

Third Sector Research Centre

Working Paper 109

## **The third sector in unsettled times: a field guide**

Rob Macmillan, Rebecca Taylor, Malin Arvidson,  
Andri Soteri-Proctor, and Simon Teasdale

August 2013

## Abstract

The third sector, understood as a diverse group of charities, voluntary organisations, community groups and social enterprises, is facing a radical upheaval in its multiple political and economic environments. Drawing on data from Real Times, a qualitative longitudinal study of third sector organisations, this paper explores how different case study organisations are affected by and have navigated this shifting context. We explore these questions using a 'field'-based theoretical perspective on social and organisational life (Bourdieu 2005, Emirbayer and Johnson 2008, Fligstein and McAdam 2012). Fields are seen as arenas within which actors convene to advance their interests and purposes amidst evolving rules and understandings about what the field is, how it operates and what is at stake. Fields are overlapping and nested; constituted at different levels from the third sector, through vertical policy domains down to individual organisations. We explore how our case study organisations enact various strategies and tactics in order to manage this period of economic and political change and maintain or advance their position in a field; a struggle for 'room'. We focus on three interrelated issues – staff redundancies and organisational restructuring; mergers and acquisitions; and repositioning and branding – and examine how these shed light on the contested nature of fields and the tensions at the heart of organisational change and reproduction.

### Keywords

Third sector, qualitative longitudinal research, fields, organisational change.

# Contents

- Introduction..... 3**
- A qualitative longitudinal study of third sector organisations ..... 5**
- The third sector as a ‘strategic action field’ ..... 6**
- Understanding change in fields ..... 8**
  - Restructuring and redundancy..... 10
  - Merger/acquisition..... 12
  - Repositioning/branding ..... 14
- Discussion – unfolding fields ..... 17**
- Conclusion ..... 19**
- References ..... 22**

## Introduction

The third sector, understood as a diverse group of charities, voluntary organisations, community groups and social enterprises, is facing a radical upheaval in its multiple political and economic environments. In many countries, the crisis in the financial system from 2008 onwards has migrated to become a fiscal crisis of public debt and spending deficits, a broader economic crisis of low, uneven or stagnant growth, and arguably a social crisis as austerity measures including significant welfare reform are implemented by governments in response (Gough 2011). Commentators and advocates for the third sector have argued that organisations are doubly affected by such measures as demand for welfare services and support increases whilst financial support for organisations (via grants, donations, and public service contracts) tends to be squeezed (Wilding 2010, Clifford et al. 2013).

At the same time, the political context in which third sector organisations operate is changing considerably. In many countries right of centre governments are pursuing programmes of aggressive deficit reduction. In the UK this is being combined with a radical programme of state restructuring (Taylor-Gooby 2012). The Conservative-led Coalition Government formed in the UK after the inconclusive general election of May 2010 has implemented new approaches to governmental action, characterised by references to opening up public services to alternative providers in the private and third sectors, commitments to decentralisation, and support for non-state social action promoted under the auspices of the 'Big Society' (Alcock 2010, Macmillan 2013a). Within this, there are signs that the UK Coalition Government is moving away from the 'partnership' conception of relationships between the state and the third sector which characterised its predecessor Labour governments (Lewis 2005, Alcock and Kendall 2011). The resulting 'unsettlement' of these relationships has led to a 'partial decoupling' between the sector and the state (Macmillan 2013c) as sector boundaries are recast and a swathe of third sector organisations are required to interpret and negotiate new expectations and roles. Third sector organisations are encouraged to become more enterprising, business-like and competitive, yet also to consider collaboration and merger, and further exhorted to demonstrate their impact.

However, this is not to suggest that the third sector is a wholly distinct and coherent entity, its constituent organisations equally affected by the shifting policy landscape and fiscal retrenchment. Boundaries around the sector are notoriously blurred, 'baggy' and contested (Alcock and Kendall 2011) with only general agreement on what constitutes a third sector organisation and considerable diversity within the sector (Macmillan 2013b). The changing political and financial context affects organisations to different extents and in different ways. It may have only limited or indirect relevance to the existence and operations of, for example, sports clubs, leisure and hobby interest organisations and small community groups; run on an entirely voluntary basis, their funding comes primarily from their membership. The diversity of organisational forms, shapes and sizes in the third sector means that whilst some might be undergoing considerable change in response to a more turbulent and uncertain environment others might continue to operate as they always have done, largely untouched. The question then is how are third sector organisations of different shapes and sizes affected by, making sense of, coping with and adapting to these contextual shifts?

In this paper we explore this question using a 'field'-based theoretical perspective on social and organisational life (Bourdieu 2005, Emirbayer and Johnson 2008, Fligstein and McAdam 2012). Fields are seen as arenas within which actors convene to secure or advance their interests and purposes amidst evolving rules and understandings about what the field is, how it operates and what is at stake. Third sector organisations and activities can potentially be seen both 'as fields' in their own right, and as operating 'in fields' (Emirbayer and Johnson 2008). Whilst the third sector may appear to be the primary field of interest, organisations also exist within other fields including 'vertical' fields in policy domains, such as health, family support and housing (Kendall 2003). However, to date there has been little consideration of third sector organisations operating through multiple fields or indeed of how organisations have experienced change over time. In this paper we seek to address this gap and to provide a theoretically informed analysis of the varied experiences of third sector organisations navigating a period of economic and political change. The analysis draws on successive waves of research in a qualitative longitudinal study of third sector organisations and activities in England over a three year period, starting in Spring 2010 and thus broadly coinciding with the period of apparent 'unsettlement'. We argue that a field-theoretical approach to understanding our longitudinal data enables a deeper exploration of organisational continuity and change in terms of the dynamic relationships within and across the different fields in which case study organisations are embedded. In this way we provide a new and distinctive contribution to our understanding of the dynamics of the third sector.

The paper begins with an overview of the research which underpins the paper, describing the qualitative longitudinal study of third sector organisations and activities from which our data is drawn. We then outline in some detail the way in which field based theory provides us with the conceptual tools for understanding the complexity of the sector, the diversity of our case study organisations within it and the different ways in which change may be manifested for these organisations. This is followed by a theoretically informed analysis of our empirical material that explores the strategies and tactics adopted by third sector organisations to secure, reproduce or advance their field positions. We call this the struggle for '*room*' (Macmillan 2011), where organisations seek to maintain or strengthen their footing, to thrive or even just survive, in multiple fields where different kinds of resources are at stake. We ask how they have experienced and survived the 'unsettlement' facing the third sector and focus on three strategies which emerged through our thematic and case-based analysis: organisational restructuring and redundancy; merger and acquisition activity; and repositioning and rebranding. We consider in turn how these strategies and tactics relate to the wider fields in which the cases operate. We argue that this analysis provides a more nuanced and multidimensional account of the third sector which highlights the power relationships that characterise the interaction between organisations and the strategies they deploy in periods of unsettlement. We conclude the discussion by emphasising the value of both a field-inspired theoretical vision, and in-depth research over time, and considering the extent to which in combination they can bring forth new perspectives on the third sector. A field-inspired longitudinal research approach enables a deeper appreciation of how field participants in third sector organisations navigate their way through multiple always-changing fields. We argue that third sector organisations position themselves firstly in relation to their understanding of

field dimensions and rules, secondly in relation to and with other organisations operating in their fields, and lastly, in relation to the past in their own organisation. A longitudinal perspective provides an understanding of what organisations are seeking to retain or reject in their own historical development; pursuing strategies of distinction (and/or affiliation) *from themselves* in order to maintain or advance 'room'.

