



Third Sector Research Centre

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Seeing things differently? The promise of qualitative longitudinal research on the third sector

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Contents

- 1. Introduction 3**
- 2. A methodological interest: the development of longitudinal research..... 5**
 - 2.1. Longitudinal research on third sector organisations 6
- 3. A contextual baseline: ‘shaking up’ and ‘shaking out’? 8**
- 4. ‘Real Times’: TSRC’s qualitative longitudinal study..... 11**
 - 4.1. Purpose and research questions 11
 - 4.2. Research design and structure..... 13
- 5. Theoretical imaginings..... 16**
 - 5.1. Temporalities 16
 - 5.2. A ‘field’ guide - towards a ‘relational’ account of the third sector 20
 - 5.3. Structure and agency – strategic action in context..... 25
- 6. Conclusions 29**

Seeing things differently? The promise of qualitative longitudinal research on the third sector

Abstract

There has been a rapidly growing interest in longitudinal research methods and dynamic analysis in recent decades. A longitudinal research gaze offers the promise of seeing things differently, and of understanding the dynamic processes involved in social change, of what happens next and why. This paper explores the potential of qualitative longitudinal research for developing understanding of the dynamics of the third sector. The Third Sector Research Centre has embarked upon a qualitative longitudinal study of third sector activities called 'Real Times'. The paper sets out the thinking behind the study. As well as providing a basic description of the rationale, design and structure of 'Real Times', the paper discusses the methodological interest in qualitative longitudinal research in the third sector, the substantive contextual issues the third sector is experiencing as the study takes place, and some of the theoretical thinking involved in the study. In particular it discusses three theoretical 'imaginings' which inform the research: the different temporalities involved in the third sector; a 'relational' account of the third sector as a contested field; and lastly the idea of strategic action in context.

Keywords

Qualitative longitudinal research; third sector; time; relational account; strategic action

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1. Introduction

There has been a rapidly growing interest in longitudinal research methods in recent decades. Social scientists have increasingly sought to understand what it might mean to take time seriously in both quantitative and qualitative research design and analysis (Leisering and Walker 1998, Rose 2000, McLeod and Thomson 2009). Above all, attention to various conceptions of temporality, and extending the duration of research engagement, offers the prospect of understanding the dynamic processes involved in social change. A longitudinal research gaze offers the promise of 'seeing things differently', and of understanding what happens next and why.

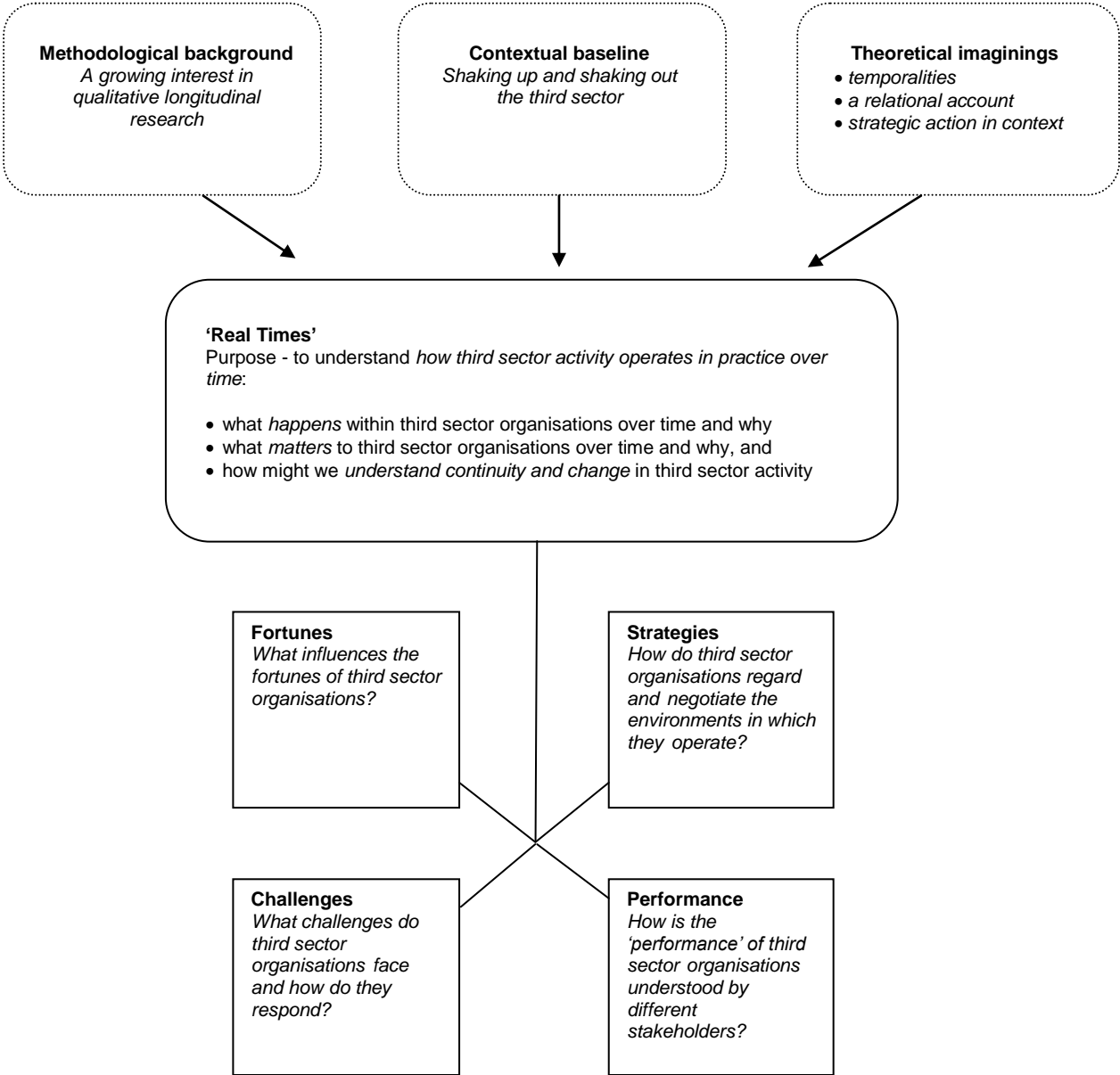
This promise applies as much to the third sector as to anything else. This paper explores the potential of qualitative longitudinal research for developing understanding of the dynamics of the third sector. The Third Sector Research Centre has embarked upon a qualitative longitudinal study of third sector activities called 'Real Times'. The paper sets out the thinking behind the study, placing it in a methodological, substantive and theoretical context. Thus it outlines the methodological interest in qualitative longitudinal research in the third sector, the substantive contextual issues the sector is experiencing as the study takes place, and some of the theoretical thinking which informs the study. Figure 1 on page 4 illustrates this schematically.

The discussion proceeds as follows. Section 2 offers some preliminary methodological remarks on the growing interest in longitudinal research in social science, noting its relevance for, but relative absence in, third sector studies. This is intended to locate the 'Real Times' study in terms of recent developments in social research methodology, particularly around qualitative longitudinal research. This section concludes with the idea that qualitative longitudinal research in the third sector may provide a greater understanding of dynamic processes in third sector settings unfolding through time. Next, in section 3, the focus shifts towards some of the key substantive issues and developments facing the third sector. Attention is given both to general trends and issues occupying the sector and commentators in recent years, and to more immediate and pressing concerns of the current economic and political conjuncture. The aim here is to provide what might be called a 'contextual baseline' for 'Real Times', situating it more precisely alongside current debates and developments in the third sector. This section suggests that 'Real Times' may be able to capture some of the ongoing, diverse and complex experiences of third sector organisations during what is potentially a significant period of transformation. Section 4 then focuses the discussion by outlining the 'Real Times' project. In turn it explains the purpose, design and structure of the study.

Finally, in section 5, the paper looks more broadly at some of the theoretical thinking involved in the study. Thus it provides an in-depth exploration of the research in the context of a range of intertwined 'theoretical imaginings'. The purpose, design and focus of 'Real Times' has in part been informed by this theoretical thinking. Firstly this involves asking questions about the different temporalities involved in the third sector, and embedded in the processes and dynamics of third sector organisation. Secondly it outlines a putative 'relational' account of the third sector as a contested field or set of overlapping fields, in which participants, organisations and ideas aim to secure 'room' for existence and manoeuvre. Thirdly it explores how debates around third sector organisations and activities are

often imbued with assumptions about structure and agency, but this is rarely made explicit. Although discussed separately, these imaginings are deeply implicated with each other. Describing this theoretical discussion in terms of ‘imaginings’ is deliberately intended to signal their creative potential in prompting further ideas for exploration in the Real Times study and in third sector studies more generally. This includes exploring possible connections with other theoretical strands and resonance with concrete experiences in the third sector.

Figure 1: The Third Sector Research Centre’s ‘Real Times’ qualitative longitudinal study – rationale and structure



2. A methodological interest: the development of longitudinal research

Quantitative longitudinal research in social science has become well established over the last 15 to 20 years, sparked by the development and growing availability of large panel data sets, for example the US Panel Study of Income Dynamics, successive Birth Cohort Studies in the UK, the British Household Panel Survey and latterly the larger 'Understanding Society' household panel survey (Rose 2000, Berthoud and Gershuny 2000, Berthoud and Burton 2008). Much quantitative longitudinal research explores, for individuals and households, ideas of durations, spells, entries to and exits from particular situations, such as disability or poverty (Burchardt 2000, Burgess and Propper 2002).

