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Institutional liminality, ideological pluralism, and the pragmatic behaviours of a 'transition entrepreneur'

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Abstract

We report the results of a qualitative longitudinal case study that lends credence not only to the need to reflect on competing values and outcomes of the politics and legitimation processes involved in practicing "food justice". The study highlights ideological pluralism, pragmatism and compromise inherent to the actually occurring experiences of actors involved in organisations ostensibly created to serve a food justice agenda. This has implications for the sort of academic filters prefigured into analytical frameworks for the study of transition processes. Such filters may pre-empt criteria against which practices are judged legitimate or indeed 'effective'. We draw on two distinct bodies of literature exhibiting useful complementarities and develop an argument around the idea of 'liminal transition spaces' where the institutional arrangements of an organisation may be deemed futile or unattainable, but their substitution remains uncertain. Firstly, 'institutional logics' and secondly, pragmatist sociology is used to advance the idea of institutional liminality, and to open a debate on the role and long-term sustainability of transition entrepreneurship among pluralist organisations.

Keywords

Cooperative, transition, food justice, pragmatism, pluralism, legitimacy, liminality

1. Introduction

In a radically dynamic and uncertain organisational environment, the social innovativeness associated with framings of alterity are in a constant state of flux. Organisational claims to alterity are often reliant on the socio-economic-cultural structures that they seek to challenge, or from which they

ultimately want to transition. This presents a number of challenges to the institutional logics by which organisations establish their legitimacy as a set of practices. In other words, these challenges are expressed in the processes through which such legitimacy is determined, contested and ultimately validated in the face of varying, inter-changeable justifications for the decisions or actions taken by an organisation. The proselytization of mission and the means by which organisational decisions are embraced are important here, but equally so when they seemingly contradict the mission or principal drive of an organisation.

We argue the latter aspect deserves greater attention. How does a social enterprise with a set of ideals operate in a neoliberal society when justice is not apportioned through markets? This is a particularly pertinent question for organisations such as food enterprises and alternative food networks advocating food justice. Can we have a "market" for food justice? These questions challenge assumptions that a coherent set of institutional logics can be identified and then used to distinguish one organisation from another - in so far as claims to alterity and socio-ecologically progressive agendas are concerned (c.f., Rosol, 2020; Holt-Giménez and Wang, 2011). Furthermore, the frequency by which organisations undertake pragmatist approaches to their everyday decisions amounts to a pluralism of logics and values that challenge academic assumptions concerning the influence of hegemonic structures, or universal narratives around organisational agency.

Local food initiatives have enjoyed widespread goodwill, including from much of the research community, which plays a part in explaining the tone and orientation of a large swathe of literature considering this type of activity (see Cadieux and Slocum, 2015; Agyeman and McEntee, 2014; Connelly et al., 2011). This literature includes activities that seek to address access to ethical food and to provide alternatives to supermarkets, as well as to advocate the adoption of progressive consumption policies (e.g., 'food miles', pesticide use etc.). Taken together, many scholars and groups of transition entrepreneurs wish to 'challenge the dominant resource-based profligacy of neo-liberalism' (Marsden and Franklin, 2013, p. 641). Regardless of any pre-disposition towards such activity, it is incumbent

on academic researchers to understand how and why such enterprises operate, and indeed how they struggle, survive or even fail.

We examine the implications for the sort of filters prefigured into analytical frameworks that may pre-empt criteria against which the good/better practice of these organisations can or should be assumed, judged legitimate or indeed regarded as 'effective'. The *pragmatism* expressed in the survival tactics of one ideologically driven social enterprise is neither absent of principles nor apolitical and features forms of learning and proselytization that are discussed here. This is enabled through reporting on a longitudinal study of the True Food Community Cooperative (TFC) operating in Reading, England. Our interest in this organisation lies in a combination of its mission and the modalities it has pursued; that is, what TFC has aimed to achieve and how this has been implemented. The TFC mission involves a mixture of enabling fair and affordable access to organic, fairtrade, local foods and other ecologically sound household items "for all the people of the [TFC] community indiscriminately". This mission, as well as being environmentally responsible, also sets out to promote community building and education activities while maintaining a community service ethic in "the interests of the community [Reading] that the Co-operative is established to serve" (TFC, 2019a). This positions TFC as a replacement for the state while operating within the logics of market-based commerce. Central to this mission are the "values" TFC outlines as part of its ethical and environmental performance criteria, e.g., transparent decision-making and pricing procedures, waste reduction, and its promotion of material and resource efficiency through "suppliers whose ingredients, products or packaging do not contain genetically modified organisms (GMO)" (TFC, 2019b).

Such aims may not be unique but, despite attention to both mission and the modalities or performances of such organisations in food movements, the effectiveness of such enterprises has not been examined fully. This is partly because of the dominant promotional inflection of previous research in this area. Secondly the wider literature problematises attempts to extrapolate organisational effects from observations of teleological claims and justifications in specific situations and their

'effectiveness'; especially given the difficulties of benchmarking, measurement and comparison (Herman and Renz, 2008). Though, over time, it is the *collective effect* of these individual responses that institutionalise and determine what is legitimate or not within a given field of organisational activity (Cloutier and Langley, 2013, p. 375).

