these other resources (Puttick, 2016).

This might be understood in Rutter's (2016) notion of "conversations' as social spaces of knowledge creation' (2), which he uses as a way on connecting social and spatial contexts. Occasionally the 'spreading' of practices and ideas across the whole field of school geography were identified with a particular person.

Worldmapper is one example, described as being something about which

everybody was like 'Ah this is amazing!' and it spread through everybody - and now it's like in the exams and stuff...but when I first started teaching that wasn't there, and then it spread through. (HoD, TC, interview 2:335)

The 'everybody' here implies the whole, connected field of school geography, from individual teachers, through to local departments and national exams. Several types of connections exist between teachers in the current study: they are members of the same professional associations; they use the same social networks (in particular, exam specification specific 'Nings'); they have similar educational backgrounds, hold similar qualifications; and they sometimes find the same news articles through similar online searches, with search algorithms working to offer them the same highly ranked articles,.

Claims about connectedness are extended to discussion of knowledge production by Drucker (1993), who argues that to make knowledge you have 'to learn to connect' (176), which Maskell and Malmberg (1999) argue involves, most importantly, face-to-face connections. Discussing spatial concentration of industries (for example, firms locating in Silicon Valley), they suggest isomorphism occurs alongside 'isolating mechanisms' which differentiate firms and give competitive advantage. Analyses of market characteristics in education (Cf. Ball 2007; Taylor 2001) suggest - accepting Rutter's (2016) argument to move 'beyond proximities' in analysing connections - that similar forces may be important to consider in studying departments. Adding processes associated with globalisation to their analysis, including information exchanged through the internet, Maskell and Malmberg (1999) use the term ubiquitification to describe differences that exist in industries otherwise characterised by isomorphism:

in other words, one effect of the ongoing globalisation is that many previously localised capabilities and production factors become ubiquities. What is not ubiquified, however, is the non-tradable/non-codified result of knowledge creation – the embedded tacit knowledge – that at a given time can only be produced in practice. (172)

An argument for the importance of corporeal mobility in knowledge transfer and creation is made by Williams (2006): even given the increasing accessibility of information - primarily online - the physical, bodily movement of people, and their subsequent interactions with others remains ‘critically important’ (590) in knowledge transfer and creation. Extending analysis of innovation by conceptualising a ‘relational turn’ (Sunley, 2008), Fløysand and Jakobsen (2010) emphasise the centrality of interactions, defining ‘social practice and social fields as *interaction* between two or more actors that is characterized by overlapping processes of transaction and signification or interchange of ‘goods’ and ‘signs’ (333, italics theirs). The movement and interactions between people is described in the context of leadership by Wilkinson et al. (2013) as ‘travelling practices’. They argue that as practices travel, they are ‘transforming the discursive, material and social conditions for learning and teaching practices as they do so’ (224).

In a broad sense, the NIT literature describes processes of organisations becoming more similar (isomorphism), and mechanisms creating difference; some differences are actively preserved by organisations for competitive advantage, while other differences persist because of a lack of connections. Most attention has been given to processes of isomorphism, defined as a ‘constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions’ (DiMaggio & Powell 1983, 149). Distinctions are made

between institutional isomorphism as coercive, mimetic, and normative, and these categories are now used to frame the analysis of data generated through ethnographic study of geography departments.

Coercive isomorphism: pressure leading to similarity

Coercive isomorphism refers to pressures emanating from institutions on which an organization is dependent. 'Such pressures may be felt as force, as persuasion, or as invitations to join in collusion' (DiMaggio & Powell 1983, 150).

Changes to the organisation of schooling in England and beyond have been argued, particularly strongly by Ball, to be part of a neoliberal vision involving marketisation and competition in which, among other things, the education goods previously provided by the public welfare state are reduced, and replaced by private philanthropic and commercial enterprises (Ball 2012, 2007). A resource dependence model (Pfeffer & Salancik 1978) suggests, however, that the role government play, at least for state schools, in providing financial resources should still be expected to play a significant role in schools' practices, in spite of shifts towards privatisation and academisation. In each case of *coercive* isomorphism, becoming-similar forces are perceived by institutions to be obligatory, or non-negotiable. Departments' relations with examination boards and Ofsted might also be expected to function in this way (Puttick 2015).