A noteworthy outcome of this work has been a recasting of key ideas around the incidence of poverty. A key argument is that an emphasis on the dynamics of poverty, as a more or less temporary spell rather than a 'state', actually changes not only how poverty comes to be viewed, but also what kinds of policy might be developed in response (Ellwood 1998, Hills 2002, Alcock 2004). A cross-sectional or snapshot view identifies the numbers of people experiencing poverty at any one time, but this adds together those experiencing long term poverty with those whose experience might be relatively temporary. A longitudinal view enables more of a dynamic understanding to be developed, noting that some people move in and out of poverty.

These debates are also underpinned by broader theoretical reflections on the role of structure and agency in social life (Alcock 2004). Dynamic analysis, in which the focus is on how individuals move into and out of particular circumstances, can shed new light on agency, and the opportunities and constraints through which individuals, households and groups attempt to live and act. In policy debates this has brought forth a renewed concern with the interplay between factors which may enable positive change, and factors which may prevent it. But the contrast between cross-sectional and dynamic perspectives is between poverty and disadvantage understood as affecting a significant minority, over extended periods of time, or understood as affecting a larger number of people over much shorter, and potentially repeated, spells (Walker 1995, Leisering and Leibfried 1999, Leisering and Walker 1998). Arguably, then, this is the promise of longitudinal research on poverty: that poverty might be viewed differently as a result of dynamic analysis. If the analytical time frame of a topic is extended, might things be seen differently, or different things seen?

More recently there has been an interest in the development of *qualitative* longitudinal research (Neale and Flowerdew 2003, McLeod and Thomson 2009). Examples include the role of qualitative longitudinal research in policy evaluation (Lewis 2007), transitions into and out of work (Millar 2007) and studies of young people's transitions to adulthood (Henderson et al. 2007). Here the focus is on more detailed accounts of people's experience of particular situations, and the complex array of factors that may perpetuate circumstances or lead to transition. In addition some qualitative studies attempt to look at whole places or neighbourhoods through a longitudinal frame, for example an extended study of a panel of households in disadvantaged neighbourhoods (Power 2007), or the long-term evaluation of area-based regeneration initiatives (Lawless et al. 2010).

The expansion of qualitative longitudinal research has led to a number of specialist conferences, panel sessions, seminars, and special issues of academic journals such as the *International Journal of*

Social Research Methodology (Volume 6:3, 2003) and *Social Policy and Society* (Volume 6:4, 2007). In addition the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) has made a significant investment in the 'Timescapes' initiative based at the University of Leeds, which brings together a number of qualitative longitudinal research projects.

Much qualitative longitudinal research, like its quantitative counterpart, appears to work with individuals and households as units of analysis. The review of qualitative longitudinal research undertaken for the ESRC notes the potential of qualitative longitudinal research with organisations, but did not identify any empirical studies (Holland et al. 2004, 2006). The few examples of research designs explicitly taking a temporal view of organisations tend to be retrospective. For example, both Christensen and Molin (1995), and Glasby (1999, 2001) provide long term historical accounts of, respectively, the Danish Red Cross and, in the UK, the Birmingham Settlement. Here we find detailed retrospective analysis of long term change in single case studies. There is some important theoretical reflection on the nature of time in organisational analysis (for example, Chia 2002, Hassard 2002), and a significant degree of methodological reflection about longitudinal research with organisations (Pettigrew 1990, 1992, Glick et al. 1990, Leonard-Barton 1990, Chau and Witcher 2005), but this does not seem to amount to an identifiable body of research.

2.1. Longitudinal research on third sector organisations

Longitudinal research involving third sector organisations, whether quantitative or qualitative, is in its infancy, and until recently there have been remarkably few studies.

The Home Office developed a 'State of the Sector Panel' survey of approximately 3,600 third sector organisations in England, which ran annually from 2003 to 2006 (Green 2009a, b, c). It aimed to monitor progress in achieving one of the Labour government's Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets: to increase voluntary and community sector activity by 5% between 2003 and 2006. Alongside this the survey sought to provide information about the activities of voluntary and community organisations and how they are funded, and about their relationships with users, members, other voluntary organisations and public bodies. Questionnaires focusing on activities and funding arrangements were repeated annually over 4 years, whilst those on human resources, engagement with other organisations and relationships with public bodies were administered annually over a three year period (Green 2009a: 5). Rather than being statistically representative of the voluntary and community sector, the sample aimed to reflect its diversity (Green 2009a: 6). For example, a very high proportion of panel member organisations (78%) employed staff in 2004-05, compared with the profile of employment in third sector organisations generally (Green 2009c: 5).

Whilst there is some analysis of trends over the period of the surveys, the longitudinal dimension of the panel appears overall to have been somewhat under-explored. However, the panel provides some indication of trends in the scale of activities and government funding to panel members over the period. For example, a sizeable proportion of organisations reported increases in activities (over the previous year) throughout the life of the panel, and very few reported decreases. However, over time the proportion of organisations reporting an increase in activities over the previous year declined quite markedly. Approximately two-thirds of respondents (64%) reported in 2002-03 that their activities had increased over the previous year, but this falls every year to just under a half (47%) in 2005-06 (Green

2009b: 8). Optimism around future activities also declined over the course of the survey. In 2002-03, around three quarters of respondents (74%) expected their activities to increase over the next three years, but this falls to between 50% and 60% in subsequent years. The main constraint on activities is considered to be funding (Green 2009b: 10). However, funding from public sources increased over time: the median amount of public funding received increased from £122,000 in 2002-03 to £141,000 in 2005-06 (at 2002-03 prices)(Green 2009b: 15).

On a much smaller scale, an initial panel of 72 voluntary and community sector organisations was brought together by the Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) and surveyed three times, in August 2006, 2007 and 2008 (NICVA 2006, 2008) . The survey was designed to monitor the implementation and impact of the Northern Ireland Department for Social Development's 'Positive Steps' investment and support initiative for the voluntary and community sector. Rather than charting general changes in voluntary and community organisations over time, respondents were asked about their awareness of the 'Positive Steps' initiative and its impact on relationships between government and the voluntary and community sector, including funding arrangements, such as length of funding agreements and full cost recovery. By 2007 the panel had fallen to 54 members, and by 2008 consisted of 48 members. The loss of one third of the relatively small initial panel over the three years hinders the analysis, and makes it difficult to draw firm conclusions about the impact of the programme. Attrition is thought to be related to individuals moving on from panel organisations and a loss of interest in evaluating the initiative.

Qualitative research on third sector organisations has often involved intensive cross-sectional case studies, typically undertaken to enable comparison across cases and subsequently to inform policy and practice around specific themes, such as funding, governance or impact. Whilst a great deal of insight may result from this approach, there is a possibility in such accounts of losing both contextual depth and movement. On the one hand there appears to be little attempt to understand the complex (historical, geographical, social and policy) contexts in which organisations are situated and operate. On the other, time tends to be bracketed out of attempts to compare a range of themes and issues across a number of organisational cases (Alcock et al. 1999, Scott et al. 2000). This runs the risk of what Walker and Leisering (1998: 19-20) call left and right hand 'censorship', leading to the neglect of how organisations originate and how issues and processes might emerge ('left hand censorship') and perhaps more significantly how they might evolve, develop and 'end' through time ('right hand censorship'). Thus, although we may be able to build a retrospective picture, we cannot prospectively follow issues and developments to understand the outcome; we don't know what happens next and why. Stretching the timescale of a research engagement (for example, as 'a year in the life of a third sector organisation') opens the possibility of capturing processes of continuity and change through time.

Thus there may be merit in seeking to add 'temporal depth' to analysis, through what Hay (2002: 149) calls a 'diachronic' perspective:

If the synchronic approach is analogous to the taking of a photograph at a particular instant and the comparative static approach to the taking of photographs at different points in time, the diachronic approach is the equivalent of a video 'panning' shot which follows the motion of the object in question.

A temporal perspective in social research involves a suggestion that researchers take time (more) seriously when identifying issues for research, framing research questions and in research design (Macmillan 2005). Extending the duration of research involvement offers the prospect of overcoming some of the shortcomings of conventional 'snapshot' cross-sectional case study approaches. An extended research engagement with participants also offers the prospect that issues and developments in organisational life in the third sector come to be regarded in a different light; again the promise of longitudinal research. If third sector organisations are not static phenomena, why should research representations of them be static? An example might be the puzzling contrast between short term and long term pictures of third sector organisations. A short-term viewpoint might provide a vivid sense of the sometimes frantic attention to the 'here and now' in third sector organisations. Many things seem to change over a relatively short period of time in the third sector, as initiatives, people, funding programmes and particular issues come and go. For many involved in the thick of these developments, and events, there is a palpable sense of a rapid pace of change, or of 'too much going on', indicating that the flow of these issues and concerns is greater than the capacity to respond. Research emphasis might typically capture somewhat familiar features such as 'busyness' and concern about the future under conditions of chronic financial insecurity. Yet viewed from a longer time-frame, many organisations appear to endure over many years, decades and beyond. From a 'day to day' perspective participants, and researchers, may be forgiven for wondering how on earth this is possible. Stretching the research gaze over time may allow us to bring different perspectives to bear.