We argue that such incidences are in some sense *political*; that is, such contestations are not exceptional, but rather a frequent and normal occurrence of the institutional life of organisations while strategizing in these pluralistic contexts (Denis et al., 2007). For these *pluralistic organisations,* Kraatz and Block (2008) stress that it is how such institutional entanglements, which embody collective norms or practices as contested, push back and/or absorb competing claims. This poses a particular challenge for the study of NPOs (Non-Profit Organisations)/Food Co-ops where it is often assumed that there is an explicit and unified or determined strategic direction (c.f., Herman and Renz, 2008). In pluralistic contexts, we assert that these intra-, and inter-organisational relational processes can depart from one set of institutionalised practices and power dynamics to another. However, our understanding of the instances where organisations find themselves at such a threshold, or at the institutional liminality of previous and desired alternative ways of knowing and doing remains poorly understood.

TFC has acted as a rallying point for food activists and those inclined to participate in the transition movement locally. It has its origins in a small local food-buying group set up by its initiators in 1999, having set out to enable access to organic and fairtrade food and household products at more affordable prices. This enterprise developed and grew into, what was at its peak, a novel 'hub and spoke' food retail operation, involving a retail unit and system of daily pop-up local markets spread around the locality. This manifestation of TFC won a BBC food and farming award in 2011. The model has featured a mix of volunteers and staff and taken together, the approach has been recognised as an innovative retail and buying model that has attracted considerable attention in policy and practice circles (Penzkofer, 2017; Smith et al., 2012; Pearson et al., 2011; Sustain, 2008).

TFC drew on wider sets of socially progressive agendas; though its ability to judge "success", on the terms set by the members themselves, is doubtful (see Feola and Nunes, 2014; Pearson et al., 2011). Observations of the blurred organisational performance of transition can be attributed to what Burnett and Nunes (2021) refer to as "'*liminal transition spaces'* between a previously understood way of knowing and doing, and a new way of actually delivering the mission of an organisation. These transition spaces constitute institutionally liminal sets of intra-, and inter-organisational relations "where [the] ground rules dictating socio-political norms are unclear, and collaborative actions are potentially working at cross-purposes and/or multiple forms of power are exercised simultaneously" (*ibid*.: p11). Such situations test the deliverability of an organisation's mission.

Longstanding accounts of how volunteer organisations struggle with appropriate skills and competencies and how this can lead to problems in managing an enterprise is a factor in this appreciation of institutionally liminal relations, which is less well rehearsed in the transition or food justice literature, for example (Cairns et al., 2005). This type of critical appreciation is necessary if we are to understand how such organisations and the activities that they perform are to survive, be resilient, and deliver at least some quotient of mission and to possibly grow and flourish while learning. In the particular case of TFC, the mission connects it to parts of a wider food quality and access agenda within a field of equity, health and food justice. The only published account of TFC in 2011 simply assessed the motives and attitudes of consumers in the period 2004-2009 at the 'scale-up' stage of its existence (Pearson et al., 2011).

2. Methods

The above gaps in research prompted our consideration of Cornforth's (2004, p. 27) call for "longitudinal case studies, which examine the relationship dynamics between boards and managers and how they attempt to tackle the problems and [ethical] dilemmas they face". The paper is based on participant observation, documentary analysis, and in-depth interviews. The former aspects involved

direct access to the month-by-month operations, meeting minutes, business plan iterations, the constitution and governance of TFC in the period 2008-2015, which provided useful and unique insights (Vinten, 1994), adding to the cumulative and day-to-day working knowledge about this type of organisation (Herman and Renz, 2008, p. 400). This also relied on the participant observation experiences of a director of TFC (2008-2015). The participant experience provides a candid account of the chronic difficulties of maintaining mission and existential survival in an uncompromising business environment. In addition, key interviews with chairs and directors of the TFC Board of Trustees over the period studied (2008-2019) were used to discuss changes to the mission and divergences in practice, and to explore key moments and issues. The approach provides a multi-level perspective on the relationships between levels of agency – society, field, individual or organisation – that drive agendas and the related practices of acquiring and maintaining or justifying the legitimacy of the organisation.

As a result, we reflect difficult organisational choices made between an adherence to TFC's mission versus its survival and the negotiation or compromise over competing logics and ethical justifications for particular actions. Below, we apply a theoretical framework for the study of pluralist organisations, like TFC, and pragmatic organisational behaviour. The research findings are presented, followed by a discussion of the micro-politics that such a pluralist organisation faces with reflections on the implications for further research.