Power relations between the department and these other organisations are unequal, with power functioning uni-directionally from the latter over the former. Two organisations in particular relate to the departments in this way; examination boards, and Ofsted, and in both cases aspects of their coercion are mediated

through the school's Senior Leadership Team (SLT). Examination boards and the grades they distribute were emphasised by individual teachers and school level practices, reinforcing the authority and legitimacy of these boards and grades. Teachers justified work set to a class by telling them it would be useful for the exam. One striking example of a teacher apologising to their class for teaching them the 'wrong' case study offers an explicitly articulated illustration of coercive isomorphism that would see different geography departments teaching similar content to students (See Puttick 2015 for further discussion). There may be good reasons for standardising such case studies. The point here is not to make an evaluative judgment about the practice, but to make the more limited argument that examination boards contribute to coercive isomorphism of school geography departments by prescribing content.

Public displays of examination grades have been used by the schools in the current study, through photographs showing students relative performance (their 'flight path'), and posters reporting headline GCSE and A Level grades (Figure 1).

<Figure 1. Exam results in City Academy>

In Town Comprehensive these displays were removed shortly before my fieldwork after attracting critical media attention for a particular aspect of the practice.

These displays were constructed by the SLT, rather than the departments.

These photo boards of examination grades are technologies of displaying performance, presented in City Academy as congratulation ('well done!'), and in Beach Academy as motivation ('are you at altitude?'). In both cases, comparative

evaluative judgements are made between students, ranking some as above, and others as below. Making visible these grades attributes importance to them. Accreditation, through gaining qualifications, is presented as an important purpose of schooling. Examination boards play a significant role in the school geography taught in these departments. All teachers in the current study described the grades their students achieved as being increasingly valued, both for their own career (with grades achieved being included as performance management targets and linked to salary for some), and the status of their department within school (high grades bringing power, and freedoms to departments; low grades limiting autonomy, and reducing power). For example, the Head of Department in Beach Academy described feeling increasingly under pressure, attributing mounting pressure and workload to the school's disappointing GCSE results, and Requires Improvement Ofsted judgements. He contrasted this increasing accountability and bureaucracy against the lighter requirements placed on a nearby school judged Outstanding by Ofsted:

There's this huge dichotomy between what we're being asked to produce here, as a school who's been under – not special measures, but near enough – and the element of scrutiny under which, y'know, we're put, compared to...the school which is outstanding, and to me this is about ticking boxes and getting us up to that next level...Because they don't come under any of the kind of scrutiny that we do...And if they came in and saw this [pointing to the Outstanding school's comparatively brief scheme of work] we'd be under the cosh even more. (Hugh, interview 1b:53-59)

Examination boards also provided the content of lessons in the form of official, authorised textbooks. Despite the overwhelmingly negative description of textbooks by teachers throughout the current study, at KS4/5 in particular they were, nevertheless, used regularly; structuring the course, providing key terms and data, and being used directly, with exercises being set from the textbook for homework, or when the teacher was away. Examination boards also provided guidance on how to deliver their specification, and some teachers attended INSET courses of this nature. The relationship between these departments and the examination boards was one of obedience, with the examination specification providing the 'fundamental reason' (HoD, CA, interview 2:84) for teaching particular topics, concepts, case studies, and offering certain definitions of terms. Existing studies have suggested that the National Curriculum (NC) also exerts considerable power over school geography (Winter 2014; Standish 2008). While examination specifications do seem to determine the knowledge taught at KS4/5 across these departments, at KS3 the NC, which has been assumed in the literature to be a force of coercive isomorphism, seems to have little influence. The findings indicate that the geography teachers in the current study are similar to the history teachers in Burn's (2007) study, who 'were much more aware of their existing departmental schemes of work and the impact of school assessment tasks' (459) than they were of the NC.

Ofsted inspections were closely related to performative aspects of examination regimes, with the type of Ofsted inspections being determined by school performance as measured by examination grades. Talk of Ofsted was found throughout all of the schools in the current study, with inspections shortly before,

during and after fieldwork. Teachers' beliefs about the expectations Ofsted inspectors have seemed to affect the way in which they planned lessons with the aim of 'demonstrating progress'. This language and focus was common in all schools, sharing a desire to do well in Ofsted inspections, and planning teaching with 'demonstrating progress' in mind. Interpretations of Ofsted's criteria for making judgements were strongly mediated through SLT, and in each school Head Teachers regularly addressed staff meetings by summarising what they believed Ofsted are (currently) looking for. Tasks of writing lessons objectives on boards, having starter activities, and plenary sections during, and at the end of lessons aimed at demonstrating progress were all described similarly, and strongly encouraged by SLT across all schools. Issues surround non-subject specialists' application of generic criterion, and the power of Ofsted judgements on lessons: terms such as 'Requires Improvement' are delivered with certainty, and the number three is recorded on a spreadsheet with no ambiguity (Puttick 2015). Examination grades function in a similar way with regard to certainty. Against the certainty of these factors relating to coercive isomorphism, mimetic isomorphism describes similarities between departments as responses to uncertainty.