Thus qualitative longitudinal research may involve a different research viewpoint, offering the possibility of qualitative depth and an appreciation of movement over time. This may take us towards an understanding both of what happens in practice over time in third sector organisations (and why), and of continuity and change in third sector organisations.

3. A contextual baseline: 'shaking up' and 'shaking out'?

Tracking third sector organisations over time also allows for a nuanced appreciation of how organisations respond to changing contextual developments in the operating environment. How do they seek to make sense of and respond to 'events', developments and wider trends in and around the sector and public policy? A qualitative longitudinal study of third sector activities can help explore the participation and experience of third sector organisations in a number of key debates, practices and contested discourses in the third sector. Somewhat selectively, six of these wider trends and debates are mentioned here, together forming part of what can be considered as a contextual baseline for the 'Real Times' study.

Firstly, it is always necessary to note the diverse experiences and circumstances of different kinds of third sector organisations, based on, inter alia, their size, degree of formality, age, geographical context, function and 'industry'. *Division, fragmentation and polarisation within the third sector* has become a significant talking point in recent years. In such a scenario, can we realistically speak of a 'sector' as a single entity, even one displaying only a 'strategic unity' (Alcock 2010), when it is typically characterised not only by diversity but also by potentially divergent interests? The kinds of divides often highlighted include those between large and small organisations (although the purported

'Tescoisation' of the sector is arguably over-stated (Backus and Clifford 2010)), national and local organisations, those primarily delivering services and those involved in community development or campaigning for change, those providing infrastructure support and those at the frontline, 'traditional' charities and 'enterprising' organisations, between formal and informal organisations, and between paid staff and unpaid volunteers.

The existence of such fragmentation also highlights the potential tensions for third sector organisations in balancing *competition and collaboration*, the second of the six issues. Contradictory trends appear to be highlighted in recent research. On the one hand, changes in the funding environment, particularly the increase in contract funding for the delivery of specific services, and the tendering processes associated with commissioning, appear to be extending and intensifying competition between third sector organisations (Buckingham 2009, Milbourne 2009). On the other hand, there is a great deal of exhortation and encouragement from policy-makers and support agencies within the third sector for organisations to develop closer collaborative relationships of various kinds with each other, including considering merger (Pepin 2005, Schlappa et al. 2006, Charity Commission 2010). Arguably the public policy and funding environment for third sector organisations provides mixed messages: to compete against others (within and beyond the sector) to win contracts and grants, but it also that it is good to collaborate with others, pool resources and expertise, and work together.

Thirdly, there remains a lively, but ultimately unresolved debate about the sector's *relationship with the state*, and particularly the extent and manner in which the sector might retain its independence. Has the sector been 'tamed' through being co-opted by the state in pursuit of public policies? This tends to raise the concern that third sector organisations' ability to campaign, advocate on behalf of vulnerable groups and communities, and play a critical role in shaping policies and services might be compromised (Blackmore 2004, Craig et al. 2004, Knight and Robson 2007, Smerdon 2009). The debate has been given a sharper political focus as a point of dispute between the Labour and Conservative parties in the period leading up to and beyond the 2010 General Election. The Conservatives have suggested that what they refer to as Labour's 'state-led' approach to the third sector has increased its dependency and thwarted the development of civil society (Cameron 2009).

A fourth debate within and about the third sector revolves around so-called *modernisation*, the degree to which third sector organisations are thought to be, or argued to be, in need of transformation. This involves professionalising the sector's people, operations and governance, with a focus on enhanced performance, a process which along the way may challenge existing sector practices and cultures (McLaughlin 2004, Carmel and Harlock 2008). Importantly this kind of argument appears to transcend political contexts, and appears to be pursued as much by significant voices within the sector as by policy makers in government (Office for Civil Society 2010, Macmillan, forthcoming), and can be summarised by the sense that although there is widespread support for the third sector, commentators and policy makers often want it to change it.

One of the ways in which the third sector has been encouraged to think differently and to abandon outdated assumptions is around how organisations finance their operations. Thus the fifth set of issues concerns an intense discussion around *rethinking finance* for the third sector (Carrington 2005,

2009, Funding Commission 2010). There are a number of different aspects to this debate, for example, the purported shifts from grants to contracts (and thus from 'giving' to 'shopping' (Unwin 2004)), growing interest in social investment and access to capital (Westall 2010), but also the continuing emphasis on third sector organisations becoming more entrepreneurial or 'business like' in costing activity, pursuing opportunities, and earning income (Macmillan 2007).

Finally, a significant debate over the last decade has focused on identifying, articulating and demonstrating the *value and distinctiveness* of third sector organisations and activities. To what extent and how do third sector organisations contribute added value to public policy and public service delivery, and is this contribution distinctive? Although the debate has moved between different terms, for example, outcomes, effectiveness, impact, value for money and returns on investment, there is little doubt that third sector organisations have been under growing pressure to identify, demonstrate and measure their value and impact in order to justify continuing and increased resources (Bolton 2002, Westall 2009, Arvidson 2009), and this is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future. However, this involves some considerable challenges, not least because much of the work of third sector organisations attempts to bring about relatively intangible outcomes. A key issue here is the extent to which (social) value can be conceptualised, captured and represented in monetary terms (Arvidson et al. 2010). Another ongoing theme here is whether third sector activities and outcomes really are distinctive when compared with public and private sector provision (Hopkins 2007, ONS 2010), and whether there is a specific third sector ethos and culture (Blake et al. 2006, Jochum and Pratten 2009). These themes have contributed to more recent debate about the growth and characteristics of 'hybrid' organisations in the third sector, amidst concern that by adopting many of the practices and qualities of private and public sector bodies, the third sector is in danger of losing its essential identity (Billis 2010).

It is worth noting that these are not simply government-led conversations, in which purposes are set and policies introduced by policy makers wanting to work with and change the sector, to which the sector then responds. Significant interventions are developed and pursued beyond government in and around the sector, for example by key umbrella organisations, media and other commentators, including academics. As we shall explore in section 5, the sector might be seen here as a dynamic 'field' freighted with an array of strategies and intervention schemes, developed and circulated from within as well as beyond the sector.

Alongside these developments, it is important to note that 'Real Times' is being undertaken at a particular conjuncture, involving a more constrained financial climate and changing political priorities following the 2010 general election. Questions surrounding the sustainability of third sector organisations in the UK have become increasingly salient during the economic downturn and as the political context changes. Much of the sector's conversation is currently revolving around survival and the subtle discursive shift to the idea of 'resilience'. However, little is known about the complex array of circumstances which might make for sustainable and 'resilient' third sector organisations, and about the everyday experiences of third sector organisations attempting to endure, develop and achieve their objectives.

In combination, these issues may pose the question of whether the sector as a whole may be undergoing a significant transformation. This involves experiencing both a ‘shake out’, where some organisations scale down or cease operations, and/or a ‘shake-up’, where organisations are being transformed or re-cast to become more entrepreneurial, to merge or work collaboratively, and to demonstrate the difference they make. The patterns and processes involved in such a transformation remain largely unknown. These contextual and conjunctural developments form the backdrop or substantive contextual baseline against which ‘Real Times’ is set. The aim is to explore the experiences of different third sector organisations longitudinally as these developments unfold.

4. ‘Real Times’: TSRC’s qualitative longitudinal study

The Third Sector Research Centre has been developing a qualitative longitudinal study of third sector organisations, called ‘Real Times’. Here we outline and examine the overarching purpose of the study, research questions, research design and structure. We discuss some of the broader theoretical thinking behind the study in section 5.

4.1. Purpose and research questions

Box 1 below summarises the research framework involved in the study.

Box 1: ‘Real Times’ research framework

The purpose of ‘Real Times’: to understand *how third sector activity operates in practice over time*.

- 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

Overarching research questions:

1. *Fortunes*: What influences the fortunes of third sector organisations?
2. *Strategies*: How do third sector organisations regard and negotiate the environments in which they operate?
3. *Challenges*: What challenges do third sector organisations face and how do they respond?
4. *Performance*: How is the ‘performance’ of third sector organisations understood by different stakeholders?

The overall purpose of the study is to understand *how third sector activity operates in practice over time*. This involves 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.

Given this overarching purpose, the study aims to contribute to the development of a theoretically informed account of the third sector ‘from the inside’. This is in contrast to, but can supplement, other theoretical accounts which aim to address other dimensions of the third sector,¹ such as

¹ These questions are taken up in other work-streams in TSRC’s research programme, but they are likely to inform and be informed by the ‘Real Times’ qualitative longitudinal study.

- What is the third sector, and in what senses might we speak of a 'sector' at all?
- What is the role and contribution of the third sector, and its relationship with the state and the market?
- How can we explain the origins and existence of third sector activity?
- How can we explain the patterns of third sector activity (including the size, shape, distribution and dynamics of the sector as a whole)?

In contrast to these, 'Real Times' is about seeking an understanding of *how the sector works in practice*.

Within this overall purpose, the project has four, closely related focal points for overarching research questions. These are:

1. *Fortunes* (or, how do third sector organisations 'get on'?)

The central questions here are: *What influences the fortunes of third sector organisations, and how do third sector organisations judge their fortunes?* These questions hint at significant concerns for third sector organisations, and for the sector as a whole, of survival, sustainability, fragility, resilience, and the extent to which these may be related to internal aspects of organisations, the external environment, and the interaction between the two. 'Fortunes' gains added salience in the purported shift to more challenging financial times.