3. Theoretical framework

In volunteer-led organisations the mission and values are set by volunteers and members who may not hold the range of competencies that a 'successful' organisation or initiative may require (Feola and Nunes, 2014), or who may not possess the levels and types of knowledge conducive to informed decision-making. The research literature points to a number of institutional variables or relationships that may affect the performance and behaviour of social enterprises. These include organisational size,

board characteristics, turbulence in its resource environment, strategy, and changes in structure, mission and client mix (see Stone et al., 1999). Issues of scale and questions of direct control of a cooperative also appear relevant. Literature on the NPO sector has focussed on governance and management from a traditional organisational governance perspective, with Cornforth (2004) arguing that:

> '…much of this literature has been prescriptive in nature and aimed at addressing the perceived shortcomings of governing bodies. However, it has been criticised for oversimplifying the problems, underestimating the conflicting demands and pressures that board members face, and presenting 'idealistic or heroic' solutions that are consequently difficult to implement in practice' (Cornforth, 2004, p. 12).

This criticism has merit and highlights how numerous factors impact on small volunteer-led organisations with 'complicated and challenging' member-specific aspirations or worldviews (Herman and Renz, 2008, p. 412) influencing the aims and dynamics of an organisation. Such attributes often can be associated with the 'social value creation mission [of social enterprises, which] does not necessarily negate nor diminish a focus on economic value' (Dacin et al., 2011, p. 1205). Ehrnström-Fuentes (2015) contend that multiple notions can emerge from a collective imaginary and also what is socially or morally legitimate for different stakeholder groups in different contexts.

In this context, non-profits and their counterparts deliberate the legitimacy of their practice in a way that many mainstream business organisations may not. The pursuit for legitimacy features in the literature on NPOs, fairtrade organisations, consumer-citizenship and ethical consumption, which emerged in the 1990s from an interest in ethical, alternative food networks (see Goodman and Goodman, 2009; Gutham and DuPuis, 2006; Parker, 1999 for relevant reviews). Escobar (2001) further notes that this sense-making is connected to a perceived idea of the "common good" as well as to positively impacting on the places where these groups are located. This reflects a "place-based consciousness", or "a place-specific way of "endowing the world with meaning" (Escobar, 2001, p. 153) rooted in particular notions of right action. This process of place-based sense-making can be seen in the long-held concerns with global food security and its nexus with 'food sustainability'.

Again, these sense-making processes are a response to locally perceived issues often found to be the result of dominant economic models of production, particularly where it concerns the environment, ethics and health (Maye, 2019; Lang and Barling, 2012), against which debates over the role, impact, durability and *legitimacy* of a range of local "alternative" initiatives and practices, operating within a capitalist framework, are debated (c.f., Holloway et al., 2010; Guthman, 2007). While institutional analysis delineates conventional versus alternative food practices, it has tended to aid a downplaying of agency and of pragmatism. That is, logics are often parsed across different domains or fields of organisational activity e.g., alternative versus conventional; local versus global.

Rather, we contend that organisations put into practice a plurality of institutional logics in instances that demand a *justification* for their actions over time. Therefore, there is a need to consider the ideological mission of organisations, to examine the paradox of mission versus survival (Brown, 1985) which, as we argue, also reflects a tension between learning and proselytizing. That is, the institutional resourcefulness of such organisations in the face of a necessary sustaining of 'alternative' enterprises, in competitive business environments, is critical. This is especially so where it concerns organisations adopting positions that refuse to mimic mainstream competition, and who often attempt to do so with limited resources and gaps in skills and knowledge. The fundamental question becomes *how an organisations' recursive efforts to sustain its legitimacy are negotiated and compromised, and why*. This recurrence of varying institutional challenges to an organisation's legitimacy within re-occurring 'instantiations of transition', is precisely where the explanatory power of institutional logics is limited.

The work of Boltanski and Thevenot ([1991] 2006) on sociological pragmatism below, helps address this limitation. This work offers an alternative perspective on organisations as "pluralist". It recognises that agency can alternate between multiple, oftentimes contradictory, justifications during instances of negotiation and compromise over organisational missions for [food] sustainability transition. Also, it offers useful insights into the wider literature that seeks to conceptualise the idea of

power in sustainability transitions (c.f., Burnett and Nunes, 2021; Avelino 2017; Bos and Brown, 2014).

3.1 Pluralist organisations and pragmatic organisational behaviour

Critique and problematisation can aid progressive projects, and accounts of a wide variety of initiatives and activities, which are developing from 'below' or as part of wider social movements (Della Porta and Diani, 2009; Larana, 2009; Wekerle, 2004; Castells, 1983). Debates in the local food literature have developed with a variety of issues being identified, including the conceptual limits of the 'local' (Dunne et al., 2011; Harris, 2010; Feagan, 2007), and the questionable alterity of many 'food justice' and 'ethical food' activities (Holloway et al., 2010). This diverse literature also identifies the ephemerality of such initiatives and activities (Cucco and Fonte, 2015), and a lack of resilience (Franklin et al., 2011). Innovative or transition practices have been identified as susceptible to appropriation by mainstream economic actors (Denis et al., 2013), such as supermarkets (see, for example, Marsden and Franklin, 2013; Goodman et al., 2011), which can undermine a mission of fostering "localised" food systems that correspond to at least some of the ideals promoted by social entrepreneurs such as TFC.