## A qualitative longitudinal study of third sector organisations

Much qualitative research on third sector organisations has taken partial 'snapshots' through cross-sectional case study analysis (Taylor et al. 2013 forthcoming). As a result relatively little is known about how and why third sector organisations change, how they respond to the challenges they face, and whether and how they might flourish over time. The 'Real Times' study sought to gain a more in-depth and realistic understanding of *how third sector organisations, groups and activities operate in practice over time*. The aim was to make a contribution to the development of a theoretically informed and dynamic account of the third sector 'from the inside'. This involved attention to three supplementary questions: what *happens* within third sector organisations over time and why; what *matters* to third sector organisations over time and why, and how might we *understand continuity and change* in third sector activity. To do this the study asked questions on the fortunes, strategies, challenges and performance of third sector organisations and activities.

A diverse group of 15 case studies was selected to capture a range of organisations by size, age and function/policy field, and different aspects of the setting in which cases operate such as, for example, urban and rural locations, relative affluence and deprivation, and local political context. Most were specific organisations, but we also examined smaller and less formal third sector organisations, groups and activities in four contrasting settings: two villages and two urban community resource centres. Studying a range of cases affords some protection against findings that might be considered to be purely idiosyncratic. The group of case studies should be regarded as *broadly reflective* of a diverse range of third sector activities and the range of contexts in which they occur, rather than statistically representative in any way, supporting a claim that selected cases are not untypical of the kinds of activities, organisations and, more importantly dynamics, found in the sector. Each case has been given a pseudonym to protect its anonymity.

The research involved a prospective longitudinal case study design (Holland et al. 2006, Elliott et al. 2009: 229) involving five 'waves' of fieldwork during the three year period from Spring 2010 to Spring 2013. Each wave combined what Dingwall (1997) calls 'hanging out' (observing case study activities and meetings), 'asking questions' (recorded and fully transcribed semi-structured interviews with people associated with each case study such as staff, trustees, community activists and volunteers) and 'reading the papers' (analysing documents produced by and about the organisation or locality). The design was informed by Sayer's (1992) description of 'intensive research', where close examination of a number of concrete cases facilitates a qualitative exploration of processes and dynamics.

Our research with the case studies began in Spring 2010; a period which featured the inconclusive 2010 General Election in the UK, the eventual outcome being a Conservative-led coalition government

with the Liberal Democrats. The new government was promising an emergency budget and an Autumn 2010 public spending review, with a strong steer towards austerity and deficit reduction, perhaps shielded by talk of a 'Big Society' approach to public policy (Alcock 2010; Macmillan 2013a). This unsettled economic and political landscape has thus formed the backdrop to the Real Times study and the processes through which our cases have negotiated this context have become key concerns for our analysis. In this paper we focus on the experiences of those case studies which were most likely to be affected by the wider unsettlement, since it is through these cases that complex dynamics of organisational change can be seen more clearly.

### The third sector as a 'strategic action field'

Understanding the process and dynamics of change and stasis in third sector organisations during this period requires a theoretical framework that can accommodate the diversity and complexity of the third sector. One recent approach inspired by the social theory of Pierre Bourdieu advances the idea of 'strategic action fields' (SAFs) (Fligstein and McAdam 2011, 2012), defined as social orders where:

actors (who can be individual or collective) are attuned to and interact with one another on the basis of shared (which is not to say consensual) understandings about the purpose of the field, relationships to others in the field (including who has power and why), and the rules governing legitimate action in the field. (Fligstein and McAdam 2012: 9)

Fields exist at different levels. A field can be a single organisation comprising a group of departments or individuals; it can also be a group or network of organisations operating in the same locality, market or sub-sector: it is possible to regard organisations operating both 'as-fields' and 'in-fields' (Emirbayer and Johnson 2008). Fields are constituted by the production, reproduction and contestation of inter- and intra-organisational power relations (Emirbayer and Johnson 2008: 371), where more and less powerful 'players' operate as 'incumbents' and 'challengers' (Fligstein and McAdam 2011). The former wield disproportionate influence in the field and are in more of a position to shape the field in their interest, particularly the rules and regulatory frameworks and structures for the division of resources. 'Challengers' are less privileged and less well-resourced, tend to be disfavoured by the rules and may articulate, and struggle to impose, alternative visions of the field. Fligstein and McAdam (2011: 6) also note the importance in some fields of governance units, such as regulatory bodies, accrediting bodies and trade associations 'charged with overseeing compliance with field rules', which 'serve to reinforce the dominant logic and safeguard the interests of incumbents'. Fields are not wholly closed entities but sit in closer or more distant relationship to one another and are nested in or overlapping with other fields. In particular they are defined by the nature of their relationship with the state, itself a nested set of fields. Fligstein and McAdam (2011: 8) argue that: 'In the modern world state actors alone have the authority to intervene in, set rules for, and pronounce on the legitimacy and viability of most non-state fields', giving states 'unrivalled ability to impact the stability of most SAFs'.

An initial step is to understand the various fields in which our organisational case studies are positioned. At the broadest level all the cases can be situated within the third sector field of organisations who share the characteristics of being non-profit making and overseen by independent governing bodies. There are broadly shared values and purposes across the third sector (notions, for

example, of being mission-driven, non-profit making and independent) that give the field meaning and coherence. However there is also a great deal of contestation and debate about how the field is organised and operates, and how it should develop in the future. An example might be the way 'social enterprise' as a discourse and mode of organisation has mobilised to challenge the notion of 'traditional' charity, or how large service delivery organisations have regularly been challenged by smaller organisations over their financial dominance and purported closeness to government. The interests of different organisational constituencies within the third sector are represented and promoted by associated umbrella organisations, such as Social Enterprise UK, or ACEVO, the Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations.

A picture is emerging here of the third sector field as a complex web of different organisational groupings with vested interests and particular values and rules structured in various hierarchical relationships to one another mediated by umbrella organisations and the state. However, in addition, the third sector field is constituted by a range of subfields: community organisation, social enterprise, the co-operative movement, or traditional charities might each constitute fields in their own right. Then there are fields organised in vertical policy domains or 'sub-sectors'; these might contain groups of organisations concerned with particular types of service or function such as children and families, mental health or community development or even sports clubs with common but also conflicting interests around sets of activities, practices, approaches and policy interests (Macmillan 2013b). These subsector fields extend beyond the third sector to embrace other actors, for example central and local government, commercial organisations, the media, and research and consultancy organisations. Finally if we drill down further we can see that third sector organisations operating in a particular location, community or neighbourhood might group themselves together in a field possibly with statutory or private sector organisations defined by their local connections and embeddedness. In summary, fields can be observed at multiple levels, and at each level they are nested within and overlapping with other fields.