Mimetic isomorphism: uncertainty leading to similarity

What to teach, and how to teach, are inherently contestable, moral questions (Pring 2004, 17–18), and in part the uncertainty of answers to these questions was addressed by teachers describing and justifying their decisions and actions in relation to others. In DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) terms, 'uncertainty is a

powerful force that encourages imitation...[w]hen organizational technologies are poorly understood...[or] when goals are ambiguous' (151). In these situations organizations may model themselves after similar 'leading' organizations.

Other factors such as a lack of time, and the increased accessibility of teaching resources online also play a role. However, the uncertainty of knowledge (particularly questions about what knowledge is right to teach in school geography) seemed in particular to lead teachers to model their work on that of others. The similarity between the formats of resources held on VSAs in these departments is one aspect of this isomorphism (Figure 2).

<Figure 2. Comparison of Virtual Shared Area resource formats>

Virtual shared areas (VSAs) are often used to electronically store schemes of work, lesson plans, and resources. VSAs, normally held on intranet systems or cloud-based services, allow sharing and collaboration between teachers. They have become an integral part of departments, with teachers accessing their VSA multiple times every day. Postings onto VSAs might be explored 'not merely as transmissions through infrastructure, space and time, but rather as encounters between various human and nonhuman agents' (Adams 2016, p.1). The VSA provides a kind of digital footprint; a record of what has been created, by whom, and when. As such, VSAs might be thought of as being like the rings of a tree trunk: evidence of changes in the local environment (potentially including culture, norms, policies, and approaches towards knowledge and curriculum) over time. The virtual shared areas (VSAs) were analysed using basic statistical descriptions, generated by manually counting files within each VSA. I asked

the following questions (drawn from the overall research questions) of each file: What year group is it for? What topic is it used in? Who made it / where was it produced? What format is it in? (For example, PowerPoint, worksheet, textbook, video). What is included? (For example, numerical data, images, sounds, propositions). When was it created, or last edited?

In each department there is a similarly high use of worksheets; giving students information and activities on printed A4 sheets of paper is seen as the normal thing to do. PowerPoints were the second most frequent, with the exception of the large number of photos Beach Academy store on their VSA. In this department, one teacher's reorganisation of the VSA is suggested to, based on his experiences in (and subsequent imitation – mimetic isomorphism - of) other departments, lead to a higher percentage of PowerPoints in the future. It is interesting that the impacted department is the one in the current study in which the HoD's preferences for particular resources, such as his active rejection of widespread use of PPT, and love of photographs (see Figure 2 for the difference between Beach Academy and the others in this area, in contrast to the similarity across other areas), are most strongly reflected in the formats held in the VSA. The absence, until very recently, of other staff and their experiences in other departments might be seen as having partly insulated him from mimetic isomorphism.

Evidence of mimetic isomorphism between teachers was most often observed in interactions between trainee teachers and more experienced colleagues. In one example, a trainee teacher asked if it would be 'ok' for her to use paper atlases with the students, rather than using google earth on the iPads: 'I'm not going to be

frowned on for not using technology, am I?' (Pam, fieldnotes 15/1/2013), conscious that 'everyone' uses the department's iPads for this kind of work.

Another trainee reduced his use of PowerPoint in direct response to the HoD's opinion, and own (infrequent) use of such resources. Examples of these kinds of individual mimicry did happen in all departments, but they were particularly apparent in the 'impacted' (Busher and Harris, 1999) department. That is, in the smallest department with only one full time teacher. Possibly, having only one full time geography teacher meant that trainees observed only one person's way of teaching geography, which then effected more obvious establishment of norms. Whereas, trainee teachers in the largest department (City Academy) observed up to five different teachers, each with quite different geographical backgrounds, expertise and preferences.