Boltanski and Thevenot ([1991] 2006) offer a framework that has been recognised widely as a seminal contribution to pragmatist sociology. They stress an appreciation of the *instantiations* within which organisations identify reasoned justifications for decisions taken in the face of social conflict. This body of work focuses on the interactions between individuals and institutions with its primary focus of analysis at the level of wider society. The authors offer a framework that constitutes an array of "worlds" or "economies of worth" (EW) that represent categories of accepted definitions of the common good, and which can be applied to an organisation's activity.

This appreciation for the flexibility or pragmatism exercised in legitimising an organisation's actions by drawing in wider societal level considerations is a distinguishing feature of pragmatist

sociology. The EW framework maintains that "worlds" are not interdependent. Instead, multiple worlds can co-exist in the form of organisational arrangements or compromises that are instantiated through conflict situations. This pragmatism is evident in organisations that continuously re-negotiate the terms of their ideological mission against everyday practical considerations of limited resources, or the capacity to deliver some measure of their mission and survive financially. This assists in highlighting the contradictions between social agendas and the economic realities / limited capabilities of organisations.

Pragmatist sociology (Boltanski and Chiapello, [1999] 2005; Boltanski and Thevenot, [1991] 2006; Thevenot et al., 2000) provides certain insights that help break with past attempts to conceive actors as conforming to, or realigning with the stability found in dominant conventions of central institutions of the state, society and market economy. Boltanski and Thevenot ([1991] 2006) offer an alternative means to examine more closely these carelessly pre-conceived assumptions surrounding organisational change, whereby *stability* is continuously negotiated and debates over what is legitimate or not are open. Whereas the "institutional logics" approach establishes a strong relationship between a field or domain of practice and an individual or organisation, pragmatist sociology directs our attention to relationships between: i) society as a whole; ii) ideas of "common good"; and iii) individual or organisational interest.

Pragmatist sociology does tend to underplay the role of the immediate institutional field of practice within which organisations operate. For example, third sector / NPO organisations are often reliant on external grants, stable membership relations and volunteer support to help advance their objectives as organisations. Nevertheless, Cloutier and Langley (2013, p. 375-76) suggest a way forward, arguing for a 'rapprochement' of the literature on institutional logics and pragmatist sociology, which is able to take advantage of the complementarity of their respective limitations, and to engage with questions of power and influence, where both academic traditions are weaker.

Our contribution to this call for a rapprochement is achieved by focussing on internal organisational competencies, values and management over a long run. The work presented here informs similar initiatives about the often banal and burdensome everyday realities of learning about running (ethical) businesses and managing key stakeholders - not to mention the challenge of managing consumer expectations in the face of strong competition from other 'ecologically', and health and wellbeing-minded businesses. This emphasis draws on insights and prior work derived from both organisation theory and recent research in social entrepreneurship studies (e.g., Montgomery et al., 2012; Dacin et al., 2011; Dacin et al., 2010).

The organisational theory literature identifies attributes often associated with volunteer organisations, exhibiting a unique mix of activities, values and limited resources (Bussell and Forbes, 2002; Vasquez et al., 2002). These attributes can drive an organisation to pursue its mission, as well as enact self-policed constraints that may affect its survival or institutional resilience (Frumkin and Andre-Clark, 2000). This situation brings into view the type of paradoxes identified by Cornforth (2004), which together imply that NPOs, operating in a competitive market economy, may well face extra challenges as well as constraints and burdens on its legitimacy as a social enterprise (Dart, 2004) when compared to mainstream commercial food retail enterprises.

Moreover, the wider literature signals that NPOs may lack some basic skills and experience in business practice and organisation and yet the types of support available have appeared to be largely ineffective in appraising or addressing these types of issues highlighted above (Cairns et al., 2005). In this same literature, issues with knowledge relating to operational size and contextual factors also tend to be neglected (Rochester, 2003; Mowday and Sutton, 1993). Explorations of the agency of individuals within small organisations and the related practices of acquiring and maintaining legitimacy, and its relationship to the organizational structures and processes of (de-/re-) institutionalisation across different levels of analysis – individual and organisation, field and society (see Figure 1) – are of research interest here.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

4. Findings: Reading legitimacy into TFC as a pluralist organisation

The account of TFC operations, discusses how challenges to its legitimacy as an organization for food justice and, in turn, its capacity to manage administrative difficulties were confronted. In this process we see TFC 'scale up', 'scale out' and 'scale back' their operations or organisational reach, during which particular circumstances required the organisation to self-reflect on questions of legitimacy and internal politics. In turn, within each of these instantiations of transition throughout the organisation's development, we find competing institutional logics, and a need to justify its organisational worth or the legitimacy of its mission (Table 1).

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

This process highlights the alignment of different institutional logics and instances in TFC's struggle to reconcile the *tactical* negotiation of its mission, and the compromises made across the three main stages.

4.1 Scale-out: the emergence of an idea and the rise of TFC and its mission (1999-2009)

True Food Co-op originated as an informal, volunteer-led initiative with circa 12 members in 1999 who came together to form an ethical food buying group. Once TFC had been formally constituted as a legal entity in December 2004 (as an Industrial and Provident Society), a committee system with a chair, secretary and treasurer had to be established. The only significant source of funding had been a grant of £10,000 that was utilised to set up the business in 2004-5. It is a community-owned / -run not-for-profit social enterprise, operating in Reading, England, which sits well within Sustain's (2020)

own food co-operative definition as: “any outlet run by local people that is involved in supplying food for the benefit of the community, rather than for private profit”.