2. *Strategies* (or, how do third sector organisations 'go on'?)

'Strategies' focuses on how third sector organisations view and respond to the complex multi-layered contexts in which they operate, and through which they 'travel'. It asks how they attempt to determine their fortunes. The main questions here are: *How do third sector organisations regard the environments in which they operate, and how do they negotiate these environments?* Strategies are not necessarily the formal written documents often produced by third sector organisations seeking to look ahead every three or five years. They can just as much be informal, implicit, opaque and contested. They might not even be labelled as such. 'Strategies' asks what cues, opportunities and constraints are taken by third sector organisations about the contexts in which they exist, and how they respond.

3. *Challenges* (how do third sector organisations 'get by'?)

Linked to the idea of strategies is a third dimension focusing on 'challenges'. Here the concern is to examine: *What challenges do third sector organisations face and how do they respond?* What kinds of issues, concerns and problems do third sector organisations encounter (whether they recognise or understand them or not), and how do they respond using perhaps both internal resources and external expert support.

4. *Performance* (are third sector organisations any good?)

The main questions here are: How is the 'performance' of third sector organisations understood by different stakeholders, and how can we understand the achievements of third sector organisations? This dimension of 'Real Times' looks at the value of third sector organisations, from a range of different perspectives. It addresses the kinds of judgement third sector organisations and others make

about what they do, how they work, and for them and others, ‘what is success?’ It considers the factors which come to be regarded as important for judging performance, and links to debates on value, effectiveness, outcomes and impact, as well as on the reputation of third sector organisations, the impressions they make, create and seek to manage.

The four focal points are all related to each other. They do not necessarily exhaust the range of questions that can be asked of different third sector organisations, but together they point to some key concerns and debates about the third sector. Within each of the four focal points, supplementary questions are posed around temporality: whether, how and why issues around fortunes, strategies, challenges and performance might change over time.

These give rise to a set of more prosaic themes of third sector activity which ‘Real Times’ may be able to explore, as presented in Box 2 below:

Box 2: Potential research themes

Mainly ***inside*** third sector organisations

- purpose and mission; values, consensus and conflict
- people: turnover, succession, trajectories, class, ethnicity and gender
- governance and accountabilities
- funding and finance, sustainability and resilience

Mainly ***outside and around*** third sector organisations

- access to support and capacity building
- inter-organisational relationships: competition and collaboration
- ‘success’, impact, legitimacy and regard
- participation in policy, independence

The distinction between inside and outside is somewhat artificial, and acts as a heuristic rather than an ‘actual’ distinction. Many of these themes have dual orientations in that they can be viewed simultaneously as about both the inside and outside of organisations.

It is worth noting that ‘Real Times’ aims to ask and address both descriptive and explanatory questions. It aims to articulate and describe the way third sector organisations operate, but also to account for how the sector works, by asking why things are like they are, or ‘how things came to be so and not otherwise?’ (Archer 1998: 71).

4.2. Research design and structure

‘Real Times’ involves a prospective longitudinal case study design (Holland et al. 2006: 37, Elliott et al. 2009: 229) involving research with case studies over an initial period of three to four years. The study has three key features. Firstly the ‘cases’ are different forms of organised third sector activity. The proposed sample involves a diverse range of organisations and groups, based on internal aspects such as, for example, organisation size, age and function/policy field, and on different aspects of the setting in which cases operate such as, for example, urban and rural, relative affluence and

deprivation, and local political context. Secondly, the sample involves a 'tiered' relational structure, with cases studied at two levels of intensity: 'core' cases and 'complementary' cases. There are 15 'core' case studies in the sample.² Most of these will then also involve up to three related 'complementary' case studies. The relationships between 'core' and 'complementary' cases may be collaborative, competitive, harmonious, conflictual, or perhaps all of these. The design aims to examine these inter-organisational relationships over time. Thirdly the study envisages six waves of fieldwork for 'core' cases, scheduled to take place every six months in the Spring and Autumn of 2010, 2011 and 2012.³ Three waves of less intense fieldwork are envisaged for the 'complementary' case studies, every 12 months in 2011, 2012 and 2013.

'Real Times' involves building and maintaining long term research relationships with core case studies of organised third sector activity. Most of these are specific organisations. However, in four contrasting cases we aim to examine smaller and less formal third sector organisations, groups and activities, and have adopted a slightly different approach. Linked to the Third Sector Research Centre's 'Below the radar' work-stream, these four case studies seek to examine a range of less formal 'grassroots' activities. In two urban neighbourhoods we are investigating the kinds of groups and activities associated with a 'community hub' or resource centre. And in two rural areas we are investigating the kinds of groups and activities undertaken in two small villages.

Ultimately the aim is to create a research space for an in-depth and detailed examination of the key concerns of third sector organisations over time. The design is informed by Sayer's (1992: 241-251) description of 'intensive research'. Close examination of a number of concrete cases facilitates a qualitative exploration of processes and dynamics. Studying a range of cases affords some protection against findings that might be considered to be purely idiosyncratic. The sample should not be regarded or described as 'representative' in a statistical sense and should not be assessed in such terms. Instead it aims to be *broadly reflective* of a diverse range of third sector activities and the range of contexts in which they occur, supporting a claim that selected cases are not untypical of the kinds of activities, organisations and, more importantly dynamics, found in the sector.

The 15 case studies operate with and across different:

- *geographical scales*: the fifteen cases involve three national, one regional, four operating sub-regionally or across more than one local authority area, three operating across a single local authority area, and four organised at a sub-local authority level;
- *functions and focus*: the case studies involve organisations attempting to fulfil different functions, such as delivering services, community development and campaigning; and operating in a range of different fields, such as housing, health, family support, employment support and regeneration;
- *organisational sizes*: from large multi-million pound agencies to groups with little income and no paid staff, the study involves a range of different sized organisations and activities. The largest organisation in the study has a turnover in excess of £50m per annum;

² The original plan was to study 16 case studies, but after an extended recruitment phase the decision was made to focus on 15. A detailed account of the recruitment phase, including where case studies declined participation, is the subject of a separate forthcoming working paper.

³ The episodic nature of the design means that, although the study is called 'Real Times', it cannot really be described fully as research in 'real time'.

- *structures*: the study involves organisations acting or being established as registered charities, companies limited by guarantee, community interest companies, industrial and provident societies and unregistered groups;
- *regions*: of the twelve non-national case studies, four are in the West Midlands, three in the North West, two each in London and the East Midlands and one in the South West;⁴
- *local political and administrative contexts*: the national, regional and sub-regional case studies operate across a range of different local authority contexts, including authorities with different local political control and different types of local authority administrative structures. The seven case studies operating at or below local authority areas include a mix of local political arrangements. Four are set in metropolitan areas and three in district authorities operating within a two-tier County and District Council context;
- *socio-economic contexts: urban-rural and deprivation*: the set of 15 case studies as a whole operate in and across a range of urban and rural settings. National, regional and sub-regional case studies operate in both urban and rural areas. The remaining seven local case studies are primarily urban-based but include two cases operating in different rural settings. Many but not all of the case studies operate in relatively deprived neighbourhoods and local authority areas. A couple of the case studies operate in relatively more affluent areas.

Finding and selecting potential case studies involved a range of different pathways and procedures. Because 'Real Times' is explicitly designed as a general qualitative research programme of use and interest across the Third Sector Research Centre, the initial structure of the sample aimed to earmark cases for particular work programmes in the Centre, such as the work around 'social enterprise' and 'service delivery'. This was never a precise framework because these categories are not mutually exclusive. However, an attempt was made to reflect this range of research interests in the final sample.

We wanted to ensure that there was a geographical balance in the sample, that is, that our cases were not all located in, for example, Birmingham or the West Midlands, and that they operated in a range of different geographical settings at a range of scales. There were two routes for selecting cases, through:

- listing, examining and choosing amongst what we termed *familiar cases*, that is, organisations with which research centre staff have some prior knowledge and/or relationship;
- devising a selection procedure for what we termed *unfamiliar cases*. To simplify search and selection amongst the many thousands of unfamiliar third sector organisations, eight contrasting local authority areas were chosen after an investigation of four criteria: the institutional structure of local government (metropolitan boroughs, unitary authorities and non-metropolitan districts), rurality (from the ONS Rural and Urban Area Classification 2004), deprivation (from the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2007), and 'Third Sector environment' (from the National Survey of Third Sector

⁴ The study does not include any case studies based in the North East, Cumbria and Yorkshire and the Humber. This was a deliberate decision designed to avoid the areas involved in the Northern Rock Foundation's Third Sector Trends study.

Organisations). These are all contextual aspects of a locality which may have some bearing on the nature of voluntary action. Then within each of these localities we examined data from Guidestar UK and web-based searches to identify potential candidates.

An initial set of potential candidates was selected through these two routes and discussed in a number of iterations in the research team and across the Centre in order to identify any significant gaps.