Normative isomorphism: social trends and professionalization leading to similarity

The final type of isomorphism defined by DiMaggio and Powell is *normative isomorphism*, which focuses on the types of people who work in these organisations. In this case, institutions become increasingly similar as a result of processes of professionalisation in which education and career tracks are 'closely guarded', producing 'a pool of almost interchangeable individuals who occupy similar positions across a range of organizations and possess a [high level of] similarity of orientation and disposition' (152). The 'double-whammy' of performativity on teacher educators described by Menter et al. (2012) suggests

that ITE (Initial Teacher Education) courses could be seen as becoming increasingly 'closely guarded', and so may possibly reproduce some similarity of orientation towards teaching. Against the suggestion that institutions may become increasingly homogeneous because of the similarity of teachers' education and qualifications, is an argument that teachers experience very different geographies during their own school and undergraduate education. Differences in teachers' experiences seem to lead to heterogeneity of teachers' conceptions of geography (Brooks 2007).

Normative isomorphism includes homogeneity across departments arising from similarity of qualifications of teachers, and wider social trends. The fourteen geography teachers in the current study hold similar qualifications, including GCSEs and A Levels, geography or related degree, and a secondary geography Post Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE). Paradoxically, aspects of this isomorphism seem to lead to heterogeneity of practice. Drawing on March and March's (1977) study of Head Teachers, which concluded there was a high degree of similarity between these managers, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) argue that universities and training institutions 'create a pool of almost interchangeable individuals who occupy similar positions across a range of organizations and possess a similarity of orientation and disposition' (152). However, undergraduate experiences of geography seem to be paradoxically related to isomorphism. Existing studies have argued that teachers' conceptions of geography have survived any pluralist tendencies of their university degrees; teachers' own experiences of school geography as school students exert considerable influence over their current teaching (Alexandre 2009; Alkis 2009).

The teachers in the current study offer a different view. Their experiences of school geography do seem to be relevant to the way in which they now understand and act. In a similar way to the students Hopwood (2006) studied, these teachers' interpretations of their own school experiences seem to be related to already pre-existing conceptions of geography, and their school experiences were then an important (subsequent) factor in choices of undergraduate geography courses. Decisions about universities, courses, and modules were made in reference to *all* of their experiences of geography; their own school experiences are relevant to and affect subsequent university experiences, and experiences of both are judged and interpreted in relation to one another (Puttick 2016). Understanding teachers' conceptions of geographical knowledge in terms of the journeys they have made, and are making, seems important. Viewing the teachers as *journeying* through these space-times and interacting with these people and situations adds temporal and spatial dimensions, expanding an understanding of their conceptions of geographical knowledge from isolated things (such as propositions about a process or event), to inter-related, emergent, and dynamic processes. This is similar to Rutten's (2016) 'conversations'; here, teachers' subject knowledge conceived of through conversation across a range of scales and times. One implication of this for departmental leadership is the importance for leaders of getting to know colleagues' experiences of the subject: what kinds of journeys have they been on? Where, daily, are they going for the knowledge they teach? What kinds of places are you making most accessible? What other places could be opened up? Better understanding teachers' experiences of their subject may also provide useful information to inform continuing professional development (CPD) provision.

The differences between individual teachers' descriptions of the nature of geographical knowledge are significant, and in many cases can be seen to relate to their experiences of undergraduate geography. The nature of that which is experienced (that is, academic geography) is important to consider, and is now argued to paradoxically contribute to heterogeneity of dispositions and beliefs, in contrast to DiMaggio and Powell's assumption of similarity. The position suggested here (that is, normative isomorphism leads to differences in orientation towards subject knowledge) also contrasts with contributions to recent discussion of knowledge in geography education research which imply that disciplines embrace one particular view of knowledge, whether this is wholly critical/postmodern (Winter 2012) or one omitting mention of such positions (Standish 2014, 2011). Bernstein's (2000, 1990) accounts of academic disciplines as producers of knowledge are based on similar assumptions about the basic epistemological homogeneity of disciplines. These accounts seem to underappreciate the inherently questioning nature of disciplines, and the associated role of undergraduate education as not simply (or even primarily) being about teaching knowledge produced by the discipline to undergraduates, but of *disciplining* students. Rather than being characterised by homogeneity, disciplines might instead be characterised by dispute and contestation, or be described as debaters of knowledge, as well as, or rather than producers. Viewing academic disciplines as contested/contesting might lead to different purposes for school subjects than is suggested by summaries of them as simply a body of knowledge. Understanding disciplinary knowledge in this way makes sense of the paradox between similarity

of educational qualifications held by these teachers, and the differences in their conceptions of geographical knowledge.