TFC operated travelling or ‘pop-up’ food markets in and around the Reading area; these had been initiated in 2004 and the number and sophistication of the markets had developed such that by 2008, on each day of the week (bar Sundays and Mondays), there was a TFC market held in a different part of the Reading area. The markets were set-up and broken down each day and held in community centres. These markets involved a significant number of person hours to prepare, set-up, operate and breakdown. After each market the stock was taken to a rented storage facility. Typically, the selling time for each market was limited to around four hours, but the person hours (staff plus volunteers) required to operate one market totalled an estimated 28 hours - excluding back office time and other costs.

The TFC aims and principles, decided by its membership, were derived from its 2004 constitution, which states:

> [...] the objects of the Co-operative shall be to carry on any trade, business or service that supplies and promotes affordable access to organic foods and ecologically sound products for all the people of our community indiscriminately; […] to promote community building and education through activities that result from our objectives […] to carry on any other activities which may seem to the Cooperative to be conducive to its interests generally, and to the interests of the community that the Cooperative is established to serve. (True Food Community Cooperative [TFC], 2004, p. 1)

The goods sold were predominantly organic, fair-trade and sourced as locally as possible and the location of markets were intended to help ‘take the goods to the consumer’ on a neighbourhood scale. A full range of packaged goods, loose foods, household products, fruit and vegetables were available at each market. Other goods such as organic meat, bulk buys and more unusual items could be purchased through a pre-order system.

Cloutier and Langley (2013, p. 376) argue that “legitimacy can be obtained by means other than just imitating the success of others”. The TFC story, with its community-cooperative based ‘pop-up’ markets model, branding and website, achieved national recognition. Though, as we see in the period

after 2008, it later became apparent that the 'pop-up' food markets model, and the legitimacy that it established, was economically unviable. The operation was not sustainable in its existing form and the financial situation was precarious; the organisation was paying rent on a storage facility and only operated the evening markets.

Indeed, there had been an extraordinarily difficult members' meeting earlier in 2008 when most of the pre-existing committee stood down; the members felt the existing TFC model could not be sustained, making them liable for any debts or liabilities accrued. Consequently, a process of struggle and compromise between TFC members, volunteers and paid staff, and later within the steering committee, ensued. For some, the prospects of abandoning the markets, and the community outreach that this entailed, was an abandonment of the mission and devalued the legitimacy TFC had acquired. Though, for others in TFC, the survival of the organisation was of a value greater than its community outreach – even if it meant TFC would be reduced to a small community cooperative retail organisation. This eventually resulted in a substantial shift in the direction pursued by a new group of volunteers, who subsequently stepped onto the management committee after 2009 and who continued the markets momentarily but also looked at other iterations.

4.2 Scale-up: The golden age of TFC (2010-2013)

As part of the new energy that TFC members were generating through the mobile markets' activity, a successful grant application of just over £100,000 was prepared for the UK Big Lottery Fund – Local Food Grants initiative – and awarded in 2010. The period 2010-13 saw TFC expand and also vary its operation somewhat; the first iteration involved the opening of a substantial shop unit in the north of Reading. The idea was that the unit acted as a low-cost base, replacing the storage facility that also provided a return as it would generate its own retail sales. The grant money assisted TFC in stepping up its services and improving its infrastructure over a 3-year period. A shop premises was leased, a

replacement van purchased, and a paid 'Local Food Coordinator' post was established. At that time, an extensive survey of shoppers was conducted (Pearson et al., 2011).

Latterly, a wider stock was held at the TFC shop that opened in May 2010, as discussed below. To support the operation, TFC grew from a small-scale voluntary organisation to one that employed 3 FTE members of staff and had an annual turnover of around £350,000 by 2009. A review led by the management committee in 2008-09, and discussed with the wider TFC membership, determined that a hub for TFC should be established, which would act as a retail space in its own right as well as providing storage space for market goods and vehicles. Thus, the project to open a retail shop, to serve as a base for the enterprise, was agreed. It was hoped that, if successful, it could help to cross-subsidise the markets.

TFC's work was receiving accolades from local media and began to attract attention on a national scale. By 2010 TFC was being used as an example of best practice for community food co-ops at a national level, based on the markets and the mission invoked and consequently winning the BBC Food and Farming Award for 'Best Retail Initiative' in 2011. However, the grant money concealed structural problems and a cost base that was too high to be maintained. The management committee realised this, and debates were rehearsed about what to do; discussions about business support advice, cost cutting, and issues with staff and volunteer fatigue were aired. It was emphasised that TFC was:

> […] trying to dream big [pause], get big chunks of money and make a leap forward; people were very like [pause] what we did with the grant funding we wouldn't have been able to do with a bank loan […] [Though] A lot of the funding streams are disproportionately revenue, which basically starts you off on that dependency footing, whereas if they're capital then you're left with an asset as longevity beyond the period of funding. But capital grants are few and far between. (TFC interviewee #1)