To illustrate this argument, it may be helpful to take an example of one of the Real Times case study organisations and explore the way it is positioned in different fields. 'Fig' is a large national charity with a long history delivering services to vulnerable families via local projects. In the broadest sense it can be positioned within the 'third' or 'voluntary sector' field. More specifically it is part of a subsector field of organisations of various sizes that deliver services to children and families within a set of parameters governed by particular policy frameworks, legislation and competition for national and local government resource streams to operate their services. This field is directly affected by shifting government policy and funding of services for these groups. Organisations survive and stay ahead by shaping and pre-empting these policies and the funding environment. Fig delivers services through its network of projects operating at the local level and each of these is part of a field of organisations offering particular services in that geographical area or neighbourhood shaped by relationships with the local authority and its funding structures, and policy priorities. Finally, Fig can be seen as a field in its own right, with a set of organising principles and structures, and within which we find struggles between different departments, or between local projects and head office, over roles, performance, resources and direction.



## Understanding change in fields

Fligstein and McAdam (2012) argue that strategic action fields move through stages of emergence, stability and unsettlement or crisis, although the precise sequence, duration and processes involved in change are not predetermined and are an empirical matter. In stable fields, roles, positions in a hierarchy of power and resources, understandings of what the field is about and how it is structured, and the rules of the game, are relatively clear and well known (Fligstein and McAdam 2011: 14). Conflict, struggle and a 'constant jockeying' for position are endemic features and sources of change in fields. However, in their view a major source of on-going turbulence or unsettlement derives from the interdependence of fields, and is likened to 'a stone thrown in a still pond, sending ripples outward to all proximate fields' (Fligstein and McAdam 2011: 9). Crises are rare and caused by more dramatic exogenous shocks, such as a political crisis, war or the recent 'subprime' mortgage crisis in the financial system. The 'rules of the game', and vested interests in the field's hierarchy and structures of power and authority serve to manage episodes of contention and crisis and ultimately these result in the reproduction of existing positions of privilege within fields rather than chaos.

We can apply this idea of unsettlement and exogenous shocks to organisations in the third sector field where some are experiencing significant upheaval in their operating environments through the combination of economic austerity and a changing political context. We have argued that resources are being squeezed and reconfigured, and existing understandings of the role third sector organisations might play in respect of both public policy and market-based provision of goods and services are in flux creating ripples as the 'rules of the game' are being renegotiated to accommodate these changes. However, there is also danger in presenting this 'unsettlement' in the third sector field as a singular process affecting all organisations in the field in the same way. We should not assume a direct read off between the wider unsettlement and particular organisational behaviours and dynamics. On the contrary, our early encounters with the case studies during 2010 highlighted how differently the organisations experience the external context. The multiple fields in which third sector organisations are embedded create a particular configuration of dynamics and struggles for individual organisations.

These conceptual tools shed new light on the experiences of case studies over time, specifically how they respond to the dynamic and unsettled context in relation to the different fields in which they are positioned. Our analysis of the longitudinal data sought to identify and explore the strategies and tactics employed by cases to survive and maintain their position. We narrowed our focus in this instance to organisations delivering public services. These are likely to face significant financial pressures in so far as the new government's austerity measures involved immediate cuts, the cancellation or non-renewal of some programmes, and re-commissioning services with smaller budgets. Around half of the case studies could be identified in this way. They include, for example, 'Ash', a large social housing group primarily involved in providing homes for low-income households, and thus at risk of proposed cuts to housing development funding, care and support work, and Housing Benefit. 'Birch', providing advice services, and 'Mimosa', a mental health charity, are both organisations operating across large urban local authority areas, and again funded primarily through public funding in the form of grants or contracts, and thus potentially vulnerable to cuts.

Following a combination of thematic and case based analysis we identified some broad generic mechanisms for organisational survival. We focus here on three broad categories of strategies and tactics that emerged from our examination of the data: restructuring and redundancy, mergers and acquisitions, and repositioning and branding. Examining the data on these three themes in relation to different cases we were able to explore how and why they were used differently by different organisations, that is to say we focused on the absence as well as presence of these strategies. We then sought to understand these differences in relation to the particular configuration of fields within which each case is positioned. Finally we examined the longitudinal narratives for the case studies in order to understand how the strategies and tactics had played out over the three years, the extent to which they were implicated in both organisational change and reproduction, and the implications of this for understanding the dynamic and contested nature of fields.

In the following section we look at each strategy in turn, drawing from five cases in particular that illustrate important facets of how the strategy is used. Table 1 below provides more information about the case studies.

**Table 1: Real Times case studies**

Case	Policy field	Scale	Size (income)*
'Ash': a group formed from the merger of several small community-based housing associations	Social housing	Regional	Major (More than £10m)
'Birch': a large, local information, rights and advice organisation based in an urban area in the north of England	Advice	Local	Large (£1m to £10m)
'Cherry': a national multi-faith-based social action network	Anti-poverty	National	Medium (£100K to £1m)
'Fig': a charity working with children, young people and families to tackle disadvantage and social exclusion	Family support	National	Major (More than £10m)
'Hawthorn': a family support project for young mothers in a town in the north of England	Family support	Local	Small (£10K to £100K)

\*Taken from NCVO's categorisation of charities by annual income (Clark et al. 2010: 24).

We begin with an examination of redundancy and restructuring. This has been salient to the immediate survival of many service delivery organisations and sheds light on the particular 'rules of the game' for fields where organisations have become closer to the state in terms of finance and the delivery of public policy priorities and the relative lack of autonomy and control for third sector organisations in the service delivery field. This is followed by an investigation of how strategies for merger and acquisition play out in different fields set against a wider narrative in which greater inter-organisational collaboration, and particularly merger, is presented as a necessary and efficient

response across the third sector to an era of constrained resources. Finally we explore the efforts of case studies to reposition and rebrand their organisations within their respective fields; strategies that can be seen as a product of the intersection between various field-based priorities and leaders in individual organisations.

### **Restructuring and redundancy**

A key dimension to the third sector unsettlement has been the proposed and then implemented cuts to public spending in some policy areas, and redirection of spending towards other priorities following the Coalition Government's first Spending Review in October 2010. As we undertook our first wave of fieldwork commentators were envisaging a 'crisis' for the sector (Taylor et al. 2012), often in rather dramatic terms such as a 'cliff edge' (Cox and Schmuecker 2010) or a 'perfect storm' (Davies and Evans 2012). Several of our cases were anticipating, with considerable anxiety although very little clarity or certainty, the effects of potentially terminated contracts, top slicing of contract income and new commissioning strategies with unknown policy priorities. Their 'room' in the field partly constituted by the financial environment appeared about to be dramatically squeezed, and some feared or considered dissolution. In this context, organisations viewed staff redundancies as unavoidable, a necessary evil but how these redundancies were managed and how the organisation recovered from them were strategic or tactical survival processes that corresponded to the rules of the game in the service delivery field. Organisational restructuring was a central strategy, here seen as part of managing the loss of, but also stabilising, the organisation for the future and ensuring its competitiveness in the new markets emerging from the cuts process. Here we focus on three of our cases – Birch, Cherry and Fig. Although each of these operates in a different subsector policy field, all faced a relatively similar set of conditions and followed similar stages of a process over three years.

