

**Charting Interest Group 'Careers':
Studying Group 'Organisational Forms'**

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Abstract

The study of interest groups has hitherto largely focussed on examining the public-policy influence activities of groups or, alternatively, explaining why people join groups. A more holistic view of group life is something key scholars argue is necessary. This paper seeks to work towards developing a holistic view. It views groups as *organisations* changing over time in order to *survive* in the face of environmental challenges.

Building on the work of organisational ecology, and its application to the study of parties and social movements, this paper develops an approach to analysing 'group careers'. Emphasis is not simply on whether groups survive challenging circumstances, but *how* they survive. What *organisational forms* are struck? And what revised *organisational practices* do they trigger? The interpretations and organisational frames of the group leadership, it is argued, are crucial to make sense of the direction of group development. Using examples of a range of groups, the paper argues that historical case study analysis of changing group 'organisational forms' is a useful way to make sense of group life.

Accounts of Group Survival: Formation, Maintenance and Mortality

The group literature is well developed with respect to issues of group formation. The early group theorists concerned themselves primarily with formation. Social change and disturbances led to the formation of organised interest groups (Truman 1956). The group theorists had the 'naïve' proposition of more or less automatic formation. Once formed, it was implied that a group would continue surviving until such time that the group's social or economic base disbursed or shifted.

However, rational choice approaches challenged these theories of formation. Olson (1965) argued that identifying interests did not automatically lead to formation: the failure of formation may reflect the lack of selective incentives, rather than the absence of collective interest. At the same time, Salisbury described how formation was predicated on the capacities of 'entrepreneurs' to construct incentive systems that attract the support of members (1969). Others have emphasised the role of patronage and benefactors in forming groups (Walker 1991; Nownes and Neeley 1996).

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When not concerned with formation, the group literature approaches the analysis of group activity in a rather fragmented manner. Analysis proceeds on the basis that groups are *either* organisations designed to pursue influence or mobilisation. Thus groups are studied in terms of influencing specific public policy measures. Or alternatively, groups are studied with respect to explaining the generation of support or mobilising their constituency. An additional account is that of group 'maintenance'. While a 'maintenance' account of group development claims to be a 'holistic' organisational approach, it generally assumes that maintaining membership support underpins survival. Matching the motivational base of the membership drives the groups overall organisational form: with political goals normally subsumed by aim of organisational stability (Wilson 1973; Moe 1980).

But surely most group entrepreneurs are engaged in the more difficult endeavour of *simultaneously* undertaking the tasks of maintaining the support of members (and thus gathering resources) and engaging in policy influence activities (and thus pursuing a group purpose). The role of leaders in development and survival is, thus, the creative (re)combination of political influence and membership mobilization tasks within an organizational form that fosters stability (see Nownes and Cigler 1995). These accounts – influence, mobilisation and maintenance – may look at group life *after* formation, but do not assist in capturing group organisations in their 'totality'.

Only recently has survival or mortality become an *explicit* theme in group research.¹ The population ecology perspective has rightly emphasised that there are limits on the number of group formations and that many groups do in fact not survive at all. This scholarship shifts explanations for survival away from individual groups to the level of group populations. The core contention is that like-groups can be studied as populations, and that population levels (and by extension individual group survival) are determined by environmentally induced population-level pressures. The size/heterogeneity of a given constituency, the attention of government, and population density (of like-groups) all feature as pressures that affect group birth and death rates. The population ecology approach emphasises environmental forces selecting out poorly adapted groups and dampening birth rates: successful group adaptation is discounted.

¹ The paper refers explicitly to the following articles. David Lowery and Virginia Gray, 'The Population Ecology of Gucci Gulch, or the Natural Regulation of Interest Group Numbers in the American States', *American Journal of Political Science*, 39 (1995), 1-29; David Lowery and Virginia Gray, 'Bias in the Heavenly Chorus: Interest in Society and Before Government', *Journal of Theoretical Politics*, 16 (2004), 5-30; Virginia Gray and David Lowery, *The Population Ecology of Interest Representation: Lobbying Communities in the American States*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996 refs to 2000 paperback edn); Anthony, J. Nownes, 'The Population Ecology of Interest Group Formation: Mobilizing Gay and Lesbian Rights Interest Groups in the Unites States, 1950-98', *British Journal of Political Science*, 34 (2004), 49-67; Anthony J. Nownes and Daniel Lipinski, 'The Population Ecology of Interest Group Death: Gay and Lesbian Rights Interest Groups in the Unites States, 1945-98', *British Journal of Political Science*, 35 (2005), 303-319.

The population ecology approach is important in that it problematises group survival: the question of mortality had largely been ignored in preference to a focus on formation. But the approach has limits. The population ecology approach offers quite blunt tools to examine mortality. Survival is appraised in terms of the dual 'events' of group birth and death. It offers a 'head count' of those groups that survive. Two problems with this type of measure are of particular note. Firstly, it says nothing of the organisational form or structure of a group at any one time. By implication each and every group is assumed to be the same. Secondly, it says nothing of what, if any, organisational changes have been undertaken to achieve survival (or to prolong life and postpone of death). The first is an absence of holism in the appraisal of group organisations. The second is a lack of concern with group adaptability and change over time. The activity that happens between the two points of birth and death is left largely unexplored.

Put simply, groups are presented as somewhat of a black box. Groups, by definition, are more than latent groups, they are *organised* interests. But having crossed the threshold into organisation, we tend to lose interest in subsequent development(s). But how to fill in this black box? What do group organisations do when and as they survive? How can we develop an account of groups as developing organisations? Can we speak of historical group transformations?

These gaps are becoming all the more noticeable given studies that note groups seem to 'stick' in difficult or adverse environmental conditions (Coleman 1997; Coleman and Chiasson 2002; Halpin 2005; Wanna and Withers 2000). Groups, it seems, are adaptable. There is also plenty of evidence that group organisations in the same general field vary significantly in their 'form'. Imig's case study of poverty action groups in the US found non-uniform responses to the same challenging operating environment (1992, 517). A more holistic concern with group organisational form reveals that groups differ markedly in structures and configurations, and that such forms change over time in attempts to adapt to new circumstances. Rather than asking questions about how groups influence or mobilise; the direction in which these studies push could perhaps be expressed by posing a question like, how do groups (at one point in time) hold together or stick? How do they survive and develop amidst challenging circumstances? In what form do groups configure themselves to prolong life?