As the TFC business plan (2015-2020) further outlines, there were some significant issues that needed to be addressed:

> […] by mid-2013 it was clear that True Food could not continue without grant funding unless steps were taken to further increase takings and cut costs. A Business Manager was recruited in a temporary role to support staff in making these changes to safeguard True Food's future. By early 2014…the difficult decision [was] taken to reduce the markets to just one, and to focus resources and energy on making this market and the shop financially successful. During this very

> difficult period of change it became impossible to run even one market and for this and other reasons the decision was taken to temporarily stop running mobile markets. (TFC, 2015a, p. 4)

Indeed, the reliance on grants and capital injections from charitable sources reflects a problem that many in the third sector have experienced as a 'grant trap' (Hodge and Piccolo, 2005). This buffering of deeper issues, concerning the sustainability of the operating model, acted to delay changes and arguably deepen the disjuncture between what we term the 'survivalists' and the 'purists' involved in TFC, where the former were prepared to be pragmatic and make substantial changes to ensure TFC survival, while the latter were unhappy with suggested change and wanted TFC to maintain its mission.

> So, the constitution is explicit about the community and accessibility element to it, how that is implemented, and how that manifests in the real world was at one time markets, is now shops; at some point, it might be something else. It doesn't say in the constitution that True Food shall run markets to get food into communities. It just says True Food shall make organic food accessible and conduct activities to build a community and how, how the members and the community steer True Food to meet those objectives can take many varied forms. So, I think it's just in a form at the moment. (TFC interviewee #1; TFC, 2004)

The TFC governance structure throughout this period involved a management group of a chair, treasurer, secretary, several ordinary members plus the business manager appointed in 2013; a further member of staff also was allocated a space to represent the employees. This group met on a monthly basis to discuss policy and strategy with most attention being paid to the finances. The monthly management meetings were dominated by discussions about costs and how to bring the TFC operation onto a stable and sustainable keel. By 2013 the enterprise was facing losses when the grant money, which had enabled TFC to grow, was running down. The markets were operating in four locations - one had been trimmed back as staff were working long hours to sustain the operation. Consequently, the management committee reached the decision to close all the markets after protracted discussions and debate during the latter part of 2013. This was reported in an interview by a director on the TFC Board of Trustees at that time:

> At first it was decided that TFC would try and keep one market open to keep the model alive – seen as closely connected to the wider mission and perceived values of TFC. In any event, this change was controversial, and the difficult decision was taken. The remaining market operated for a very short time as the staff and board felt that the survival of the organisation was threatened

> by the hub [shop] and spoke [markets] model and the only realistic way of ensuring survival was to conduct 'major surgery'. (TFC interviewee #3)

Many members felt the markets were a defining feature of TFC and a critical means by which communities and *mission* were reached. In the subsequent membership vote the proposal was carried, but a large minority opposed the closures. This led to a schism in the membership and many members resigned or did not renew their membership later that year. In particular, the active members who had formed support teams for the various community markets were aggrieved and many stepped away. This resignation of membership and loss of volunteer capacity persisted despite a pledge to re-establish markets or work to create other shops once the TFC enterprise was placed on a more stable financial footing. The TFC interviewees corroborate this view:

> [We were] compromised in terms of geography, because we have had to [close the markets], but not suspended in terms of the main mission. (TFC interviewee #2)

> The mission remains the same because of the mission… the constitution; the constitution hasn't changed, and that is to make organic food accessible in the community […]. So, you could argue that is being met, being the one community at [shop location]; there's definitely a desire to do it in other communities. (TFC interviewee #1; TFC, 2004)

> The management group reluctantly closed the markets, but the hope was to come back and operate at least some markets when the financial stability [of TFC] was more secure. This was part of the pledge given at the time. (TFC interviewee #3)

Though, the prospects for this aspect of mission for TFC remains open as no markets have been reopened as discussed in the third stage below.

4.3 Scale-back: Mission abort or mission drift? (2014-2019)

The tensions surrounding the changing mission of TFC were centred on what the chair described as: "[…] the markets; there's a lot of investment in markets, with us as committee members as well; I mean they [the markets] were the sort of heart, if you like, of True Food, whereas the shop was the mind […] and base", helping make "it [food] accessible in communities that wouldn't normally have access to it." (TFC interviewee #1) The claimed 'heart' of the TFC operation was looking to serve a

range of Reading's neighbourhoods. The aim was that a cadre of volunteers, who serviced the markets, would encourage regular visits and critical purchasing behaviour and develop further volunteering and engagement through purchasing in each neighbourhood. Though, despite the limited weekly presence of the markets that did not fully take root in the communities, TFC continued to encourage more community buying relationships through what remained of the original 'hub' (i.e., the shop) and 'spoke' (the markets) model. To supplement the small staff cadre, teams of market volunteers and a circle of other active volunteers had been developed to assist with management and other support functions. In 2013-14 there had been over 300 members, and this slipped to around 120 after the restructuring and the Shop was the only tangible presence. Yet by 2015 the membership numbers had climbed back with TFC reporting 264 members in June 2015. Although, the type and attitudes of the membership had not been examined.