At Wave 1 they were contemplating the potentially substantial loss of contract income and in various stages of planning for, and in some cases undertaking, a swathe of staff redundancies; a response that they viewed as not so much strategic as inevitable and unavoidable. Any delay in making staff redundant once a service contract has been cut could leave the organisation with substantial staff bills and no income to cover them. A member of Birch's board pointed out how the personal liability of trustees makes it imperative that they cut services and staff quickly as funding is reduced:

'arguably had we continued to run and do nothing we as trustees could have ended up having to meet a bill for possibly hundreds of thousands of pounds because we'd have done nothing.' (Birch, Chair, Wave 2)

All had a history of delivering publicly funded services and past experience in doing what one board chair called "the usual things regarding redundancy". Fig, for example, had understood from an early stage that its heavy reliance on government funding (around 80%) made it vulnerable to public spending cuts. Senior management had raised these issues with the board in Autumn 2008, and presented proposals for a 'cut-back plan' in May 2010 that assumed the need for 30% cuts over two years. Cherry too had recognised the political and economic uncertainty ahead although it had fewer staff at risk. Instead of focusing on a redundancies strategy its senior executive spoke of the need for "a hardnosed fundraising strategy" that would enable them to keep staff. Both Birch and Fig made a

substantial number of staff redundant over a three year period and the CEOs described feeling dismayed by the process. As Birch's CEO reflects:

'it's some of the most painful stuff I've ever had to do, it's absolutely horrible, absolutely horrible. People come in and really look you in the eye and tell you how desperately they want their job and they enjoy their job and you just feel dreadful because, you know, it's not about whether you want your job or not...It's about how much money we've got' (Birch, CEO, Wave 2).

There was a sense that the pursuit of various strategies around restructuring and redundancies implied a need for some commercial ruthlessness on behalf of senior executives and trustees to ensure organisational survival and a more secure position in the field. At the same time the CEOs of Birch and Fig both articulated a narrative of themselves as 'good' managers; where managing the redundancy process 'well' is effectively part of the requirements of being a CEO and one which marked them out in relation to other organisations in their fields. In relation to this all three organisations saw their goal as minimising staff redundancies and managing their impact on the organisation. This involved a number of strategies. All three cases made use of non-renewal of existing short term contracts where they could as well as strategies such as reducing staff working hours in order to avoid redundancies. They tried to predict their financial position as accurately as possible in order that they could make the redundancy process as efficient as possible. This was not straight forward for Fig or Cherry whose local authority commissioners pursued a policy of rolling over existing contracts on a monthly or three monthly basis meaning neither organisation had any certainty regarding which services might eventually be cut and thus where redundancies might need to fall. Fig coped with this by engaging in rigorous and endless financial scenario planning based on different packages of cuts. Cherry were less confident about doing this:

'clearly much more difficult to plan around scenarios that involve downsizing, and to some extent it's conjecture. [...] the likelihood is that there will be between 0-100% of what they're getting now and you know you can't really say where' (Cherry, Coordinator, Wave 1).

In their field of anti-poverty campaigning they were less dependent on local authority funding and so were able to focus on bringing in other sources of income to cover staff salaries. By Wave 3 Cherry had secured funding for all three of its main projects and only needed to make two redundancies. Ironically, by Wave 3 Fig's CEO felt they had cut too many staff and were now overstretched as they had retained more contracts than initially anticipated in their scenario planning.

Finally restructuring the organisations was also a key strategy to manage funding cuts and redundancies. Fig for example planned to restructure its internal infrastructure and rationalise the number of regional managers to reflect the loss of services on the ground. Birch restructured elements of its service in order to try to meet increasing demand with less funding. A new role of 'volunteer mentor' was created to train and support a greater number of volunteers to take on enhanced responsibilities, suggesting some substitution between paid staff and volunteer roles.

This is not to argue that the strategies they needed to adopt around cuts were viewed wholly negatively by the organisations. The CEOs of Birch and Fig both spoke of using the restructuring process to remove or 'weed out' underperforming or otherwise problematic members of staff. The

restructuring became an opportunity for implementing internal 'organisation-as-field' strategies for reshaping and strengthening organisations.

### **Merger/acquisition**

Fligstein and McAdam (2011: 14) propose that dominant groups engage in imitation, co-optation or merger to preserve and improve their position in the strategic action field. The latter is interesting as merger and consolidation of organisations has been a particularly strong discursive theme in the third sector field for many years. It has been promoted by government, some third sector infrastructure bodies and discussed widely in specialist media, particularly in a tighter economic climate or as a response to recession (Taylor et al. 2012). For example, Bubb and Michell (2009: 78) argue that:

we need to recognise that the sector is the wrong shape to make maximum use of the limited resources it is able to draw on: having a multitude of small organisations duplicating one another's work is not a good use of what capacity does exist in the sector. So we need to encourage more partnership working, more sharing of back-office facilities, and more mergers.

These third sector players argued it could increase the effectiveness of the sector by creating economies of scale, reducing overheads and reducing unnecessary duplication for service users.

Despite the enthusiasm for merger by some umbrella bodies and other central players in the third sector, there is a clear tension between this agenda of 'modernisation' from part of the field's leadership and the priorities of individual organisations within the field. The literature highlights that third sector organisations appear to favour a range of somewhat looser 'sharing without merging' (Pepin 2005) collaborative options. Indeed it appears that for many organisations in the third sector field organisational independence and identity are prized characteristics and threats to these are strongly resisted. Merger is seen as a last resort, arising mainly when forced by funders or where organisations are in serious financial difficulty. These competing discourses operating in the field were visible in the case study data.

Organisations talked about the possibilities of merging with or acquiring other organisations as a potential strategy to help them weather the constrained economic conditions. This could secure or increase their market share; effectively their 'room' in the field. The way in which merger was discussed and then deployed or not as a strategy by organisations varied considerably depending on the sub-sector field in which they were positioned. In other words the rules of the game differ in different fields. Case studies Ash and Fig provide an interesting contrast, with rather different narratives around merger reflecting the vertical fields in which they were operating – social housing and family support respectively. Importantly these narratives shifted over the course of the research. We outline their different starting points and histories in relation to merger as this provides a way to unpack the different rules of the game.

Case study Ash is a housing group, formed as individual housing organisations came together over time. Throughout the 2000s new organisations would join the group, either for positive reasons such as filling a gap in provision or opening up a new market, or because joining the group was a recommended journey out of regulatory supervision for organisations in difficulty. Ash thus has a significant history of absorbing other organisations. It also has a strategy that involves an assertive

pursuit of growth on the grounds that being bigger affords more scope for survival in its field than otherwise. In this strategy further mergers and acquisitions were possible. Between Waves 1 and 2 Ash submitted bids in two separate competitions for housing associations to join a larger group, but failed in both. Feedback from one suggested some concern that by joining Ash it would be regarded as an association in difficulty, and from a second that the group appeared as a loose collection of autonomous associations rather than an organisation with a clear corporate identity.