The research programme involves a fieldwork strategy combining what Dingwall (1997) calls 'hanging out', 'asking questions' and 'reading the papers'. Thus a range of different data generation methods will be used across successive waves of fieldwork:

1. *interviewing* people associated with each case study: for example, paid staff, unpaid volunteers and community activists, governing body members, users and external stakeholders such as peer organisations, funders and statutory agencies. The aim here is to hear a range of voices and perspectives on organisational life in the third sector, and to avoid a situation where particular voices prevail throughout the research;
2. *observing* activities in each case study: such as shadowing people, attending specific events, service-related activities, board or staff meetings, Annual General Meetings, and meetings with funders or collaborative partners. The aim here is to witness at first hand the ways in which third sector activities are undertaken in practice;
3. *reading* documents produced by and about the organisation or locality: for example, annual reports, financial statements and management accounts, marketing and publicity material, project reports and evaluations, and minutes of meetings. The aim here is to broaden our understanding of the development of case study activities and the issues they encounter, as well as to appreciate how these are constructed in text.

Having outlined the rationale and design of the 'Real Times' qualitative longitudinal research study, the next section considers some of its theoretical underpinnings which have informed the focus and design.

5. Theoretical imaginings

As with any research study, 'Real Times' has been developed with a range of theoretical considerations in mind. These often tend to be implicit, but here we consider three theoretical 'imaginings' which inform the project, namely, temporalities, the idea of a 'relational' account of the third sector, and questions of structure and agency. The aim here is to use three debates in social and political theory to connect with and enrich the study's approach. Although they are outlined separately here, these 'imaginings' are of course deeply intertwined. It is important to recognise also that these are just three of many possible 'imaginings' which may inform and inspire the research.

5.1. Temporalities

'Real Times' is a longitudinal qualitative study. A first set of theoretical imaginings aims to ensure that this means more than just that it is a *long-term* study, by taking different notions of temporality seriously. Time may become a central dimension of the research itself. Yet despite a renewed interest

in temporality across much of the social sciences, including sociology and social theory (Adam 1990, 1995) and geography (May and Thrift 2001), analysis of the third sector seems largely to have escaped the ‘temporal turn’ (Macmillan 2005). Time assumes a largely background or silent role in both academic analysis and policy approaches towards the third sector. As Adam (1995:5) argues:

time forms such an integral part of our lives that it is rarely thought about. There is no need it seems, to reflect on the matter since daily life, the chores, routines and decisions, the coordination of actions, the deadlines and schedules, the learning, plans and hopes for the future can be achieved without worrying what time might be.

Different notions of temporality lie within all discourses about social life. These may refer to notions of, for example, speed, duration, ‘waiting’, the ‘time expectations’ we have of others, and the orientations we may have to the past, the present and the future. The same is undoubtedly the case in accounts of and conversations within the third sector. For example, the substantive contextual developments outlined in section 3 involve a range of implicit temporal assumptions and horizons. The suggestion is that temporalities are thus an ‘invisible present’. As a heuristic aid in locating the temporalities of the third sector, table 1 below identifies three dimensions of time which may be relevant for analysing how the third sector operates in practice over time.

Table 1: Temporalities in the third sector

Temporal concepts	
Time: duration and scale	how long, how short
Timing: cycles, rhythms, stages and phases	repetition, progression, evolution, path dependency, succession
Tempo: speed, pacing, intensity	how fast, how slow
Time scale	
Momentary time	the ‘here and now’
Day to day and week to week	the ‘everyday’
Annual	annual financial, governance and planning cycles
Project time	conception, through design, implementation and closure
Biographical time	‘life course’ and ‘life cycles’
Political and policy time	electoral cycles and public policy
Historical time/Glacial time	decades, generations, centuries
Units of analysis	
Sector	the third sector; parts of the third sector, such as social enterprise
Segments or sub-sectors	different ‘industries’, e.g. social care, regeneration, arts
Space and scale	national, regional, local and neighbourhood
Organisational	organisations, projects, networks and partnerships
Individual	managers, trustees, paid/unpaid workers, service users/clients

We might like to think about how different *temporal concepts*, such as *time* (as in 'duration'), *timing* (as in sequencing and scheduling) and *tempo* (as in pace and intensity) could be used to inform empirical research (Adam 1990). Analysis could operate using ideas related to, inter alia, duration, cycles, stages, sequences and speed. It could consider the 'objective' clock-time and calendar-time of hours, days, weeks, months and years. Here we might sensibly ask how long things have taken, might take, or crucially might be expected by different participants to take. We might ask when they take place, and the significance of timing and sequence. We may explore the multiple experiences of time across organisations, including 'busyness', work intensity and 'suspended' waiting time (for example for the outcome of a funding bid, or anticipated budget cuts). Our analysis could concentrate on a less specific notion of 'developmental' or 'successional' time. Here ideas of stages, beginnings, endings, processes, progression and evolution come to the fore, without necessarily any explicit reference to 'clock time'.

Timescale can involve anything from a micro-focus on 'moments' of interaction in third sector settings, to the rhythms of day to day, week to week and annual cycles, as well as to notions of project time, biographical time, and longer term historical time. For example, how has the nature of the sector, or of individual organisations, changed over the last 10 or 15 years, or the last 30 to 50 years, or even longer? To what extent, how and why are the activities of third sector organisations bundled up into 'projects', and with what implications for those involved in them and for the organisation as a whole?

Lastly the *unit of analysis* can vary greatly, from analysis of the sector overall, or different segments of the sector (organisational, 'industrial', large and small), to the dynamics of different organisations and projects, geographical regions and localities, and finally to individual managers, workers, volunteers, participants and service users or clients. At an organisational level, we may seek to understand the origins, development, subsequent evolution and possible ending of projects or organisations, whilst at an individual level we may explore the biographies and 'career trajectories' of paid and unpaid workers in the third sector (Lewis 2008) or explore the differing and contrasting time experiences and perspectives of paid workers and volunteers.

Looking through temporal eyes can therefore take multiple forms. Sensitivity to time sheds some light on some of the challenges and dilemmas faced by different aspects of the sector: by paid and unpaid workers, by clients or users, by organisations, and by funders and policy-makers. Given the overarching research questions which drive 'Real Times', three more substantive temporal questions are significant.

Firstly, the idea of *continuity and change* is integral to the purpose of Real Times. We want to hear and explore how participants identify, understand, articulate and account for what seems to change and what seems to stay more or less the same in third sector organisations and activities. Pursuing these issues is unlikely to be a straightforward endeavour, as it will involve seeking to understand significant moments, critical junctures, the influence of age and period effects, and path dependency, and where change involves the complex interplay of recent and distant events, and both memorable and forgotten factors.

Secondly, time in case study organisations is likely to be an important site of *power and discipline*. How is the time of and within third sector organisations structured? Who or what determines this and

how? An example is the expectations of different participants around how long it might or should take to undertake activities, to achieve objectives, or to ‘make a difference’. These are fundamentally relationships of power expressed through time. Another example is provided by the idea and operation of ‘projects’ as a mechanism for allocating and deploying resources for activities over time. Despite their significance in the third sector, there has been remarkably little reflection about the fundamental features of ‘projects’, nor much by way of substantive discussion about how they operate and develop over time.

There is some discussion in economic geography on the fluidity, creativity and energy of ‘project ecologies’ and project teams (Grabher 2001, 2002a, 2002b), and in organisational studies on the idea of ‘project-based organisations’ (Sydow et al. 2004), but this tends to relate to private sector activities, rather than a third sector context. Some guidance is offered in practitioner literature (Lawrie 1996: 7), where projects are seen as unique, time limited, creating change and goal oriented. Third sector organisations seeking to achieve their objectives often have to utilise resources from elsewhere, and those resources are normally available conditionally to do certain things (and not others), over certain periods of time (and no longer), with certain client groups (and not others), in certain places (and not others). Thus projects are typically about resources channelled, assembled and organised along four main dimensions, as outlined in table 2 below.

Table 2: The ‘anatomy’ of projects

<p>Activity (‘What?’) – a specific thing</p> <p>Projects are invariably established to do something usually quite specific. They are ‘task-oriented’, with specific aims and objectives. This is arguably the primary defining feature of a project.</p>	<p>Time (‘When/How long?’) – a specific period</p> <p>Projects have a distinctly organised temporality. They have an end-point and therefore ‘take time seriously’. Durations of project funding vary – e.g. from one year up to five. The implications of fixed duration for the activity in a project, and its effectiveness are not well known.</p>
<p>Group (‘With whom?’) – a target population</p> <p>Projects are increasingly focused on a target population of ‘beneficiaries’, for example disabled people, older people, or pre-school age children and their parents. These may be concentrated in a particular geographical area or dispersed in a wider area.</p>	<p>Space/Scale (‘Where?’) – a specified area</p> <p>Projects tend to operate within defined geographical boundaries. In some cases funding is more specifically targeted. For example, funding in area-based initiatives becomes directed to, and concentrated in, certain ‘deprived’ areas, but different notions of scale might be implied.</p>

Individual projects will vary in the extent to which they display each of these features, and in the way each of these features influences the nature of the project. Each of the dimensions reflects a desire to target resources and generate specific outcomes in line with a wider strategy or purpose. For this theoretical imagining, however, this raises questions of how a third sector project’s temporal

organisation is constructed and played out in practice, and thus how time in third sector organisations is structured.

Thirdly, the practice of running third sector organisations may involve use of a range of *time-shaped orientations, tools and techniques*. How do participants regard the past, the present and the future, and why? In what ways do third sector organisations look ahead with an anticipatory outlook, considering risk and uncertainty, or look back in hindsight, through ceremonial review by annual reports and annual general meetings, historical reconstruction of events and sequences, and articulation and celebration of 'our journey so far'? How do third sector organisations regard and make use of techniques such as time and project management, horizon scanning or foresight, and business and strategic planning, and with what consequence?