> Whether they were 'diehard' organic food purchasers, [who were] coming over 'cos it was 'local', there was a good spread between the markets. [In] some of the markets, the dominant shoppers were middle-aged women, others it was men in their early twenties, and mixes of ethnic groups that were varied and representative of the areas that the market was in. So, the East Reading market, for example, where it has a high Asian contingent of shopping because Cemetery Junction has a very high Asian population, saw value in what was being offered there, whereas Emmer Green tends to be more white middle-class shoppers. (TFC interviewee #1)

This highlights what has been widely documented in the literature regarding the community-led food activities that struggle to be inclusive of the racial and ethnic diversity in neighbourhoods where they operate (DuPuis and Goodman, 2005). Nevertheless, the shop was "becoming a focal point in [around the shop location], and it's taken six or seven years for it to establish", according to a former Chair (TFC interviewee #1). The question that remains is what that means for the organisation itself and its mission. If it means that it must operate a single shop from a suburban middle-class, predominantly white, neighbourhood, then this presents nothing less than an existential question about why TFC should exist.

By 2015 four FTE staff were involved exclusively in running the TFC shop five days per week (open on a Saturday but closed one weekday). The staffing model was a combination of several paid

core members of staff which were supported by a team of volunteers. The structure was expressed by TFC in the following way:

> The business as a whole is governed by a committee of volunteers with a standard Chair, Secretary, Treasurer and Directors set-up. TFC has a core membership base of around 100 people from which professional skills are drawn, for example; marketing, IT, the University sector, food industry, accountancy, environmental sciences, teaching, human resources, project management, engineering and trades (electrical, carpentry and plumbing), to name but a few (TFC, 2015b, no pagination).

Numerous discussions took place over how to mobilise, and indeed attract volunteers with the right skills, and to responsibilise them onto the committee. In the early years of TFC operation, the business planning was somewhat rudimentary, and lessons were learned; the first plan had been produced in 2009-10 (TFC, 2010), including the recognition of better organisation accounts for the type of statements found in TFCs own literature: "in order to survive in a highly competitive retail and food market TFC has established a professional approach to its operation, with a careful monitoring and business planning model." (TFC, 2015a, p. 2). This alludes to many years of operation where TFC had very poor financial management. Also, this is reflected in how TFC saw themselves by 2015:

> In the past, True Food has left itself vulnerable by not giving adequate resources to the management of finances. Adequate resources now allow a suitably skilled and experienced Finance Manager the time to professionally manage the complicated finances of True Food (TFC, 2015a, p. 9).

The wherewithal of the board in a time of crisis meant that volunteers with limited time focussed on crisis management (see Rochester, 2003; Mowday and Sutton, 1993), bringing into view the basis for board member selection (Sivertsen, 1996). However, the skills question is not the only dimension; Cornforth (2004) highlights that NPOs often have twin priorities relating to their *mission* ('conformity'), and to their financial viability ('performance') or *survival*. Sacchetti and Tortia (2012) argue that:

> Cooperatives are characterised by mutual-benefit coordination mechanisms aimed at the fulfilment of members' participation rights and welfare, consistently with the normative principles of democratic involvement, independence and care for the community. This ideal situation may find, in practice, obstacles within the internal characteristics of the cooperative as

> well as in the nature of relationship with other actors in the socio-economic environment (Sacchetti and Tortia, 2012, p. 1).

This third phase of TFC operations involved expanding again, having learned from the past and building from a stable financial and organisational base. One of the 'legacy' aims for TFC post-2015 included opening further outlets beyond the shop. However, the instantiations presented by a mix of growth opportunities, past difficulties and a consequential shift in operation through 'scale out', 'scale up' and 'scale back' has left little appetite for growth and a degree of existential crisis:

> Are we meeting the mission, or is it the right mission? The shop is there. [So] it is best that we clarify on what the mission is. Is it still organic food? Or should we be focusing on the sort of plastic-free, reducing waste area? Or will that simply be something that, because it is so, dare I say, fashionable, at the moment anyway, it is something that everybody will take on board? If we were to simply move our mission to that, we'd find that we're not distinctive within a couple of years. (TFC Interviewee #2)

> So, there is that debate going on. And, being twenty years old, when starting with organic was quite an unusual mission, do we alter it or not? Or do we feel that that mission is accomplished, and that people can get [readily access] organic food these days? [Such]… that there is no real need for True Food anymore. (TFC interviewee #2)

The challenges of launching an innovative mission and agreeing an operational design for its management, coupled with the need to perform and survive in a competitive market was a challenge. Not least because of the need for TFC to justify its self-worth or legitimacy as an organisation along the way. This process was not tainted by any profit-seeking motive; rather, we find that TFC's decision to ultimately scale back and close down its mobile markets was purely seen as a necessary evil to try and secure its survival as an organisation, and its mission. The organisation was able to take decisive action where 'performance' had to take precedence over conformity in order to ensure survival, but it did come at a cost. Firstly, the loss of key members and volunteers and second to the markets – the arm of the operation that helped give TFC its uniqueness and reflected a key part of its mission to transition toward a more just and sustainable socio-ecological future through alternative food retail.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