A brief example reinforces the point. The Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) is a UK group that pursues the interests of the blind. It was founded in 1868 as the British and Foreign Society for Improving Embossed Literature for the Blind. It was established as a benevolent organization primarily developing materials and offering rehabilitation services for the blind. Since then it has undergone five name changes. It's most radical change came in 2002, when it decided to affiliate the blind into membership. The RNIB has changed from advocating *for* the blind to organizing the blind to advocate for themselves. It now offers 'full membership' to those who are blind and partially sighted. The RNIB of the early 21st century is in no way the same organisation than it was in the

late 19th century. But how can we describe and articulate this difference? The current approaches fall well short. The group has formed, so 'formation' is less than a useful frame for analysis. The ecology based population perspective, with its blunt measure of birth or death, hardly suffices. Indeed, the RNIB has changed name five times in 150 years; by ecology measures it would have been considered as five different groups! We could look at 'influence' over time or 'mobilisation', but by any yardstick it retains its insider status; the only key difference is that it mobilises a different constituency (blind people as opposed to professionals or empathizers). But this hardly captures the 'total' shift that has gone on: this change precipitated an overall shift in internal decision making, method of influence, membership categories, and more. It is not by any reckoning the same organisation in 2007 as it was in 1888. There is a need for a new account.

These limitations are largely acknowledged by group scholars operating within an ecology framework. For instance, they suggest a need for attentiveness to how leaders/entrepreneurs and members 'experience' and 'feel' environmental pressures and react (Nownes 2004, 67; Gray and Lowery 2000, 250). They offer a two-fold suggestion of the way forward. Firstly, they suggest developing a more *holistic* group analysis, which acknowledges the role of leaders *but* critically accepts the shaping role of environmental change and population level pressures (Nownes 2004). Similarly, Gray and Lowery suggest 'linking the study of interest organization populations to the literature on interest organization strategy and leadership' (2000, p.250): linking the population level to the individual group level of analysis. Secondly, they suggest case study histories of individual group development that can explore the way environmental pressures are felt, perceived and interpreted by group leaders or entrepreneurs (Gray and Lowery 2000).²

This paper takes these challenges as its point of departure. There is a gap in the literature that warrants attention. There is an absence of an account of group survival that (i) looks at groups in their totality (is holistic), and (ii) that maps changes in the totality of group organisations over time (focuses on group careers). And there is a consensus that this is necessary. While we know a lot about group formation, influence, mobilisation and maintenance (*aka* incentive management) and now – owing to population ecology – group death, there is little attention paid to plain old 'surviving'. The implication is that groups tread water – imprinted with the logic and form of their birth³. But a significant thread of group scholarship challenges these assumptions. A critical question is not only *do* interest groups survive, but *how do they survive* and in *what organisational form do they survive?*

² This call for well-designed comparative case-study analysis of groups is also echoed by Baumgartner and Leech (1998). The social movement literature has come to a similar conclusion. Clemens and Minkoff (2004, 157) argue that the emerging SMO literature uses comparative historical case studies to underline 'the diversity of ways of organising'.

³ This is a reference to Stinchcombe (1965) who talked of organisations being 'imprinted' with a structure at birth, after which time change is rare.

There are good reasons to aspire to this type of scholarship. A holistic focus on group organisational form implies a concern with overall 'capacities'. A remarkable number of claims are made about the (in)capacities of groups – they are democratising agents (Rosstquetscher 2005) or facilitate strategic policy or governing capacity (Painter and Pierre 2005). Attention to overall organisational form drags the attention of group scholars away from particular fragments of life – influence, mobilisation, or maintenance – and refocuses on overall properties or capacities that group organisations may or may not possess. Attentiveness to *changes* in overall form over a group career reinforces that groups may actually *develop* properties or capacities. In this context some claim that groups are becoming less capable as democratic vehicles (Putnam 2000, Skocpol 1999). To engage in such important debates suggests an attentiveness to 'form' (McCarthy 2005). But group scholars lack just this type of account.

It is somewhat encouraging that the absence of such an approach is not unique to group scholarship. Studies of other political organisations evoke similar demands and calls for a different, and explicitly holistic and historical, organisational approach. But studies of other political organisations do seem better equipped⁴. Party scholars talk of shifts between 'mass' and 'cartel' party 'forms', with each shift in party form instigated by various 'external, internal and networking dilemmas' (Blyth and Katz 2005). Others talk of changes in form over time in terms of party 'careers' (Rose and Mackie 1988). In a related manner social movement studies routinely refers to shifts between 'service', 'advocacy' and protest 'organisational forms' within the lifetimes of individual movement organisations (Minkoff 1994, 1999). These are helpful pointers, but can group studies get close to this kind of account? Can we speak of group 'organisational forms' and of group 'careers'?

Towards a Holistic Analysis of Group Survival

Population ecology has placed the question of group survival on the agenda of group scholars. But, as remarked at the outset, a core limitation of the ecology approach is that, by plotting birth and death, it offers a 'head count' of group survival. It does not detect whether the groups transform or adapt their organisational form to facilitate survival. At any one time it is not clear what organisational configuration groups conform to and thus what capacities groups possess. Population ecology simply registers that at any one time a given group exists. Getting beyond this limit means revisiting assumptions.