5.2. A 'field' guide - towards a 'relational' account of the third sector

A second theoretical imagining begins from the idea that third sector organisations, and the individuals circling in and around them, are involved in some form of commonly understood milieu or social world. It may have its own codes, values, rules, norms, expectations and language, and may make more sense to 'insiders' – 'voluntary sector-type people' - than to those looking in from the outside. Newcomers to this partially enclosed world are likely to feel a sense of dislocation as they move from other sectors and begin to learn the tacit 'rules' which seem to operate in the third sector. Of course this is an exaggeration. Real life in third sector activities is unlikely to be so straightforward or singular, and certainly not so encompassing or enclosing. However, a recent example serves to illustrate the point. Here a writer with a voluntary sector background writes of his experience studying housing associations, and wondering to what extent they are part of the wider sector:

In some ways, the housing sector is quite a small world, preoccupied with its relationships with its own immediate partners. Indeed, for someone like me from the wider voluntary sector to study the world of [Housing Associations] is, perhaps to a greater extent than most other subject areas, like travelling in an exotic foreign country where it is quite difficult to understand what the inhabitants are saying (Purkis 2010: 3).

Drawing inspiration from the theoretical framework developed by the late French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, this second imagining seeks to take the 'small world' suggestion seriously. It asks whether it might be useful to envisage the 'world' of voluntary and community action as a common, but contested 'field' (or more likely a set of complex, inter-related and overlapping fields), in which individuals, groups and organisations are 'positioned' in relation to each other, and where some are in a better 'position' than others. In this view, an adequate account of how third sector activity operates in practice can only be developed through a 'relational' understanding: an appreciation of how individuals and organisations in the third sector exist *in relation to* each other (Emirbayer and Johnson 2008). A field might be recognisable in the sense of familiarity that participants have in the world in which they take part. If the phrase 'the usual suspects' can be applied and understood by participants, this might be indicative of a field in operation.

How might Bourdieu's social theory be applied to the third sector? In general terms, his ideas revolve around a sophisticated use of a game metaphor. Agents, be they individuals, groups or organisations, are 'players', developing and deploying 'strategies' in a complex and dynamic 'game':

By game [Bourdieu] did not mean mere diversions or entertainments. Rather he meant a serious athlete's understanding of a game. He meant the experience of being passionately involved in play, engaged in a struggle with others and with our own limits, over stakes to which we are (at least for the moment) deeply committed. He meant intense competition. He meant for us to recall losing ourselves in the play of a game, caught in its flow in such a way that no matter how individualistically we struggle we are constantly aware of being only part of something larger – not just a team, but the game itself. (Calhoun 2003: 275)

The field is an arena of struggle amongst different agents. According to Bourdieu a 'field' is defined as:

a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions. These positions are objectively defined, in their existence and in their determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situation in the structure of the distribution of the species of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field, as well as by their objective relation to other positions. (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 97)

For Bourdieu the existence of a field arises from some common understanding and interest amongst agents regarding the things, or forms of '*capital*', that are likely to be at stake. These are all things that keep agents linked to each other, are worth striving for and are typically in short supply. Generically, capital is a prized resource, a source of power for its possessors. Capital represents anything of value to the participants or players in the field. In Bourdieu's words capital is 'all the goods, material and symbolic, without distinction, that present themselves as rare and worthy of being sought after in a particular social formation' (Bourdieu 1990: 51).

In a third sector context these goods might include tangible resources such as funding and physical resources, but might also include intangible assets such as legitimacy, status and reputation, information, influence and connection. Bourdieu distinguishes four different types of capital: crucially, capital is not just money ('economic capital') but is also connection, information and networks ('social capital') as well as educational credentials, social skills and taste ('cultural capital') and status, legitimacy and authority ('symbolic capital'). Significantly there is no automatic assumption that economic capital, or material wealth, is more important or powerful than others. Such a view is seen as an empirical question and depends upon the field itself and its participants. In principle different forms of capital are convertible. Thus the power accrued by social connections and networks can in some circumstances be used to advance the aims of a third sector organisation, bringing additional funding (or economic capital) in the process. Likewise, creating a powerful reputation and a positive 'brand' may be significant in acquiring financial resources, and vice versa. However, the extent and ease with which different forms of capital are convertible are again empirical questions. There are many third sector organisations with excellent reputations but limited success in translating these into ongoing funding.

Arguably the most useful aspect of this framework is that it provides a way of understanding the everyday contention that some groups, organisations and individuals in the sector may be in a better or stronger position than others, however that position might best be judged. In Bourdieu's terms the field is uneven, favouring some groups and organisations rather than others (Foley and Edwards 1999). Some groups in the third sector have greater influence, or money or time or perhaps 'capacity' and expertise than others. Some groups are better connected than others, whilst some groups are

more familiar with the 'rules of the game' than others, including its terms and its language, and have more experience in how to play it. The framework suggests that different agents already possess different levels and qualities of resources or 'capital'. It thus raises the further prospect of a theoretically informed analysis of the neglected issue of class, and other forms of inequality based on gender and ethnicity, in the third sector.

Different agents operate so as to advance their interests by seeking to secure their existing position and to gain further access to limited resources. Agents develop *strategies* to preserve or advance their position, and positional advantage, in relation to the capital at stake. Agents with strong endowments tend to seek to preserve their privileged position whilst those with fewer resources will seek to advance their own position. This is not dissimilar to Archer's conception of a societal structure which, in its distribution of resources, creates vested interests among agents for either the reproduction or transformation of that structure (Archer 1995: 204):

Those who find the cards stacked against them do not simply have the bad luck to come from a long line of bad card players. With any such position come vested interests and with these come motives for the reproduction of advantages or the transformation of disadvantages.

Some participants (individuals, groups, organisations) may be seen more as insiders, and others regarded as more peripheral. Identifying the outer edges of a field, and its relation to other fields, is an important but hardly straightforward empirical question (Emirbayer and Johnson 2008: 7). It may relate to the differing degrees to which participants exhibit a concern for the particular goods of value in the field, as well as an understanding of its forms of language, codes and rules.

Bourdieu is, however, at pains to suggest that strategies are not the deliberative, conscious and calculated orientations often associated with the term 'strategy', and implied in rational choice theory. For him a strategy involves a more encompassing notion of action, less directly intentional than that implied by rational choice theory, though still purposeful. Strategies arise from the defence of various positions and the pursuit of valued capital in a field. Because strategies do not necessarily operate at a conscious level, they work as a semi-automatic 'feel for the game' or, as Bourdieu calls it, from 'practical reason'.

Bourdieu's suggestion is that strategy emerges from the combination of the location of agents within a particular field, which defines what things are of value to agents and how they might be apprehended, and their deep-seated understanding of that location – this is Bourdieu's idea of a pre-conscious *habitus* or disposition towards the social world. This is a foundational concept that links the enduring dispositions of agents, acquired through early socialisation, and reinforced through education, to everyday practice in the world. It is manifested in the way agents behave, how they dress, accent, gesture and a structure of expectations about the world. Fundamentally habitus is how individuals 'carry' themselves or 'go on' in the social world. Habitus generates practice, which, in the pursuit of different forms of capital in a field, informs strategies. In a third sector context, it relates to the possibility that there might be a distinctive culture or ethos that permeates third sector organisations. Painter (1997: 138), for example, suggests that a habitus might be embodied in gut orientations towards particular issues, such as an automatic suspicion amongst voluntary and community organisations of statutory authorities. Participants in these partially enclosed worlds are

actively engaged in using the position they have (stocks of capital) and their 'habitus' (gut instincts, or relatively pre-conscious but enduring dispositions towards the world) to seek in different ways to secure or improve their position or their 'room' for manoeuvre, power to define the field and to dominate its operation.

As an extension of this framework, the overarching research questions in Real Times may be explored using the idea of organisational 'room', or the 'space' for an organisation to operate in a given field (Macmillan et al. 2007). For third sector organisations, 'room' involves firstly an acknowledged role and position, based on a context-specific, ongoing, 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. These aims may involve an uneasy balance between achieving a particular mission (for example alleviating a particular need, or achieving an element of social change), but also of perpetuating the organisation in itself.

Room is clearly a spatial and ecological metaphor, but it encapsulates the idea that what might matter for third sector organisations is health, survival and legitimacy, and the constraints and threats around this. Third sector organisations might pursue 'room', but in order to create or preserve it, they may need to attend to, develop and advance particular 'resources' (or economic and human capital in Bourdieu's terms), 'relationships' (social capital), and 'regard' (symbolic capital). In more prosaic terms, 'resources' implies funding and the people available within an organisation, 'relationships' implies who you know, how they can be accessed and what they can bring, whilst 'regard' implies the reputation, status, authority and recognition that organisations or their representatives have.

Boldly stated, if the 'bottom line' is primarily profit in the private sector, it may be 'room' for the third sector. In this view room would act as a fundamental, often unstated, assumption and concern of participants in third sector groups and organisations. More cautiously, we might ask whether and in what ways this framework has relevance for the third sector. Is it really like this for third sector organisations? How, if at all, is 'room' understood, articulated and pursued? How is 'room' negotiated and enacted by people in and around the sector in practice? Is 'room' only a characteristic of organisations, or groups of organisations, or can it be applied to competing arguments and discursive constructions in the sector? If 'room' does not seem to apply, or is less of a concern, what else matters and why? These questions may be considered throughout the 'Real Times' study.