Ash's CEO subsequently describes 'testing the temperature' by talking to people to get a sense of whether merger activity will increase. He notes little interest from other housing associations in joining group structures and few competitions to do so. Smaller associations were seemingly just 'managing the here and now' rather than thinking of longer term strategies (Ash, CEO, Wave 4). He reflects on the need for a more cautious approach to merger discussions to avoid being seen as predatory: "I think that... the strategy around that has to be tacit and not overt so I don't think you go out there and openly pursue a kind of merger and acquisition strategy" (Ash, CEO, Wave 3). Although there have at times been periods of intense consolidation across the social housing field, this suggests a prevailing norm in which explicit and aggressive acquisition activity is frowned upon. By Wave 4 Ash had acquired a separate company in order to benefit from what is thought to be an expanding care and support market. In housing, merger and acquisition appears to be a well-rehearsed strategy, but one where opportunities ebb and flow, and where tacit rules of the game are in operation. The interests of some (relatively secure) housing field participants may be served by absorbing others, but the interests of other (less secure) participants may not be served by being absorbed.

The merger narrative in Fig starts from a rather different point but actually plays out in a similar fashion. Merger was also part of their history in that they had successfully taken over a smaller charity in the last decade. In response to the straightened financial context, merger is mentioned almost immediately as a strategy for the future as they prepare to lose an unknown number of their services. The CEO described them as being 'on the sniff' for organisations to merge with or take over, especially given a climate where organisations might wish to save themselves from outright closure:

'there will be a lot of charities that are going belly up, and I suspect if I'm honest that the merger opportunities will not be at the big national level, the big charities. It's going to be the one or two millions on the local level, and that's where I think: I don't have a strategy and I should have' (Fig, CEO, Wave 1).

This was about ensuring that Fig had 'sustainable work' to cover the costs of its internal infrastructure: "There's a service that we could take over for example in the south west, I wouldn't need to lose a regional manager, because I'd have a viable body of work and we've got regions which are pretty much only just viable" (Fig, CEO, Wave 1).

In subsequent waves over the next two years the CEO discusses merger possibilities and each time indicates that she cannot see suitable organisations to merge with "that are our sort of size and do our sort of work". Lack of fit appears to be around size (to avoid being swallowed by a larger organisation); values and ethos (a secular versus a faith-based ethos) and financial viability (others have less secure funding models): "so there's quite a lot of potential basket cases out there if I'm

honest, and it wouldn't be sensible...the coming together of two baskets is not a good idea" (Fig, CEO, Wave 2).

In fact even at Wave 1 she recognised that merger was only likely to become a pressing strategy if there was a significant reduction in contract funding in the family support field:

'actually if we all lose a lot of work we will be stronger together and we need to set aside any differences and say actually we need to amalgamate our charities. It will be good for families and we'll learn from each other' (Fig, CEO, Wave 1).

She speculated that a crisis is not the best time to merge since organisations are focusing on staying afloat:

'that sort of bringing together of charities, the time's not really right to do that because we're too busy and we can't get distracted by a merger, mergers will wait, if they're not being driven by a crisis, they'll wait. And I think that would be a better strategy' (Fig, CEO, Wave 2).

By Wave 3 merger is still broadly in mind, but with the same problem: with whom to merge. There is evident concern that a larger organisation would simply take them over, and potential candidates are viewed with suspicion, based on the personalities involved, divergent values and different working practices.

Merger remains a strong field-shaping narrative across different third sector fields, and arises as a project to reorder a set of rules of the game for a context of squeezed resources. This means that it stays on the agenda and is the subject of much debate and consideration. It is something organisations think they should be addressing, and are strongly encouraged to address, even though in practice it has not actually led to much action. Evidence from Ash and Fig highlights some of the barriers and resistance to merger within different fields, as organisations struggle to retain an independent footing in the fields in which they are embedded.

### **Repositioning/branding**

As part of a response to unsettlement in their operating environments, third sector organisations appear to intensify their strategic efforts to maintain or renegotiate both their *actual* positions in their fields (or niche), and the *symbolic* presentation of these positions (or brand). Actual positions focus on the activities or services provided in relation to other agencies, whereas symbolic positions centre on regard, that is how the organisation is portrayed and then understood by others. Hence these forms of positioning are primarily externally focused strategies, and arise out of a challenging task of keeping up with and understanding the activities, offers and positions of peer organisations in their field, the emergence of new practices and terminology, or changing political contexts, personnel and policy developments. As an example, the CEO of case study Ash described the importance of wider field-awareness:

'you've got to be aware of what other people are doing. We certainly try and stay close to key competitors and their tactics to understand what the world is going to look like and we try and adjust our plans accordingly. We do quite a lot of I suppose what the private sector would call market analysis, you know....horizon scanning....what is the world going to look like, what are the political directions, how do we position ourselves to work in that way....' (Ash, CEO, Wave 3).

More formally, Chew and Osborne (2009: 31) suggest that charities providing services engage in strategic positioning: 'a managerial decision-process to develop an organisation-level positioning strategy that aims to effectively differentiate the organisation from other service providers'. A chief executive of another case study described how rebranding the organisation was one of his first actions on taking the job:

'I actually said to the board, this is quite important, because I think we've got to distinguish ourselves. And it wasn't just about the political side of things; it was partly about me as well. I was saying, I've got to establish myself as the chief executive...and I think the only way I can do that is by doing visible things. So we re-branded, a new image and so on' (Birch Comp C, CEO).

Rebranding is thus a process of differentiation, in this case drawn against the just-past and position of his own organisation ('in-a-field'), as well as seeking to establish his authority and make his own mark as CEO *within* the organisation ('as-a-field'). Crucially positioning and branding strategies cannot be fully understood without reference to the fields in which the organisations are situated since it is the field, its actors and the relationships between them that provide the symbolic context that gives these positions their meaning. Chew and Osborne (2009) refer specifically to 'charities providing services' in order to make sense of the idea of strategic positioning. However, their theory is not systematically located in field terms. The question posed here is how third sector organisations have sought to reposition themselves in their fields in the context of a period of unsettlement? We focus on two contrasting case examples that highlight the dynamic field-related issues at stake.

Large social housing group Ash has been active in seeking to develop its profile and positioning as a leading edge, progressive, innovative and community-based housing provider. Its strategies, pursued vigorously over the previous decade but redoubled in response to the recent unsettlement, have been to actively pursue and promote its work *beyond* housing, including promoting social enterprise initiatives and local community development amongst its residents and local communities. This diversification strategy is effectively an attempt to widen its remit and to steal a march on other providers in the social housing field, which, in Ash's eyes, are 'hunkering down' on their core business of providing and managing housing stock: "battening down the hatches, not coming out to play... stick to the knitting" (Ash, CEO, Wave 3).