This limitation reflects the ecological approaches explicit emphasis on population level analyses. The approach directs analytical attention to aggregate populations, not individual groups, which means such explanations 'purposefully neglect individuals in organizations, decision-

⁴ There is a commitment on their part to loosen the presumptions that Michels and Weber insisted upon in terms of the natural drift to oligarchy and institutionalisation (see Mair 1995; Clemens and Minkoff 2004).

making processes, and the micro-processes linking environments to organizations' (Aldrich 2001, 46). The ecological approach assumes the 'unitary character' of organisations: 'Ecologists tend to treat the coherence of organizations as entities as relatively non-problematic, based on their assumption that organizations are relatively structurally inert' (Aldrich 2001, 45). The approach tends to privilege environmental forces, rather than adaptation, as being decisive in explaining survival. As Aldrich explains, 'The assumption of structural inertia underlies the principle that selection, rather than adaptation, drives population level change. Populations change because of differential mortality, not because organizations live forever by adapting to each change as it comes along' (2001, 45). This leaves the ecological approach open to the criticism that its focus on birth and death events has tended to 'mask unobserved heterogeneity' among organisations (Lounsbury 2005, 93). And, further, that it does not give due emphasis to issues of organisational agency (Rao *et al.* 2000, 238).

Recent group analysis has suggested that, contra the ecology approach, a group account should be developed that emphasises group organisational replication, adaptation, and transformation, and attributes agency to group leaders (Halpin and Jordan 2008). It has been argued that a new account could conceive of group leaders, confronted with ever changing (and probably challenging) environments, as seeking to adapt and transform organizational form in order to continue to survive. By its own admission, the ecological approach underemphasises the significance of organisational adaptation and transformation (via individual group leaders' reactions) in response to challenging environmental conditions. A 'holistic' analysis of interest group organisations is recommended. Attention needs to be paid not just to survival, but to the organisational form that a group survives in. But, the previous section has established that no such account exists explicitly within the group literature. How can this gap be addressed?

Like the population ecology approach, this paper looks to organisational studies to guide the development of a holistic account of group 'careers'. But unlike population ecology, a cue is taken from a different thread within the literature. To generate a different account, we need to look to a different emphasis in organisational studies.

An Account of Organisational Survival: Organisational Form and Careers

The consensus around organisational survival in organisational studies has for some time been that environments or institutional pressures are decisive (see Barnett and Carroll 1997). Crudely put, the organizational ecology strand of organizational theory suggests that environmental forces⁵ select out organisations that do not fit, while the (neo)institutional strand observes the way institutional pressures⁶ encourage organisations

⁵ The 'competitive' pressures outlined by population ecology include, size (and homogeneity of constituency), level of governmental attention and density of like organizations.

⁶ Adopting a (neo)institutionalist perspective (see DiMaggio and Powell 1991), they argue that 'mimetic' pressures (whereby uncertainty leads organizations to resort to tried and

to match conditions (lest they perish). Either way, exogenous forces dictate survival. As argued above, this approach curtails and discourages questions about whether organisations seek to adapt to conditions by changing form. It also downplays organisational agency.

However, the organisational studies literature has come to somewhat of a different consensus around the relationship between environments and organisational survival, including the question of organisational agency and overall form. This offers a way forward for group analysis.

The emerging position on organizational change is well summarised by Scott (2001, 179), who says 'Organizations are affected, even penetrated, by their environments; but they are also capable of responding to these influence attempts creatively and strategically. ... Organizations are creatures of their institutional environments; but most modern organizations are constituted as active players, not passive pawns'. The organizational literature has weakened its emphasis on exogenous forces – environmental selection and institutional adaptation – being decisive in organizational survival. This debate has developed in a direction that talks of organizational *evolution* (see Aldrich 2001). The emphasis is on tracking how organizations change over time, how they 'feel' exogenous environmental and institutional pressures and how such pressures structure their responses⁷.

Returning to the issue of group survival, such a perspective suggests different types of questions. Principal among these is how groups confront changing environmental conditions and adapt to survive. A core challenge of this paper is to generate an account of group change over time, but *in a holistic manner*. But what of holism?

One thread of organisational studies is explicitly concerned with capturing the 'totality' of a given organisation at a point in time. The 'configurational approach' talks of organisations as organisational configurations, patterns, templates, archetypes or forms (Meyer *et al.* 1993). The underlying assumption is that individual organisational characteristics 'take their meaning from the whole and cannot be understood in isolation' (Meyer *et al.* 1993). It is argued that 'organizational structures ... are best understood by analysis of overall patterns rather than by analysis of narrowly drawn sets of organizational properties' (Greenwood and Hinings 1993, 1052). Scholars frame accounts of organizational change in terms of 'periods of convergence and stability punctuated by reorientations of strategy and design' (Greenwood and Hinings 1993, 1053). Thus, *changes* in organisational form over time can be referred as

tested models, thus they imitate existing successful model), 'coercive' pressures (formal and informal pressures by those they are dependant upon to conform to rules or expectations) and 'normative' pressures (professional forms of knowledge create powerful norms that shape behavior) all contribute to the environmental pressures felt by organisations.

⁷ Tsoukas and Chia (2002) review the literature on organisational change and argue for a focus on 'organizational becoming'. They argue for the deployment of organisational ethnography to study how 'forms' are produced by innovations in organisational practices.

organisational 'change pathways' (Erakovic and Powell 2006) or 'tracks' (Greenwood and Hinings 1988).

In this paper the concept 'organisational form' is deployed deliberately to aid the task of holistic analysis of groups. In terms of group analysis, that means we examine types of group 'organizational forms' rather than only one or other group 'characteristics' (e.g. influence strategy, recruitment or maintenance incentive mix). Changes in group 'form' over time equal group 'careers'.

The population ecology approach would accept that organisational forms exist, but would assume that environmental forces select out all but a *single* form that 'matches' the prevailing environment. New forms emerge (are born) just as poorly adapted ones are selected out (they die). Thus, Assuming organisational inertia, ecologists see no need to track how a single organisation changed form. However, the revised account of organisational change above (Aldrich 2001, Scott 2001) has the affect of admitting the possibility – indeed the likelihood – that *multiple* organisational forms will be 'in-play' at any one time. And moreover, that 'there is more than one way [for an organisation] to succeed in each type of setting' (Meyer et al 1993, 1178). Group survival, then, is not about conforming to *the* dominant form, but in simply seeking out forms that offer stability under prevailing conditions. The expectation is for shifts in group form over time, rather than the straightforward choice between 'correct' adaptation and survival or 'incorrect' adaptation and death.