Particular theoretical imaginings may serve to open up interesting questions and ideas, but in doing so they can close down others. It is thus also worth asking what might be missing or lost in the idea of 'room'. For example, there is little sense of what matters most between resources, relationships and regard, and how the balance between them may change over time, or how they might combine. Simply getting more money in, or having a higher profile than competitors may not be the only thing that counts for third sector organisations, or it may need to be seen in context as a proxy or intermediate step in enhancing the capacity to achieve what the organisation is for. Arguably, however, the purpose or mission of an organisation is downplayed in this framework. As summarised here, room draws attention to strategic and instrumental aspects of organisational life, and perhaps downplays issues of organisational purpose, culture, values and ethos. In focusing on the strategic, it may overlook what really animates third sector organisations. This relates to a much broader critique

of Bourdieu's social theory. To the extent that it prioritises strategic, calculating or instrumental action, it calls forth a rather bleak and potentially narrow conceptualisation of third sector activity. Bourdieu's account, and the idea of 'room' developed from it, seems to be based on a strong notion of individuals, groups and organisations pursuing their interests. Notwithstanding the problematic notion of interests, what scope is there for 'disinterested' action? (Sayer 1999). What are the 'ethical dispositions' (Sayer 2005) which might also be operating through the sector, and crucially, how might they relate to strategic intent? How are 'social' and 'economic' concerns articulated and pursued, and how do they relate to each other?

A second critique of this theoretical 'imagining' concerns the extent to which it glosses over who the 'agents' or 'participants' are in third sector fields. There are individuals in a variety of roles, but also third sector organisations of many different kinds. Can third sector organisations, for example, be regarded as singular actors? To what extent can the framework accommodate some form of 'collective agency'? To assume so seems somewhat reductionist, and likely to overlook the immense complexity of relationships and strategies implied by the idea of organisation. However, organisations are often regarded as more or less singular entities in practice, constructed discursively as such, and individuals may act with organisational affiliations and perceived organisational interests in mind. Emirbayer and Johnson (2008) suggest that a two-level theoretical account of fields is possible, combining analysis of both *inter*-organisational relations in 'organisational fields' and *intra*-organisational relations in 'organisations-as-fields'. The former might consider, relationally, how organisations have weight and bearing on each other, and how they might each struggle to dominate the field and its operations. The latter might look, again relationally, at the roles, inter-relationships and power-struggles between individuals, groups, and institutional sections over the purpose or mission, position and trajectory of the organisation.

Hence this 'imagining' seeks to bring these concepts to bear in the third sector, and to ask: 'to what extent and how is the third sector like this?' It opens questions such as: what kind of 'game' is it, who are the 'players', what are their positions and how do they relate to each other (i.e. it is a *relational* account). What are the rules, how are these perceived and played by different participants, and fundamentally, what is at stake. This kind of analysis can be applied at and across a number of different levels: for example, the whole of the third sector, geographical or thematic sub-sectors, 'industries' (for example, health, housing, criminal justice) or individual networks and organisations might be regarded as contested fields. The idea of a sector or sub-sector 'habitus' might be worth exploring, for example, in the construction of a distinctive ethos or culture. The pursuit of different forms of capital and the struggle to define what might be important in the field suggests that performances, circulations (of information, impressions, understandings, rumours and credit/blame) and representations (models, pictures and understandings of the sector) might be worth exploring. It may also help inform an understanding of strategies of 'distinction', that is, how individual third sector organisations, or groups of like-minded third sector organisations, or even the third sector as a whole, may seek to advance a position by making claims for their distinctiveness against others. In addition, the interaction between different interests can be co-operative or collaborative, but can often be more openly competitive, leading to familiar experiences of 'turf war'. Either way the framework suggests

that different agents (be they individual, group or institutional) have different interests, which inform how they operate in relation to each other and what strategies are developed.

The focus on the 'fortunes', 'strategies', 'challenges' and 'performance' of third sector organisations in the Real Times study is informed by Bourdieu's theoretical framework. It is not the only way to think of the sector and how it operates, but it may prove a fruitful and theoretically informed starting point. It might be informative because attention is drawn to participants being engaged in common social spheres, the pervasiveness of competition and conflict, and resource and power asymmetries (i.e. the idea that it is 'not a level playing field'). It can ask how third sector organisations emerge, develop, survive, and how they may or may not respond or adapt to the changing environments in which they operate. It draws closer attention to how organisations are positioned, the different kinds of resources they may have or seek to gain, and the strategies they might pursue to secure or advance their 'position'.

5.3. Structure and agency – strategic action in context

A third theoretical imagining draws from the first two, and concerns questions of 'structure' and 'agency'. Who or what has agency in the third sector, and how is this enacted? What relationship does it have with the context in which agents operate, and to what extent and how does each shape the other?

Questions of structure and agency have dominated social science debates for many years, but have rarely been used in any explicit way in a third sector context. And yet assumptions about structure and agency underlie many analyses of the sector. For example, the model of voluntary organisation developed by Billis (1996) involves analysing the interactions between five-sub-systems: human resources, funding, governance, an explanatory system (values and orientations), and internal accountability (rules and procedures). In order to understand the processes associated with organisational change and crisis, Billis distinguishes between 'dynamic equilibrium', where continuing changes within and between subsystems are absorbed and adjusted to without there being a fundamental change in the mission or purpose; and 'disequilibrium' where imbalances within and between the systems have a significant effect such that survival is at stake. The five subsystems are designed to get away from a purely resource-based model of organisation.

But in proposing this framework Billis brackets out almost completely the external environment. He concedes that external context permeates and affects each sub-system, but argues that planned change is possible in an attempt to open up analysis of voluntary organisations from the determinism of evolutionary life cycles or resource dependency. There is clearly an implied account of structure and agency here, although it is not stated as such. But the effort to identify a space for third sector participants to formulate strategies and make decisions appears to remove the possibility of environmental influence altogether.

Questions of structure and agency underpin many analyses of organisational failure. In 'Black boxes in the wreckage', Scott (2010) examines multiple accounts of the failure of a social enterprise, Enterprise Action, aided by the analogy of 'black box' aircraft flight recorders used in crash investigations. He notes that in the case of Enterprise Action:

much post-crash commentary (by the media, local politicians and third sector professionals) has tended to concentrate on the 'plane' (i.e. Enterprise Action) and the 'pilots' (EA Director and Deputy), with virtually no regard for the external environment (the 'air', 'weather conditions' and other 'aircraft'). The analogy is useful therefore, to the extent that it alerts the reader to these alternative dimensions and prevents what has become the conventional myopia. (Scott 2010: 10).

This is clearly a story of competing ways of assigning responsibility for, in this case, failure. However, without explicitly saying so, it is also a tale of structure and agency. Was failure a matter of agency, the performance and decisions of key individuals, or was an element of structure or context implicated, such as the funding environment, or the competitive practices of other organisations? Crucially, of course, it may be a bit of both. It becomes important, as Scott goes on to note, to avoid the relatively easy slide into a simple one-sided account which prioritises one side of the dichotomy over the other. More fruitful would be an attempt to think about the complex interaction between structure and agency, or internal organisational factors and decisions and the external environments in which organisations operate (Macmillan 1999).

Scott's paper is an in-depth account of a single case. A broader analysis has recently been provided in Wollebaek's (2009) study of the antecedents of voluntary organisation survival in a single region of Norway between 1980 and 2000. Based on data from more than 5,000 local voluntary organisations, he concludes:

Except in extremely turbulent circumstances, organizational death is rarely caused solely by ecological or environmental factors. Within the limits of external constraints, organizational leaders still make choices that affect chances of success and failure. Likewise, except in cases of extreme mismanagement, bad strategic choices are rarely the only cause of an organization's demise. The same actions that work well in a resourceful and established organization in a stable, favorable environment may be catastrophic in a small, newly founded organization under unstable or antagonistic environmental conditions...a more realistic and comprehensive account of organizational survival is achieved by combining insights from both organizational ecology and more agency-oriented perspectives (Wollebaek 2009: 268-269).