This diversification strategy coincides with, and emerges in response to, a significant political challenge made to the social housing field: providers should stop, it is said, 'warehousing the poor' and use their accumulated assets instead to provide more support to tenants to reduce worklessness and poverty (Greenhalgh and Moss 2009: 10). One of Ash's strategies has thus been an explicit attempt to re-orientate its work and align messages to speak to the changing political agenda. These contextual 'organisation-in-field' developments have been the driver for the creation of new 'organisation-as-field' dynamics. Ash has been implementing a significant internal change management process since 2010, including a corporate rebranding exercise. A letter from the CEO to all staff identifies both an internal focus on efficiency and restructuring, but crucially also an external focus on the changing nature of the housing field:

how can we add capacity to job roles, be more efficient, give our customers services they want, be an exciting company in which to work? And how can we link all of this to the



challenging priorities of the government?...We want this work to have an edge in order for us to remain competitive as a group of organisations (CEO letter to all staff, Oct 2010).

Ash's longitudinal story is thus one of interpreting, understanding and responding to the changing political and financial context in their main field of social housing. As well as an actual re-orientation of activities, such as internal investment in new social enterprise initiatives beyond housing and a new social innovations work-stream, new symbolic articulations are formed of distinction from other housing providers, and alignment with new political agendas ('we are localism...we are the Big Society' (Ash, Communications Director, Wave 3)).

Hawthorn provides a slightly different account of repositioning and rebranding in a contrasting field of operation. This case is a relatively new and very small local voluntary family support organisation working with teenage mothers. As such it is positioned within a wider field of family support, parenting and children's work, dominated by large national charities and networks operating through local branches or projects. Hawthorn's funding profile, based on a significant five year grant from a charitable foundation, has provided some insulation against the wider unsettlement and the Coalition Government's austerity programme. However, this grant has created its own timeline and discipline, since it ends in 2013, coinciding with a concerted move by the local authority to introduce a new commissioning framework for local family support services and the potential outsourcing of public sector services.

Early in the research the Chair of Hawthorn's board of trustees was clear about the direction the organisation should take:

'by the end of the year....a completely different organisation, a fresh new start and that kind of professionalism will be seen by our stakeholders, which I think then by the end of the following year we really would be in a good position to have the data, have a proven track record of delivering quality services, to go and get more funding' (Hawthorn, Chair, Wave 1).

In contrast to its informal origins as a 'drop-in' service, Hawthorn has developed a strategy to position itself as more professional and 'business like', through: incorporation, the adoption of new systems and processes, changes to the focus and structure of its activities, a new business plan, a new focus on outcomes, and a more professional image and brand:

'if we get Hawthorn to be an organisation people want to work with; they want to refer to, there's no reason why we can't be sustainable and can't still be here in five/ten years. I think it needs some kind of business approach from the top level to miss the pitfalls that most voluntary organisations hit' (Hawthorn, Senior Coordinator, Wave 2).

Whilst they sought to differentiate themselves from 'most voluntary organisations', the positioning strategy actually involves replicating the positions, practices and structures of larger successful 'professional' organisations in the field. Indeed whilst Fligstein and McAdam (2011: 14) identify imitation as a strategy of incumbents to preserve or improve their position, in Hawthorn's case it provides a way to become a dominant organisation in the field locally. In 2011 Hawthorn re-launched with a new website, marketing materials and logo, and a new set of structured services. These would be based on a 'client journey' with the organisation where 'distance travelled' outcomes would be

measured through a new evaluation framework. Hawthorn's coordinator describes how all these developments offer a way of 'selling' the organisation to potential funders:

'if we got funding for what it was before, what we're selling now is a far greater product really....I would be a lot more confident selling Hawthorn with all these documents, with all this structure, than going and saying we kind of come and have a chat but we don't really do anything' (Hawthorn, Senior Coordinator, Wave 2).

Hawthorn is thus trying to strengthen its position in its local field of family support, by distinguishing itself as more professional, business like and structured. This is a strategy of imitating what it sees as the requirements of potential funders in the field. Importantly, however, seen over time, this involves differentiating itself *from itself*, from its origins and existing orientation.

These two cases, operating from different positions within different fields, both embark on repositioning and rebranding strategies. Whilst for both organisations these are seen to help them survive the current environment they are not wholly defined as responses to a crisis. They are also part of wider strategies within their field to preserve or improve position in relation to other actors.

## Discussion – unfolding fields

Through the theoretical framework deployed here, third sector organisations can be seen as strategic action fields *in their own right* (and sometimes comprising separate internal sub-fields), as well as participating *within a range of nested strategic action fields*. As we have suggested, these can be based on locality, where appropriate; (vertical) policy domain or 'industry' (advice, housing, etc.); the (horizontal) third sector as a whole, and all operate amidst the wider political economy field. In order to explore the fortunes of third sector organisations over time, and thus be able to understand better their dynamics, we have focused on case study organisations in relation to three broad strategies – restructuring and redundancy; mergers and acquisitions and finally repositioning and rebranding. There are of course other organisational strategies to hand and in play, such as closer collaboration and partnership activity between organisations; income diversification and reconfiguring the sources of revenue (for example shifting from public sources to commercial revenue); campaigning to save services; and embedding organisations by building dense networks of relationships with key constituencies including local communities, potential donors and public officials.

However, in the midst of the complexity of organisational dynamics and fortunes, a field perspective enables us to suggest that all of these strategies have a common root. They are all designed to preserve or advance the 'room' organisations have to operate as participants within multiple fields. In general, room here implies a secure or strengthened footing in more or less settled fields constituted by different kinds of resources, or forms of capital, which are at stake (Bourdieu 1983). These strategies to preserve or advance room may be characterised by their temporality and their focus. They may be more or less immediate and urgent; for example as necessarily fast and tactical responses to an imminent sense of crisis, or they may be longer term developmental strategies to align and position organisations for an evolving landscape of opportunities and threats to the flow of different forms of capital. They may be focused more or less on internal 'organisation-as-

field' processes, or on external 'organisation-in-field' dynamics, although the precise distinction between 'internal' and 'external' becomes redundant in this perspective (Tsoukas and Chia 2002).

Our three selected strategies illustrate these twin dimensions of temporality and focus. Firstly, the web of organisational strategies employed around staff cost reduction including *organisational restructuring* play a role in managing the immediate cost-saving responses to a relatively sudden shift in the resources available in the field; an imminent threat to the financial settlement on which organisations have been operating, and thus their future activities, role and survival. It is thus a crisis response to an exogenous shock. Rapid redundancies, and other cost-saving mechanisms, became necessary to prevent a situation of paying for staff for which no income is being received, and thus threatening insolvency and dissolution. Room is preserved insofar as the strategy is successful. However, this can be allied to a slightly longer term and apparently internal dynamic of re-shaping the internal staffing structure and operation of organisations. Executives and managers try to refit their organisations in a way that makes sense for the fields in which they operate. The focus of this strategy is thus internal in as much as it addresses structures and field dynamics within the organisation, but this is always in the shadow of a changing external context.