A 'Holistic' Account of Group Survival: Group Organisational Form and Careers

The overall concern of this paper is in getting a better handle on group survival; an account is needed that at least anticipates adaptive behaviour and attributes groups with a modicum of agency to actively seek out survival. Empirical evidence suggests groups stick, but no account really allows exploration of how. The above literature provides a helpful way to develop an account of groups that addresses survival by a holistic attention to form and one that alerts us to significant change over time. This is all very encouraging, but the crucial task here is to specify how one can work with organisational form in a group context.

The configurational approach operationalises 'organisational form' in a diverse range of ways (Meyer et al. 1993)⁸. But the common plank to the approach is in defining the 'core' characteristics or 'elements' of organisations; changes in which will 'flag up' shifts in overall form. The claim made is that changes in 'core' characteristics will usher in or

⁸As the literature makes clear, holistic analysis of organisations through organisational forms is akin to the task of generating 'types' (Greenwood and Hinings 1996; Meyer et al 1993). And, as with types, the identification of organizational forms can be approached in several ways: (a) on the basis of single organizational elements, (b) on the basis of elements derived from theoretical models, (c) on the basis of empirical correlations between organizational elements, (d) on the basis of theoretical/logical correlations between organizational elements, and (e) on the basis of 'embodied' interpretations of real organizational actors.

catalyse a shift in the 'totality' of the organisations, in its organisational form. In SMO research it is common to just use change in organisational 'strategy' as a marker for changes in overall form (Minkoff 1994). In the case of interest groups, identifying core organisational 'characteristics' is quite straightforward.

Definitionally, groups are organisations that engage in public policy influence *and* that mobilise individuals (Jordan, Halpin and Maloney 2004). As outlined above, accounts of group 'life' emphasise the two 'tasks' of policy influence and mobilisation as of central importance (albeit that they are often analysed separately). Moreover, and crucially for this paper, the group literature reminds us that these two tasks of group life are central to defining the *overall organisational dilemmas* that shape group life and exercise the minds of leaders. For instance, Schmitter and Streeck (1981) argue that interest groups must be attentive to a 'Logic of Membership' and a 'Logic of Influence'⁹ and that interest-group organisations must build internal structures that 'respond to both logics equally and simultaneously'. Yet, striking a balance between the two logics is not easy, as they may not be complementary. Fundamental organisational dilemmas for groups will likely emerge from shifts in these characteristics or 'logics'. It is not uncommon for empirical studies of group influence strategies to talk about mobilisation in making their analysis (see Mendes 2003, 87; Maloney et al, 32). Narratives predominately aimed at understanding a group's influence require resort to mobilisation issues. This further suggests that changes in one or other of these characteristics will likely have repercussions for the group organisation as a whole.

This paper proposes an account of group survival which directs attention to individual group level activity. It is argued that groups (particularly those mature groups – already formed) can usefully be conceived as organisations managed by leaders with the aim of securing organisational survival within a changeable environment. The manner in which the tasks of influence and mobilisation are formulated and undertaken constitute the core 'characteristics' that help discern overall group form at any one time. How they are formulated and executed (e.g. what mix of membership incentives or political strategy is pursued) is assumed to be shaped by changeable historical conditions *and* the perceptions, skills and role of leaders/entrepreneurs (and the assumptions they have about what responses will work). Environmental conditions – again interpreted by leaders – can from time to time destabilise the way one or other tasks is executed and thus destabilise the overall group form. These 'organisational dilemmas' catalyse efforts to re-stabilise the group; often resulting in a *new* organisational form. In terms of group 'careers', it is helpful to see groups as undergoing a series of 'initial organisational form' – 'organisational dilemma' – 'response' – 'new organisational form'.

⁹ Schmitter and Streeck (1981) discuss interest groups as having two 'organisational' logics: the 'logic of goal formation' and the 'logic of efficient implementation'. However these logics refer to the way a group develops formal and informal organisational procedures. Given that this paper is developing a framework of the imperatives an interest group may have in terms of its intermediation activities, these logics are not of prime importance.

The organising framework advocated here places an emphasis on looking at changes in interest group 'organisational form' over time as 'responses' to organisational 'dilemmas'. External and internal environmental factors shape (or destabilise) organisational forms of interest groups. This implies, firstly, that groups must change solution over time. Secondly, this, in turn, implies some agency should be attributed to groups. That is, groups should be seen as making sense of these changes and then reorganising themselves. Thirdly, it implies that there would be many organisational forms in play at any one time: as Nownes and Cigler conclude, 'there is no *one* road to group success' (1995, 397).

This paper sets to one side, for now, the issue of defining generic group forms equivalent to the party literature's mass or cartel party. Instead, the core concern is with sensitising scholars to this general lens on survival. If nothing else, the key feature of this account is its orientation to survival. It suggests attentiveness to organisational form, rather than a simple 'head count' of survival. It problematises the activity organisations undertake in an effort to survive. In that respect, it is helpful in reorienting group scholarship. But what can such an account reveal?

The next two sections offer empirical evidence of different group 'careers'. It is an initial attempt to establish that the account developed above prompts new insights when deployed to make sense of empirical cases. These are offered as single case studies sketches, rather than coherent comparative analyses¹⁰. The modest aim is to sensitise group scholars to the possibility that much happens between birth and death; and that development be understood as far more than just influence or mobilisation, or maintenance. The paper concludes by looking at next steps, including elaborating the account and exploring it empirically.

Empirics: The NFF and Resilience of organisational form

Here Australian farm organisations are discussed with respect to the above account of group survival. In particular, the paper considers the National Farmers Federation (NFF) and its largest state farm organisation – the NSW Farmers' Association (NSWFA).