This discussion of disciplines might apply across subjects, but seems of particular relevance to geography. That is, the hybrid nature of the discipline, including social and natural sciences ('human' and 'physical' geography) may be related to the differences between teachers' beliefs about the nature of geographical knowledge (although not scope; teachers in the current study expressed a belief in an expansive and potentially all-encompassing view of the scope).

An important example of normative isomorphism which does relate to the homogeneity of practices across departments is the popularity of internet searches in the search for knowledge to teach. Googling might be seen in relation to wider social trends playing a role in normative isomorphism across departments. All teachers studied find a considerable amount of the information they teach to students 'literally from Googling' (Sophie, CA, interview 2:8). In Gemma's (BA) terms, 'my first port of call – like most people – is the internet' (Gemma, BA, interview 1:206). Her use of 'like most people' is particularly relevant; aligning oneself to what it is believed are examples of shared good practice serves rhetorical purposes. The use of 'most people' rather than 'most geography teachers' might also speak to the broader population, and wider changes in the way in which information is accessed. Heavy reliance on internet searches makes search engine rankings, and the algorithms driving them powerful. Teachers seemed to use the first one or two links on the first page of results, and so websites are found primarily when Google presents them. Further research is needed into

teachers' use of the internet, the ways in which they search, and their selecting and curating of search results.

Conclusions

Spatially separated school subject departments seem to display striking aspects of similarity. Through the use of NIT three dimensions of institutional isomorphism (coercive, memetic, and normative) were applied to findings from an ethnographic study of three secondary school geography departments in England. In arguing that there is evidence of each aspect of isomorphism in these departments, I suggested that there are significant and perhaps surprising similarities across these departments. Aspects of mimetic isomorphism include the strong regulatory role of examination boards, and Ofsted. Across all departments these external institutions exert considerable influence on teachers' practice. Displays of examination performance seem to reinforce the legitimacy and power of examinations, contributing to a strongly held belief across departments in the importance of accreditation as the purpose of education. Ofsted's role is relayed to these departments through the SLT's perceptions of Ofsted's current expectations. Considerable energies are devoted to predicting areas that will be given attention, and similarities in discourses associated with Ofsted preparations (including discussion of 'demonstrating progress') are strong. Mimetic isomorphism was evidenced through these teachers' responses to uncertainty, discussed mainly in relation to the similarity of the uses of virtual shared areas. The types of resources held in these areas are very similar, which raises questions about why these teachers choose to use these particular resources when they might choose any

number of others. Processes of isomorphism have some explanatory power for developing understandings of why similarities between departments might exist. Further research, particularly the generation of longitudinal data on the types of teaching resources held in VSAs, would offer a valuable contribution to these debates.

Normative isomorphism seems to be paradoxically related to homogeneity of practice, with induction into one discipline potentially leading to heterogeneity of beliefs about the subject. In making this argument I drew on an understanding of disciplines as disputing, which offers a development of Siskin's contention that departments are most significantly *subject* communities: particularly for a heterogeneous discipline such as geography, what 'the subject' means and for whom are contested issues. The differences between teachers' conceptions of their subject may also have implications for the most appropriate kinds of CPD school leaders seek to offer and facilitate. Finally, I presented a different aspect of normative isomorphism – that related to wider social trends – and argued that the practice of Googling for knowledge to teach in lessons was widespread and used heavily across these departments. Further research exploring the role of subject knowledge across different departments may offer interesting comparisons.

Further analysis of ways in which the 'wider social trends' discussed here (specifically, the high use of Google searches) both in geography, but also across other subjects would also be worthwhile.

The evidence of homogeneity of practice across spatially separated departments raises interesting questions about teachers' practice: for example, why so many PowerPoint currently seem to be used, and why these teachers attribute

significant importance to accreditation as an aim of schooling. Suggestions might also be made for ITE to introduce beginning teachers to research about school subject departments. I have presented some evidence to indicate the ways in which homogenising forces are currently being responded to (in these examples, primarily by adopting these norms). Awareness of the potential existence of such forces, and possible dimensions through which they can be described (such as coercive, mimetic, and normative) might be useful for school leaders and managers seeking to critically evaluate potentially unexamined assumptions about teaching. As I argued above, my position is not that similarity across departments is necessarily a good or a bad thing; the argument is that surprising similarities do seem to exist across departments, which may be in response to isomorphism, and critically examining these processes may be worthwhile.

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Figures

Figure 1. Exam results in City Academy



Figure 2. Comparison of Virtual Shared Area resource formats.