*Mergers and acquisitions* are much talked about in the sector, and appear to be promoted by some as necessary responses to a financially constrained environment, where the 'unsettlement' suggests that third sector fields cannot sustain as many individual TSOs as before. However, in our analysis we highlight the resistance to this idea within different parts of the sector, and this resistance is revealing. From one case study, Fig, we note the repeated talk of merger, but little action unless the specific circumstances are right. From another, Ash, we note an organisation with an acquisition-based growth strategy struggling to find others with whom to merge or take over, and having to tread carefully in broaching discussion of merger with others. The underlying issue in common here reveals something about third sector fields, namely that merger appears to be a strategy of last resort. The existing 'rules of the game', albeit with different inflections in different fields, suggest the importance for individual organisations of identity and control; and thus of maintaining 'room'. Merger is an obvious threat to this. These facets of third sector organisation are bolstered by a sense of longer term discursive history and pride in an organisation's achievements, ethos and legacy (which becomes manifested in the idea that different organisational cultures are a barrier to merger), but also potentially by the interests and power of key personnel within each organisation understood as a field. Merger unsettles these relationships, and is therefore likely to be viewed with some reluctance by executives facing the loss of position. In this strategy, therefore, it is the relative absence of a phenomenon which reveals something of the complex nature of unfolding third sector fields.

Finally, with *repositioning and rebranding* we find a slightly longer term set of processes, which can be somewhat independent of the wider unsettlement, although they gain meaning from it in particular fields. Whilst repositioning and rebranding may be triggered by an exogenous unsettling shock, these strategies are likely to be in play before an unsettlement. Whereas the first two strategies thus exhibit organisations taking or resisting actions in direct survival mode, the third strategy emphasises more fundamental underlying features of third sector organisational life. They are part and parcel of what Fligstein and McAdam (2011) refer to as on-going 'jockeying' for position in fields. Although

repositioning and rebranding have internal implications, these are primarily externally oriented strategies, undertaken in the pre-emptive shadow of expectations and understandings taken from the field environment. They are designed to send appropriate signals to other participants in the fields in which third sector organisations participate, of either affiliation or differentiation, as conceptions of control in a field, and both for resource attraction and niche demarcation.

## Conclusion

The three strategies examined in this paper provide different pathways towards understanding the sheer complexity of organisational life and change in third sector organisations. Something of the nature of the third sector is revealed by analysis of case study experiences and strategies through what we have characterised as a significant ‘unsettlement’ in fields involving third sector organisations. We see highly active but varied attempts by organisations to keep the show on the road, and to prevent dissolution or absorption. In diverse ways participants are involved in an on-going struggle combining their purpose, role or contribution with organisational survival. Despite the complexity and nuance of strategy and response, however, we have offered a common general foundation, namely securing or advancing ‘room’. This seems to amount to a ‘bottom line’ for many third sector organisations, involving ‘an acknowledged role and position, based on a context-specific, on-going, sometimes awkward and contested accommodation between similarly placed organisations operating in a given catchment area, and secondly a capacity to continue its activities to pursue its aims’ (Macmillan 2011: 23). The first condition of ‘room’ emphasises the need for attention to be paid to relative positions and inter-organisational relations, whilst the second focuses on the financial and other resources, or ‘forms of capital’, as well as internal capabilities required to continue functioning.

A field-related perspective is a fruitful way of exploring and understanding these dynamics. It steps beyond a managerial account based primarily on the resources, structures and capabilities of individual third sector organisations. At the same time it gets underneath a rather general ‘whole third sector’ horizontal narrative to reveal the multiple dilemmas and decisions involved in sustaining organisational life. Whilst the former can divorce analysis from wider contexts, the latter overlooks diverse experiences and perspectives. Instead a field-perspective assists us in appreciating, unpacking and understanding complexity and diversity. It provides a context-sensitive, multi-level and overlapping and nested fields analysis of the third sector, starting from the idea of individual or collective actors as field participants, that is, having and engaging in struggle around ‘positions’ in a multiplicity of fields. Neither fields nor positions are completely stable, though they can be more or less ‘settled’. Change occurs through exogenous shocks arising from proximate fields, or through the complex outcome of everyday struggles for position.

The dynamism of fields highlights the value of a longitudinal approach to the study of third sector organisations. Through this we can understand something of how field participants negotiate their way through multiple always-changing fields. Our empirical work suggests that the metaphor of sector facing a ‘cliff edge’ or ‘perfect storm’, and then responding through a range of short term tactics or longer term strategies may be too simplistic a picture. Different strategies address a range of different agendas and positions across a number of different fields. For example, ‘restructuring’ might cut costs

for an organisation, enabling its survival *in a field*, but it also changes the structure of relationships and positions in the organisation *as a field*. The longitudinal analysis enables us to consider participants' sense-making at any one time, and then 'what happens next', rather than simply emphasising or comparing the concerns of the moment. Participants are typically involved in a rather restless approach to organisational life. They appear to be attending, as best they can in the presence of uncertainty and partial knowledge, to issues thrown up in the various fields in which they operate, as well as considering how their organisations could or should be different, better, and somehow 'fit for purpose'. This is achieved through a combination of differentiation and affiliation of organisations in relation firstly to their understanding of field dimensions and rules, secondly to and with other organisations operating in their fields, and lastly, in relation to the past in their own organisation. A longitudinal perspective can thus help provide an appreciation of what organisations are seeking to maintain or move on from in their own historical legacies, that is pursuing strategies of distinction (and/or affiliation) *from themselves*.

In order to support this analysis of third sector organisational dynamics, we have drawn extensively from Fligstein and McAdam's (2011, 2012) recent work on strategic action fields. We have been able to analyse our data by 'thinking with and alongside' the theoretical framework, which has provided a productive lens for exploring third sector case study experiences of change. We believe this approach and our theoretical and empirical contribution here, opens up many lines of enquiry for studies of the third sector as a changing strategic action field in relation to other fields, and as comprising multiple, overlapping and nested strategic action fields. As well as a wide range of empirical questions, further work should, we believe, explore theoretically the notion of a field and its effects on participants. For example, does an actor have to be conscious of being positioned in a field in order to be a participant? Or is field participation a latent condition or power which can at some times rather than others be activated, or somehow switched on or off? What does it mean to be a less active participant?

Related to this question, to what extent does a field require interaction between its participants, and if so how regular or frequent does this need to be? Fligstein and McAdam's definition (2012: 9) seems to focus on interaction, which would seem to suggest primarily a rather local network of participants, unless the notion of interaction is expanded to include a whole range of virtual and other mediated forms of interaction. A narrower version of field relationships, based on interaction, would fall prey to what Bourdieu refers to as the fallacy of 'interactionism' (2005: 195, see also Emirbayer and Johnson 2008: 9), which precludes the kinds of structural power which some participants can exert off-stage as a kind of absent presence in a field. Finally, and linked to this, Fligstein and McAdam's framework involves a strong role for the idea of *incumbents* and *challengers* in a field. Whilst this is a useful distinction for identifying the contested distribution of power and resources in a field, it may be rather too stark. It may also be helpful to note that different participants at different times will be more central to field concerns, and sometimes more peripheral. The *degree of centrality* or otherwise is a dimension which is always in flux. Actors can make themselves more or less central through their activities and how they choose to direct their energies, but this is not fully within their grasp, and is not the same as having greater power in a field. The ideas of centrality and peripherality also enable the field perspective to extend to participants (in the third sector and in other fields) who may not seem to

play a highly active role in a field, may not understand or recognise the rules of the game, or even that it is a game, but are nonetheless affected by its dynamics and struggles.