This is a useful case for the purpose of illustration. The NFF has been subject to various positive appraisals from an influence perspective (influential and responsible) and a mobilisation perspective (high membership density) (see Trebeck 1990, 138; Connors 1996, 271). These evaluations, based on a measurement of influence (or even mobilisation), are no doubt correct. But such one off evaluations miss the underlying challenges involved in keeping the NFF family together and ensuring its survival. The case study detail that follows demonstrates how the above account can assist in capturing this set of evolving challenges over an extended period of time.¹¹

¹⁰ Work is currently under way by the author to examine 20 UK group histories by way of organisational biography (Funded by Leverhulme Trust Fellowship 2007-8).

¹¹ The material presented is the result of an extended study of the NFF family of organisations. Access has been secured to internal review documents, which – along with informal discussions and reflections with group office bearers and staff – provide an insight

It is argued that the NFF family can be understood to have undergone three broad phases of development (often corresponding with an internal review process); each sparked by an organizational dilemma (often reflecting shifts in approach to influence and mobilisation); itself catalysed by environmental change de-stabilising preceding (settled) organizational forms. In each case, a revised organisational interest group form is developed. In each instance, the discussions and interpretations of the leadership cohort seem crucial for the direction of change¹². After a brief discussion of group origins, all three phases are summarised below.

Origins: amateur and voluntary

The earliest origins of Australian farm organisations were in the local voluntary groups formed in the late 1800s. Successive state and national organisations were prompted by organised labour, the power of merchants and unstable prices. The period pre WWII saw separate farmers and graziers groups aligned to a country based political party. These disparate groups reflected regional and commodity based cleavages. Arguably, pluralistic group formation reflected varied interests.

In the post WWII era, commodity specific national organizations were involved in clientelistic relations with a dedicated public service to govern a fragmented set of specific industry assistance measures. Bell (1994, p.142) notes about this period, that business interests worked through old-boy networks direct to 'clientelistic' ministers, and proposals were unsophisticated and unresearched. That they were accompanied by rhetorical claims of the importance of business and the need for government to listen (targeted at appeasing members) did not threaten group access or influence. Leaders could attempt to appease members and policy makers at the same time.

First phase of development: professionalising influence

The 1960s and 70s marked a period that *destabilised* the preceding organisational form. In the 1960s pressure grew from government for Australian farmers to speak with one voice. Disunity and inconsistency amongst farm groups, it was asserted, would leave government with no other choice but to act on departmental advice or the advice of other more professional and cohesive sectors¹³. In the 1970s, the need for a coordinated, professional and credible political representative was further underlined by the creation of the Industries Assistance Commission (IAC) to review assistance levels, the cessation of National Party patronage, and

into the way leadership cohorts identify and interpret environmental changes, define organizational dilemmas and mount responses.

¹² And of course the discussion is also crucial for the lack of change – while the account emphasises adaptation and change led by leaders, it should not be forgotten that the 'non' decision (the decision not to change) to defend the status quo is crucial in and of itself. It emphasises the 'intra-organizational' dimension of change (see Greenwood and Hinings 1996).

¹³ See the strong debate over the pros and cons of unity; Campbell (1971, pp. 148-160); Campbell (1972, pp. 91-92); Corbett (1972, pp. 88-90); Harman & Smith (1967, pp. 66-82). Harman (1972, pp. 87-88).

the growing influence of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) (Warhurst, 1982).

These changes catalysed an *organizational dilemma*. It destabilized the plethora of semi-professional commodities and state based groups that each operated successfully in their niches. To maintain policy influence the groups needed to become better resourced and speak with a cohesive industry voice. Faced with such external challenges, internal issues, such as the duplication of work, and maintenance of group offices in close geographical proximity to one another, became issues for open debate.

In response, a first wave of *reform* was undertaken. They were largely at the inter-organizational level, aimed at creating a system of interest representation that would accommodate the demands of the political system. The process can be characterized by professionalisation, unification and centralization (Warhurst 1994). Unification was via amalgamations of the plethora of state, commodity and regional groups under the NFF in July, 1979. Branching off the NFF are state farm organisations (SFOs) and commodity councils (CCs). The NFF centralised activities in Canberra, the national capital. The NFF, and more importantly its SFOs, had the resources to hire permanent professional staff and economic experts to replace the small bands of often elected amateur leaders.

Internal reviews and debate at Annual Conferences of state farm groups at the time make clear that group leaders actively read the challenges they faced and debated the options for a response. In his presidential address to the 1966 NSW Graziers' Association Annual Conference, Bruce Wright warned that unity would benefit politicians more than primary producers by 'force[ing] into a common organisation interests which are not ideologically homogenous' (op.cit. Connors 1996, 121). Despite these arguments, amalgamations went ahead. The ultimate settlement, then, was constructed the around leaders' view that organising to pursue influence was more important than privileging the organisational expression of diverse interests.

In a departure from the policy pursued by the previous collection of separate federal commodity organisations, the NFF policy agenda emphasised macro-economic reform in preference to the reform of specific agricultural policies. To be influential in the general economic policy area, farm interest groups adopted a different approach to policy-making. Table thumping, intimidation and threats were (largely) replaced by rational economic argument, researched policy positions and the expectation that all interested parties will have to give ground to reach consensus. This role has assisted a managed change in the paradigm underpinning general agricultural policy (Keating and Dixon 1989, Coleman and Skogstad 1995, Wonder 1995). Leaders recognised this and explicitly reinforced the case for change (see McGauchie, 1995)

In terms of mobilisation, SFOs – those with direct farmer members – emphasised few selective material incentives beyond the usual magazine, access to farm insurance and advice on legal/employment matters.

Recruitment campaigns were often run by local members and couched in pursuit of joint policy goals and emotive references.

Second phase of development: professionalising mobilisation

While the NFF family structure was firmly established, its first decade and a half was characterised by wide scale unrest in the farming constituency. It was subject to the first signs of *destabilisation*. Leaders conducted advocacy in a more de-politicised and remote manner; their 'responsible' and measured approach was a precursor for access. But this also risked mobilisation efforts. The policies of the NFF were linked to rapid re-structuring and economic hardship. Alternative farm groups emerged¹⁴ seeking to unseat the NFF: none succeeded. Yet, the NFF was suffering a decline in membership and subject to heightened public criticism. This threatened resource levels and reputation (including authoritativeness). It needed to re-stabilise the professionalised advocacy model it was committing itself to.