We find that TFC has been pre-figured into institutional contexts where certain domains and logics are assumed to predominate. In other words, the "alterity" of the organisation's mission has been defined by means of juxtaposing it with undesirable conventions, such as aspects of a socially and ecologically unsustainable global-industrial food complex. Assertions regarding the legitimacy of an organisation's actions or decisions often follows binary divides (c.f., Cadieux and Slocum, 2014; Friedland and Alford, 1991). What is consequently deemed *acceptable* practices are defined as either legitimate or not legitimate. Also, sustaining such justifications of *legitimate* organisational agency often mirrors the stability sought within shared definitions of the "common good" e.g., food justice, which is established for the purposes of enabling collective action and empowerment.

We see organisational struggle over ideological and practical differences, among entrepreneurs like TFC, as a process of claiming legitimacy through perceived collective or shared identities. In fact, there is evidence which suggests that such assumptions by food justice advocates fails to take account of the processes of strategic decision-making in organisations. Cadieux and Slocum (2015) suggest that the practice of food justice is often not what scholars, activists and policymakers would consider as working toward more equitable food systems, or at least not in some pure form. Those doing or assessing food justice practices often get stuck between a universal notion of justice and the contingent, messy and contested reality of practices that feature difficult trade-offs and pragmatic behaviour (see Nunes, 2017 on 'pragmatist ethics'; c.f. also, Ehrnstrom-Fuentes, 2015; Dart, 2004).

Pluralist organisations can find themselves grappling with intra-, and inter-organisational relational pressures as they depart from one set of institutionalised practices, with its inherent power dynamics, to another. We have shed some light on such instantiations of transition by drawing attention to the associated micro-political dynamics behind efforts to negotiate and identify some form of compromise over clashing and/or competing institutional logics and associated ethical justifications for the legitimacy of particular actions. The institutional logics of pluralist organisations illustrates that these processes are a re-occurring feature of organisations like TFC, who must reconcile some degree of

'lost' mission with the pragmatism required to financially sustain the organisation i.e., survival. Cloutier and Langley's (2013) call for a rapprochement of institutional logics and pragmatist sociology begins to address these occurrences. They argue that actors such as TFC will be faced with everyday challenges, which generate responses or solutions that do not always conform with expected institutional logics and values. Yet Cloutier and Langley also note that while the two theoretical traditions are distinct, their respective limitations offer a complementary approach in future organisation studies, especially considering the lack of a distinct conception of power in either.

We propose that future research into such conceptions of power must embrace the institutional liminality within which pluralist organisations operate. The 'liminal transition spaces' (Burnett and Nunes, 2021) of these pluralistic institutional contexts are re-occurring features of *instantiations of transition* where the ground rules dictating socio-political norms are momentarily or permanently disrupted, resulting in conflict situations where collaborative actions consequently work at cross-purposes and/or multiple forms of power vie for legitimacy simultaneously in contexts where institutional arrangements may have been proven futile, but its alternatives have yet to be determined.

TFC has provided a sobering tale of the harsh realities of operating a volunteer-led, non-profit enterprise, and how its members have had to justify decisions that have challenged the legitimacy of the organisation, and/or its ability to proselytise on the basis of its founding mission. This has prompted us to consider the ideological mission of such organisations, as well as to examine the paradox of mission versus everyday survival (Brown, 1985) which, as we have argued, also reflects a tension between learning and proselytizing. Hence a principal contribution of this paper has been its longitudinal study of TFC, enabling a fuller appreciation of its trials and tribulations with legitimacy, which otherwise would leave us with select accounts (Pearson et al., 2011; Sustain, 2008) that would serve only to reinstate the organisation as a partially understood rallying point for food activists and those inclined to participate in a transition movement toward 'food justice'.

Moreover, our assessment of TFC challenges the filters prefigured into analytical frameworks that pre-empt criteria against which practices can or should be judged. That is, we have been unable to identify an adherence to any consistent pre-determined set of values being pursued by TFC. This is consistent with the observations of 'pluralistic contexts' (Denis et al., 2007), and 'pluralistic organisations' (Kraatz and Block, 2008). Given its established role and significance as a transition-entrepreneur, the question of how we should judge TFC remains pertinent. Is the 'working face' of transition for organisations – like TFC – time-limited, acting only momentarily to confront the mainstream? Can they affect some (prefigured) change, and then perhaps restart that process? What implications does the loss or diminution of key elements of organisational mission actually have for the continuing role and significance of an organisation as an agent of transition?

TFC has retained its outwardly active claim to alterity. One success of TFC appears to have lain in its symbolic value, as an organisation and entrepreneur, for the food justice and transition movement - acting to prefigure and inspire others. We argue that more attention still needs to be paid to the 'liminal transition spaces' occupied by such organisations (Burnett and Nunes, 2021) where pragmatic behaviour, instantiated through the mundane burdens and difficulties of survival, are complexly interwoven with an intrinsic politics of delivering socio-ecologically just futures.

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