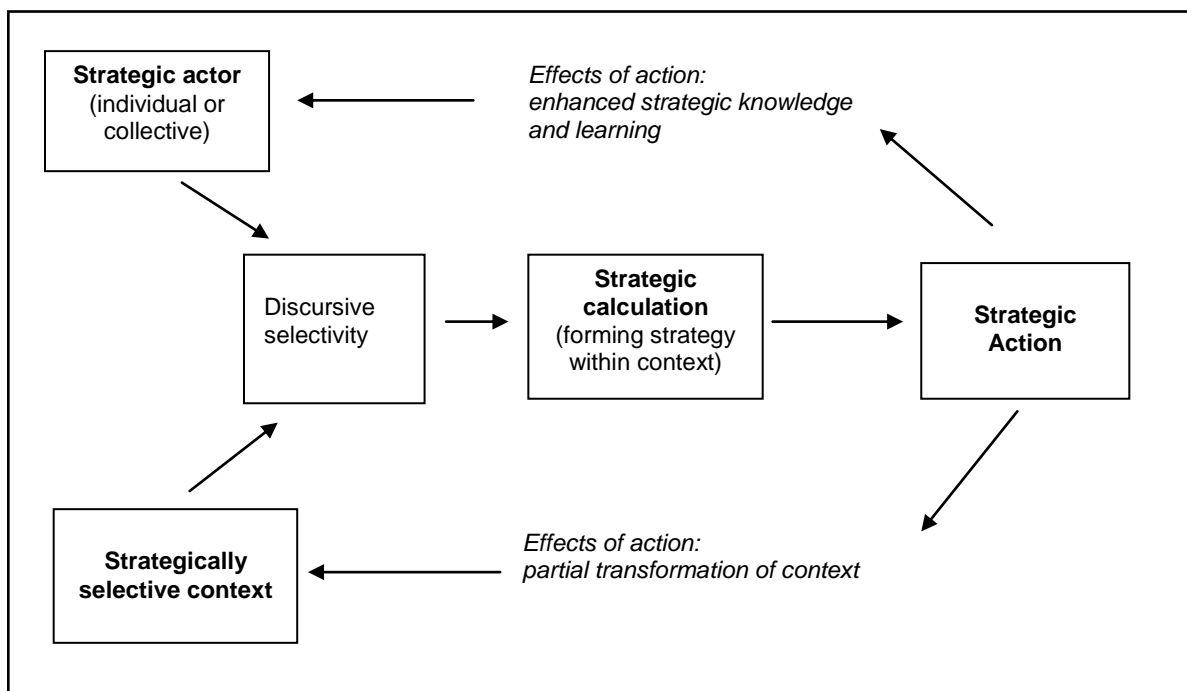
Wollebaek argues that neither a deterministic account of voluntary organisation survival (derived from hypotheses drawn from organisational ecology literature), which suggests that the chances of survival largely lie outside of an organisation's control, nor a voluntaristic account (derived from hypotheses drawn from the wider literature in organisational studies), which suggests that organisational design and strategy can affect chances of survival, offer a sufficient explanation of the antecedents of survival. Both perspectives are necessary, but Wollebaek does not seem to countenance the idea that the interaction of factors might be illuminative.

Wollebaek draws inspiration from Mellahi and Wilkinson's review of literature on organisational failure (2004). They write of the need to build an integrative framework including both internal organisational features and external factors: 'any attempt to explain organisational failure will not be complete unless the interplay between contextual factors and organisational dynamics is taken into account' (Mellahi and Wilkinson 2004: 34). The framework they propose appears to be primarily additive rather than interactive, in that analysis must take into account internal factors *and* external factors, rather than the possibility that interaction between the two creates a qualitatively different outcome. However, reference is made to the mediating effects of internal factors on organisational

failure, and whether external factors might 'magnify or suppress' (Mellahi and Wilkinson 2004: 33) the effects of internal factors, referring to the possibility of favourable/unfavourable and stable/uncertain environments (Mellahi and Wilkinson 2004: 33).

These debates are about 'structure' and 'agency', but they don't particularly name them as such, and the connection to wider debates in social theory on structure and agency seem tenuous at best. Hay's model of strategic action (2002: 89-134), and the relationship between context and conduct, offers the possibility of a general framework through which structure and agency might be explored in the third sector. Figure 2 illustrates the basic features of the model.

Figure 2: A model of strategic action in the third sector (adapted from Hay 2002: 131, 212)



The model starts with the idea of actors encountering, and acting within, a context. Actors can be individuals, but they can also be collectives, such as groups or organisations. How agency is conceptualised and enacted by collective actors is of course, as we have seen in the discussion of Bourdieu, not a straightforward matter. Following Jessop (1990), Hay argues that the context or environment is 'strategically selective'. In this view, particular outcomes are not inevitable, but: 'the context itself presents an unevenly contoured terrain which favours certain strategies over others and hence selects for certain outcomes while militating against others' (Hay 2002: 129).

Actors are regarded as 'strategic', such that they can develop and revise ways of realising their intentions. Strategy is thus:

intentional conduct oriented towards the environment in which it is to occur. It is the intention to realise certain outcomes and objectives which motivates action. Yet for that action to have any chance of realising such intentions, it must be informed by a strategic assessment of the relevant context in which strategy occurs and upon which it subsequently impinges....to act strategically is to project the likely consequences of different courses of action and, in turn, to judge the contours of the terrain (Hay 2002: 129, 132).

But Hay also suggests that the context is never directly apprehended by actors but always discursively mediated:

strategy is forged in a context which is strategically selective, favouring certain strategies over others....Yet actors have no direct knowledge of the selectivity of the context they inhabit. Rather they must rely upon on understandings of the context...which are, at best, fallible. Nonetheless some understandings are likely to prove more credible given past experience than others.... Context comes to exert a discursive selectivity upon the understandings actors hold about it (Hay 2002: 212).

Action creates direct effects on the context, however marginal this may be. But in Hay's model it also leads to strategic learning. Actors monitor the consequences of their actions, including assessing the success or failure of previous and existing strategies. In doing so actors learn about barriers, enabling factors, constraints and opportunities. Hence the model is recursive as strategic action is then reformulated on the basis of learning and a changing context.

Hay's model of strategic action offers a compelling framework for interrogating how third sector activity is organised and operates, and particularly how participants 'go on' in the contexts in which they operate. This relates to the second set of questions in 'Real Times' on the 'strategies' formulated by third sector organisations. By relating action and context through the notion of strategy and strategic selectivity, Hay's model avoids the dichotomy identified by Scott and the temptation to prioritise 'structure' (environment) or 'agency' (decisions and actions). For studies of third sector activities and organising, the model may be regarded as an ideal-typical description of action, and against which the complications and departures of actual practice can be examined in depth. For example, it opens intriguing lines of enquiry about what processes are involved in the strategic and discursive selectivity of context. What does that look like to third sector participants in practice, and how does this inform the decisions and actions they take?

These three imaginings represent a set of theoretical thoughts which inform aspects of the 'Real Times' study. They do not preclude others, and there are many connections between them. For example, Bourdieu's field could be synonymous with Hay's strategically selective context, and both are dynamic conceptualisations imbued with different temporalities. Both could be criticised for deploying a framework for action that is too narrowly calculating and strategic. Hay has recently tried to avoid the possibility that this becomes indistinguishable from a contextually-sensitive theory of rational choice, and comes quite close to Bourdieu's notion of 'habitus' in proposing that:

all action contains at least a residual strategic moment though this need not be rendered conscious. This makes it important to differentiate clearly between intuitively and explicitly strategic action.....Any specific action is likely to combine both intuitive and explicit strategic aspects, though to differing degrees. Even the most explicit strategic calculation is likely to be infused with intuitive assumptions at the level of 'practical consciousness'. (Hay 2002: 132-3)

Intuitive, routine and habitual practices are strategic inasmuch as they are oriented to a surrounding context, even if they remain unarticulated, unchallenged and implicit.

The three theoretical imaginings act as creative devices for raising questions and possibilities, rather than for asserting 'how the world is'. Although the research design has been informed by these perspectives, they are not the only possible interpretive frameworks in play. Their task is to 'open up' fruitful lines of enquiry, as a way of helping make sense of what we might encounter empirically, rather

than close down analysis. To what extent can they help illuminate what we think we are finding, or suggest new ways of seeing? Importantly for a qualitative study like 'Real Times', this includes being alive to the unexpected aspects of third sector life, the surprising things and the bits which do not seem to fit our pre-existing understandings.

6. Conclusions

This paper has attempted to describe the rationale and design of the Third Sector Research Centre's 'Real Times' qualitative longitudinal study of third sector organisations and activities, but also to place it in a methodological, substantive and theoretical context. In turn the paper has considered the growing methodological interest in qualitative longitudinal research, a range of contested debates, issues and trends which, together with recent economic and political developments, provide a contextual baseline for the study, and finally some theoretical 'imaginings' which have informed the design and may enrich the conduct of the research.

As a mark of the methodological interest in qualitative longitudinal research in the third sector, and a strange parallel with the arrival of three buses at once, it is worth noting that two other qualitative longitudinal studies of third sector organisations are also underway alongside TSRC's 'Real Times' study. A team of researchers from Teesside and Durham Universities have embarked upon a qualitative longitudinal study of fifty third sector organisations operating in the North East and Cumbria (the 'TSO-50' study), as part of the long term 'Third Sector Trends' study funded by the Northern Rock Foundation (Chapman et al. 2010). Meanwhile, in Scotland, a team from Edinburgh and Napier Universities is charting the opportunities and challenges of twenty third sector organisations over a three year period. With each of the three studies deploying slightly different research designs, there is a unique opportunity to share and compare methodological and analytical experiences and insights across the three qualitative longitudinal studies currently underway.

The 'Real Times' study has moved from an initial phase of planning and design into recruitment of case study participants and the first stages of fieldwork. Further working papers will report on the experience of recruiting third sector organisations for a long term study, the position in which participating organisations find themselves at the beginning of the research fieldwork, including how they regard the new economic and political context, before considering issues of continuity and change, and particular themes and 'story-lines' which emerge within and across the case studies. New research dilemmas will emerge and will become the focus of further reflection; for example, whether a 'qualitative baseline' is possible, and if so how can it be constructed, how analytically we should make sense of the complexity of continuity and change in third sector organisations, and how we can relate the specific issues arising in our case studies to wider trends and developments in the third sector. Notwithstanding these dilemmas, and the fact that qualitative longitudinal research is intense and long-term, it has the potential to significantly increase our understanding of the dynamic unfolding of third sector activity over time, and potentially of seeing the third sector in a new light.

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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.

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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.

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