The second *organisational dilemma* emerged from the instability in the NFF organisational form.

Analysis of the NFF leadership's review of its future (in the mid 1990s) acknowledged much of this analysis. It recognised a feedback loop between its policy strategy and membership dissatisfaction about levels of representation. It accepted that the grassroots felt distant from the leadership given that the majority of farmers did not understand the issues they pursued (NFF 1994, 4). The NFF also acknowledged that its new policy approach required more time of office bearers which meant that older and wealthier farmers were more likely to be involved (NFF 1994, 11). Additionally, it recognised that the range of issues in which organisations were involved was likely to create 'a heavy reliance on staff for policy development.' (NFF 1994, 11). The final implication of this policy role, was an increased demand for financial resources (NFF 1994, 13).

A second wave of *reforms* were planned and executed in the mid-1990s. The NFF family – in fact, its state organisations that have direct members – pursued intra-organisational reforms to stabilise support while *continuing* its insider strategy and neo-liberal policy platform. A flurry of consultancies, reports, strategic plans and reviews were conducted by the NFF family, which illustrate the assumptions and plans of leaders¹⁵. Analysis of these highlights two related sets of responses: i) formal organisational change and ii) discursive devices.

The organisational element of the reform strategy involved setting *quantitative* membership targets, the development of a *product* which can be marketed, the sophisticated and aggressive *marketing* of

¹⁴ Among them the Graingrowers of Australia, Canowindra Reform Group and Womens' Rural Action Group.

¹⁵ The NFF produced 'NFF Review: Issues paper' (NFF 1994) and 'NFF Strategic Plan' (NFF 1996b), whilst the NSWFA commissioned 'What are we here for?' (Michels Warren Pty Ltd 1993) and the SAFF produced the 'Strategic Plan 1997-2002' (SAFF 1997b). These represent the most significant documents available to the author.

membership (as a revenue neutral decision), *broadening* the membership base and the reallocating of significant levels of *resources* to support the recruitment of members (see Halpin 1997 for details). For the NSWFA at least, membership levels stabilised and then rose.

Several discursive strategies were crucial to the effectiveness of the above¹⁶. The NFF family constructed a *division of labour* between members and the group. It was asserted that the NFF provided a 'competitive economic environment' within which farmers survived according to their individual acumen (NFF 1994, 3; Comensoli 1995b, 2). This effectively privatises failure and protects against widespread generalisation of specific farm failures (that have historically fanned internal revolts).

The evidence from internal review documents – written by or commissioned for group leadership cohorts – shows these were explicitly designed as processes to deliver strategies to stabilise the group. The emergent second *organisational form* is one where members are largely remote from real policy determinations, policy strategy remains insider focussed and both influence and mobilisation tasks are highly professionalised. Members can and do participate in branches, regions and annual conferences. However analysis shows that most conference motions that are passed emerge from the leadership cohort. Branches are often poorly attended, and levels of accountability are, therefore, not operating at lower levels (see Halpin 1999). For many, mobilisation is about access to services on a value for money basis. This form did place limits on the capacity of the NFF family. The remoteness of members from the leadership meant that it was difficult to manage their mobilisation; members could easily run off script or act in inopportune ways. This has become more evident given the state's desire, as elaborated on below, to engage directly with farm communities (see Halpin 2002)

A third phase of development?

Instability in second phase *reforms* seems to be raising the prospect of a new (third) *organizational dilemma*. Key destabilising trends in the group environment include, the government consulting farming constituencies independently of the NFF family (and promoting fragmented associative structures); the rising heterogeneity of the farming constituency (undermining messages about farms as businesses); and, the experimentation with other forms by NFF members. The NFF family is facing problems in sustaining its existing stance to both mobilisation and influence.

As previously, reviews have been instituted internal to the NFF family; a third *reform* phase seems immanent. There is almost overwhelming acceptance amongst NFF leaders that the organisation has outlived its

¹⁶ In conceptualising these types of responses, the 'supply-side' literature on political participation and group joining is particularly helpful and illuminating (Jordan and Maloney 1997).

original design. The Vice President, putting it diplomatically, said 'The NFF and state farming organisations are basically in the same mould now that was struck back in the 1970s. In the past 25 years agriculture and agribusiness in general has evolved, so it doesn't hurt periodically to do some self analysis, and to have a reality check.' (Morse 2001c). In terms of the NFF career, it sounds like a radical change is in the offing.

The most prominent proposal is for a unitary organisation, called Australian Farmers, to replace the current federated structure (Morse 2001b)¹⁷. In a sense it recognises a similar raft of issues to that which sparked the second wave of reforms, but this time it contemplates the wholesale reorganization of the system of farmer representation¹⁸. Not unexpectedly, the proposal has failed to garner the support of the member organisations of the NFF who fear loss of control to the centre (Morse, C. 2001b). Debate continues on how best to rationalise the structure¹⁹.

The resting point, a third *organisational form*, is as yet unclear. A competitor to the NFF seems implausible. Instead various forms of organisation are being tested. The NFF has already participated in forming the Agrifood Awareness Australia, an organisation dedicated to educating the public on the gene technology²⁰. Some pursue a think tank style – the Australian Farm Institute has been formed with loose links to NSWFA. Others see a renewal of commodity based groups (a return to early 20th century patterns?). Some still see a broader rural constituency as of sufficient size to sustain a general group structure. Still others see value in a group pursuing interests of viable and productive farmers: removed of the vocal 'rump' who are under pressure to leave the industry. Farm groups are also reportedly involved in 'borrowing' the organisational form of 'competitors' in order to better fight contentious political issues.²¹

Summary

The case of the NFF establishes the resilience of an established group to changing and challenging circumstances. While from outside it looks like a very influential and well supported group, there is a lot of hard peddling going on to keep it afloat. The NFF, and its member body the NSWFA, has

¹⁷ The document is not in the public domain, but was made available to the author by the NFF on condition it not be directly quoted.