## References

- Alcock, P. (2010) 'Building the Big Society: a new policy environment for the third sector in England', *Voluntary Sector Review* 1 (3): 379-89.
- Alcock, P. and Kendall, J. (2011) 'Constituting the third sector: processes of decontestation and contention under the UK Labour governments in England', *Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations* 22 (3): 450-469.
- Bourdieu, P. (1983) 'The Forms of Capital', in J. G. Richardson (ed.) *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (2005) *The Social Structures of the Economy*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bubb, S. and Michell, R. (2009) 'Investing in third-sector capacity' in P. Hunter, (ed.) *Social enterprise for public service: how does the third sector deliver?* London: Smith Institute.
- Chew, C. and Osborne, S. P. (2009) 'Identifying the Factors That Influence Positioning Strategy in U.K. Charitable Organizations that Provide Public services: Toward an Integrating Model', *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 38 (1): 29-50.
- Clark, J., Kane, D., Wilding, K. and Wilton, J. (2010) *The UK Civil Society Almanac 2010*. London: NCVO.
- Clifford, D., Geyne-Rahme, F. and Mohan, J. (2013) 'Variations between Organisations and Localities in Government Funding of Third sector Activity: Evidence from the National Survey of Third-sector Organisations in England', *Urban Studies* 50 (5): 959-76.
- Cox, E. and Schmuecker, K. (2010) *Growing the Big Society: Encouraging success in social and community enterprise in deprived communities*. Newcastle, IPPR North.
- Davies, N. and Evans, K. (2012) *Perfect Storms: An analysis of the operating conditions for the children, young people and families voluntary sector*. London: Children England.
- Dingwall, R. (1997) 'Accounts, Interviews and Observations' in G. Miller and R. Dingwall (eds) *Context and Method in Qualitative Research*. London: Sage.
- Elliott, J., Holland, J. and Thomson, R. (2009) 'Longitudinal and Panel Studies' in P. Alasuutari, L. Bickman and J. Brannen *The Sage Handbook of Social Research Methods*. London: Sage.
- Emirbayer, M. and Johnson, V. (2008) 'Bourdieu and organizational analysis', *Theory and Society* 37 (1): 1-44.
- Fligstein, N. and McAdam, D. (2011) 'Toward a General Theory of Strategic Action Fields', *Sociological Theory* 29 (1): 1-26.
- Fligstein, N. and McAdam, D. (2012) *A Theory of Fields*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gough, I. (2011) 'From financial crisis to fiscal crisis' in K. Farnsworth and Z. Irving (eds) *Social Policy in Challenging Times: economic crisis and welfare systems*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Greenhalgh, S. and Moss, J. (2009) *Principles for Social Housing Reform*. London: Localis.
- Holland, J., Thomson, R. and Henderson, S. (2006) *Qualitative Longitudinal Research: A Discussion Paper*. London: Families & Social Capital ESRC Research Group, London South Bank University.
- Kendall, J. (2003) *The Voluntary Sector*. London: Routledge.

- Lewis, J. (2005) 'New Labour's Approach to the Voluntary Sector: Independence and the Meaning of Partnership', *Social Policy and Society* 4 (2): 121-31.
- Macmillan, R. (2011) *Seeing things differently? The promise of qualitative longitudinal research on the third sector*, TSRC Working Paper 56. Birmingham, Third Sector Research Centre.
- Macmillan, R. (2013a) *Making sense of Big Society: perspectives from the third sector*, TSRC Working Paper 90. Birmingham: Third Sector Research Centre.
- Macmillan, R. (2013b) 'Distinction' in the third sector', *Voluntary Sector Review* 4 (1): 39-54.
- Macmillan, R. (2013c) 'De-coupling the state and the third sector? The 'Big Society' as a spontaneous order', *Voluntary Sector Review* 4 (2): 185-203.
- Pepin, J. (2005) *Sharing without merging: A Review of Collaborative Working and Sharing Back Office Support in the Voluntary and Community Sector*. London: Bassac.
- Sayer, A. (1992) *Method in Social Science: A Realist Approach*. London: Routledge, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition.
- Taylor, R., Parry J. and Alcock, P. (2012) *Crisis, mixed picture or phoney war; the third sector and the 2008/9 recession*, TSRC Working Paper 78. Birmingham: Third Sector Research Centre.
- Taylor, R., Arvidson, M., Macmillan, R., Soteri-Proctor, A. and Teasdale, S. (2013 forthcoming) 'What's in it for us?'; Recruiting Third Sector Organisations to a Qualitative Longitudinal Study and maintaining relationships' in L. Camfield (ed.) *Research in international development: A critical review*. Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Taylor-Gooby, P. (2012) 'Root and branch restructuring to achieve major cuts: the social policy programme of the 2010 British Coalition government', *Social Policy and Administration* 46 (1): 61-82.
- Tsoukas, H. and Chia, R. (2002) 'On Organizational Becoming: Rethinking Organizational Change' *Organization Science* 13 (5): 567-82.
- Wilding, K. (2010) 'Voluntary organisations and the recession', *Voluntary Sector Review* 1 (1): 97-101.



## About the Centre

The third sector provides support and services to millions of people. Whether providing front-line services, making policy or campaigning for change, good quality research is vital for organisations to achieve the best possible impact. The Third Sector Research Centre exists to develop the evidence base on, for and with the third sector in the UK. Working closely with practitioners, policy-makers and other academics, TSRC is undertaking and reviewing research, and making this research widely available. The Centre works in collaboration with the third sector, ensuring its research reflects the realities of those working within it, and helping to build the sector's capacity to use and conduct research.

Third Sector Research Centre, Park House, 40 Edgbaston Park Road,  
University of Birmingham, Birmingham, B15 2RT

Tel: 0121 414 3086

Email: [info@tsrc.ac.uk](mailto:info@tsrc.ac.uk)

[www.tsrc.ac.uk](http://www.tsrc.ac.uk)

## Real Times: an in depth study of third sector organisations over time

Real times provides an opportunity to study continuity and change in the nature and activities of third sector organisations. The programme works closely with a diverse panel of case study organisations across England over several years. Typically, case study research in the third sector provides only snapshots of issues or findings, rather than taking a longer view, or what we call a 'longitudinal' approach. This longer view allows us to examine how organisations, and the issues, opportunities and challenges they face, develop over time.

## Contact the authors

**Rob Macmillan**

[r.macmillan@tsrc.ac.uk](mailto:r.macmillan@tsrc.ac.uk)

**Rebecca Taylor**

[r.taylor@tsrc.ac.uk](mailto:r.taylor@tsrc.ac.uk)



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.

© TSRC 2013

The support of the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the Office for Civil Society (OCS) and the Barrow Cadbury UK Trust is gratefully acknowledged. The work was part of the programme of the joint ESRC, OCS Barrow Cadbury Third Sector Research Centre.