¹⁸ The plan was for all SFOs to become divisions of a new national farmer body called Australian Farmers. The proposal explicitly identifies challenges as the irrevocable decline of the farmer subscription base, the heterogeneity amongst its constituency, the struggle to keep up with ballooning and diverse issues agenda, competition from other groups and the decline in staffing and resources to unacceptable levels. It also devotes considerable time to discussing the organisational barriers within the NFF to optimizing existing resources and skills.

¹⁹ The emerging compromise is for incremental change, including constitutional change to make it easier for emerging industries to join as associate members, a reduction in the scope of issues pursued, and a diversification of funding sources.

²⁰ It membership is the NFF, AVCARE (representing manufacturers of crop production and veterinary health products) and the Grains Research and Development Corporation (GRDC) (an organisation funded by grain grower levies that commissions grain R&D).

²¹ The Australian Environmental Foundation reportedly has involvement of farming constituency and is an echo of the ACF.

had a colourful group 'career' spanning at least three reform phases. After discarding the fragmented beginnings of primary producer organisation, the NSWFA/NFF has developed over its career but mostly in order to make an established form resilient to difficult environmental conditions. The NFF case is therefore valuable for providing a hint at the nuance with which leaders engage in organisational and discursive strategies to change form and survive. This dimension of group development is not well explored or accounted for in the literature, but on this account seems worth the effort.

By briefly examining the development of farm interest groups in Australia, this article has illustrated that (i) form has changed, and (ii) hinted at the way it has changed. Environmental changes have destabilised the way tasks like influence and mobilisation are done, and group leaders have weighed up options and reacted to sustain the group. In reviewing the history of group development in this field, it becomes apparent what would be missed from existing accounts reviewed at the outset. Registering policy 'success', or merely plotting group 'head counts' over time, misses a rich story of survival. And, as becomes evident, the development of group organisational 'form' in this particular case has implications for the capacities of the group, in representational and policy implementation terms. This supports the value of a holistic account of changes in organisational form over time.

Empirics: Some 'radical' cases

As the RNIB case, mentioned in the introduction, illustrates, change need not be of such a modest nature. Analysed at a rather less detailed level of resolution, what follows illustrates how groups can radically change their form over their 'careers'.

The Australian Conservation Foundation: A similar quite radical change is evident in the case of the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF). As Warhurst (1994) explains, the ACF commenced life as a "semi-scientific body"...and drew upon the upper echelons of scientists in government and universities' (p. 77). It had active AGMs, and contested elections for a board which then set strategic direction. Post 1970s, it pursued a more radical 'green' agenda and tactics, and opened up its membership to a mass public. In the latest period covered, Warhurst explains how the ACF appointed a lawyer to Director and a rock star as its President. The organisation for senior scientists had become a mass affiliation group pursuing an environmental agenda. The ACF started life as a group of professional ecologists concerned with environment; its legitimacy arising from the democratically derived view of its professional membership. It has ended as a group pursuing affiliations with supporters and generating an attentive mass public to show solidarity with nature. Warhurst (1994) notes that while 'The culture of the organisation is participative...the leadership has tended to overshadow the membership...' (p. 82). Indeed, the ACF itself now talks of supporters and volunteers; its web site does not explicitly show how a 'member' can actually influence the group direction. That the ACF has changed its overall form in a fundamental manner is beyond dispute.

Federation of Small Businesses (UK):

This observation regarding Australian farm associations applies equally to other groups. The FSB in the UK has been subject to similar claims of success and insiderism (see Ramsden 2002, 246), with its radical increase in membership also noted (in total and density terms). Yet, closer inspection from a holistic 'career' view finds a different story. A study of the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) shows that in its initial formation phase – then called the National Federation of the Self Employed (NFSE) – recruitment was through personal contacts and policy stance emphasised belligerent pursuit of policy goals. The early success of the group faded as the initiating issue of National Insurance charges for small businesses receded. The largely activist led and outsider style influence strategy continued, but the recruitment was professionalized and the group developed a mass membership organisation, predicated on selective incentives (Jordan and Halpin 2004, pp. 447-8). Subsequent to that, the FSB shifted its policy approach, pursuing a more insider stance, moderating its tone and tactics (Jordan and Halpin 2003). Yet, the FSB remains one of the few UK business organisations that has remained activist dominated. Unlike the CBI, of Business Chambers, which are predominantly run by paid staff, the FSB still relies mostly on paid activists elected by popular vote of members. That the FSB is starting to move to a more fully staff run venture has created tensions (Jordan and Halpin 2004).

These brief vignettes confirm a need to push for a better way to understand organisations as changing organisational forms. Each case shows different types of challenges and adaptations in group careers that incorporate quite clear cut shifts in overall form. These shifts have implications for group capacity. The NFSE was not helpful in policy formulation or implementation, with its outsider style and lack of resources. The present FSB is far more capable in that sense, but not well suited to mobilising members. The ACF was at the outset a good reference point for scientifically formulated positions on conservation, endorsed by expert consensus. But it was less able to prosecute international campaigns and mobilise a mass membership for causes. The endorsement of the current ACF for policy proposals is less about attaching a veneer of scientific respectability, but it is more able to confirm widespread societal support.

Conclusions and Next Steps

This paper is a tentative first step towards pursuing a more satisfactory account of what groups do when they 'merely' survive. Organisational ecology offers a 'head count' of surviving groups, but says little about the activity underpinning survival. Scholars in organisational ecology suggest a need to develop a more holistic account of individual group life, and one that is attentive to change over time. Recent group scholarship encourages this direction, and suggests attention to the role of leaders in adapting and transforming group form to survive challenging environments.

The paper has made several arguments that are worth recalling.

Firstly, the paper argues that group scholarship is inattentive to development and survival, instead preoccupied with formation and mortality. And further, that influence, mobilisation and maintenance accounts are helpful but insufficient statements for exploring the issue of group development holistically.

Secondly, the paper proposed that making progress on a holistic account of survival necessitated taking a different theoretical approach to organisational survival. Rather than population ecology assumptions of group submission to environmental selection pressures, this article pursued inspiration from an emerging thread in organisational studies, both configurational and evolutionary. It was proposed that organisations can be understood holistically through mapping 'organisational forms'. Further, it was proposed that group organisations be attributed with some agency in mediating environmental change. In the case of group organisations, dilemmas around influence and mobilisation provoke broader organizational dilemmas and thus shifts in overall organisational form. It is possible to track the way leaders interpret change and deal with dilemmas in terms of organisational adaptation and reform. This string of changes constitutes a group career. The organising framework advocated here places an emphasis on looking at changes in interest group 'organisational form' over time as 'responses' to organisational 'dilemmas'; themselves catalysed by changeable internal and external environments.

Thirdly, the paper operationalised the approach to group organisational form and careers. In pinpointing changes in form this paper stuck to a very loose formulation. Disruption of and subsequent changes in group orientations to both influence and mobilisation tasks are taken as 'bellwethers' of emerging organisational dilemmas and changes in overall form. In the NFF case, this approach seems to have revealed much. When appraised from either a solely influence or mobilisation account, the NFF was routinely deemed an exemplar of a successful group. Ecology inspired 'head counts' would confirm 'mere' survival. By contrast, the holistic account of form and career revealed a great deal of effort going into survival related questions: endless reviews, reorganization of influence and mobilization tasks, and both organizational and discursive strategies to stabilise the group.

While the NFF had a career within a rather narrow range, there is ample evidence that groups have vastly different types of 'careers'. The cases of RNIB, ACF and FSB, establish that change can and does occur in group organisational form. It makes sense to examine survival in terms of changes between organisational forms, and to speak of group organisational 'careers'.

Next Steps?

The purpose of this paper is to argue for a fresh account of group survival; with an explicit holistic focus on groups as organisations that

change over time. The approach that is offered points to a different account of groups – a different image that may drive the types of questions asked about groups. But clearly, if such an account is accepted as reflecting an important – but understudied – dimension of group life, there is much that can be done to develop it beyond this modest start.

A logical development is to arrive at a set of labels of overall organisational forms, and elements/characteristics of organisational forms, that could inform analysis of a larger clutch of groups. In this paper, the framework uses two characteristics, influence and mobilisation, as bellwethers of change in group form. This approach seems to be a useful start, particularly when considering a single case in some detail²². But when deploying an approach to map numerous group careers, a more formalised approach may prove necessary. In terms of organisational characteristics or elements, the literature on organisational configurations suggest a focus on 'interpretive schemes', 'systems' and 'structures' (Greenwood and Hinings 1993). Elaborating these in more detail may be a useful step. The issue of labels for overall group organisational forms is perhaps more problematic.

With only one detailed case, and given the variation (noted above) among groups (compared to parties), it would be speculative to say the least to propose a similar series of group organisational forms to match that produced by Katz and Blyth for parties. Generalisations are likely to be more tenuous in group scholarship²³. This being said, groups scholarship must surely be concerned with working towards such generalisations. There is some organizational form-like 'talk' in the literature. In the US, Robert Putnam (2000, 49) has identified the emergence of 'mass-membership' organisations, but seeks to convey by this term additional features of a dominant group secretariat, passive supporters, and limited face-to-face contact. A similar set of attributes is conveyed by Theda Skocpol (1999, 463) who contrasts 'old federations' and 'new movements'. In the UK, Jordan and Maloney (1997), for example, label some interest groups as 'protest businesses'. This is intended to convey the tendency in large public interest groups to pursue mass supportership, a mix of influence strategies, a scientific research base for advocacy, media savvy campaigning, in tandem with deploying business management and membership marketing methods. These various terms seek to address holism: to bundle together organisational characteristics or elements in unique ways. This is useful, but caution is required to ensure they do are not absorbed back into the literature as shorthand for one *single* characteristic (i.e. public interest group = campaign business).

One approach is to generate a reference case – accepting that this is rather arbitrary – from which subsequent cases can be compared and contrasted. To some extent, this paper provides a few cases that may trigger comparison.

²² In fact, the SMO literature satisfies itself with an overall measure of change in 'strategy' as an indicator of change in overall form (advocacy, protest or service) (Minkoff 1999). So by this measure the approach in this paper is quite sophisticated.

²³ While party scholars are able to quite easily identify the key players and to examine changes in organisational structures and logics, the task is far greater for groups.

But the more necessary development is the comparative analysis of groups confronting *similar* conditions. How do careers of similar groups vary, and why? An obvious iteration of the above approach is to choose cases with sensitivity to context (to sector or field). The cases explored above are drawn at the author's convenience. But the literature on unions, patient groups, business or trade associations, farmers unions, all point to *specific* challenges – exogenous and endogenous – in carrying out tasks highlighted as *generic* to groups. This suggests group development should be analysed among *like-groups* using case study life histories. This will better integrate population level analysis with individual group accounts (as is the suggestion of Gray and Lowery 1996/2000).

An additional development in terms of studying group form, would be capturing the discursive element. While configurational approaches tend to see form in terms of formal characteristics – which may be evident in organisational diagrams – the discursive or framing element is crucial (see Clemens 1996). The NFF example established that stabilising changes in form entailed the framing of key (re)organisational dimensions. The formal rules about membership and participation remained the same, but 'talk' changed.

But perhaps the most challenging task is to move towards more detailed explanations for changes in group form over time in individual groups. Not just defining 'resting points' within careers, but explaining the *direction* that groups move in. In that respect, embedding this work in the broader organisational studies literature, configurational and evolutionary, is useful. It provides some theoretical infrastructure with which to guide future elaboration of this basic account. For instance, the configurational studies approach suggests that the experience of leaders and the models they perceive as both 'in-play' and legitimate is crucial to how organisational forms develop (Greenwood and Hinings 1996). Thus, we could be more attentive to the impact of the professionalisation of group staff (and CEOs) in diffusion of organisational forms. The work of Associations of Association Directors (and the like), could surely contribute to some level of convergence in group forms evident within certain fields of activity.

There is much more to be done.

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