**Expansive opportunity makers but selective opportunity takers? Positional agility and tactical social skill in English third sector social service**

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**ABSTRACT**

In a challenging climate of austerity policies, relationships between Third Sector Organisations (TSOs) and the State are often contentious, with great sophistication required to secure a reasonable degree of stability and continuity in services and relationships. This paper draws on data gathered through semi structured interviews with 23 CEOs of TSOs focused on children’s preventative services to explicate and exemplify the skills embodied in TSOs which allow them to navigate these complex situations relatively successfully. We draw on the concept of ‘social skill’ as developed in strategic action fields theory to frame an analysis of this data. We consider how TSOs have collectively helped shape the political and economic conditions under which they operate, and present a range of skilful tactics we associate with the concept of ‘positional agility’ which differentiate those organisations which are especially accomplished in navigating relationships and resources.

**INTRODUCTION**

Governance approaches linked to New Public Management (NPM) have increasingly framed State-civil society relationships in public service domains in many parts of the world (Salamon and Toepler, 2015). The UK is often taken as a case where NPM assumptions and techniques have been most rapidly and extensively adopted (Kendall, 2018), so potentially offers interesting evidence for international debates. Central to the UK’s version of NPM is ‘commissioning’, defined as ‘a cycle of assessing the needs of people in an area, designing and then securing an appropriate service’ (Cabinet Office, 2006). Here it has become the dominant process by which State and third sector relationships are now managed (Rees, 2014). British literature (for example Milbourne and Murray, 2017; Rees and Mullins, 2016), suggests that a range of political, ideological, policy and economic ingredients come together to generate both barriers to, and opportunities for, productive commissioning relationships (see literature on ‘relational’ contracting and ‘co-production’; e.g. Bovaird and Loeffler, 2012; Crouch, 2011; Cunningham, 2008). Many of these factors can be considered structural and out of the reach of those immediately involved in delivering social services locally. Most noticeably since 2008, public budget attrition and the intensification of organising ideas derived from NPM broadly stressing competition, choice and the importation of techniques from business, have all had to be taken as ‘givens’ in the new landscape (Hood, 2011). Furthermore the research stresses that such pressures can result in Third Sector Organisations (TSOs) struggling to sustain their independent identities, potentially becoming supplicants to the ‘marketised State’ with whom they have become entangled; or perhaps seeking to opt out, distancing themselves from such processes, but as a result potentially foregoing chances to achieve valued social outcomes.

This paper is premised on the perspective that to date, most of the critical literature (e.g. Clifford et al, 2013; Cunningham, 2008; Independent Panel, 2015; Milbourne and Cushman, 2012) focuses on the strength of pressures towards subservience or marginalisation. Whilst we acknowledge that these tendencies are real and can create a hostile environment, they do not exhaust the range of possible responses. In particular, we wish to focus on those aspects of inter-sectoral relationships which at least, to some extent, are within the reach of TSOs to steer and shape at their own initiative as they attempt to create ‘space’ for themselves, within and across specific policy fields (Kendall, 2009; Macmillan et al, 2013; Milbourne and Murray, 2017; Taylor and Rees, 2016). To this end, we will seek to deploy the notion of ‘social skill’ (Fligstein, 2007; Fligstein and McAdam, 2012) to capture these more open situations.

While Fligstein himself only considers ‘non-profits’ in passing relation to the SAF framework, other analysts have begun to connect it to this sector systematically (Barman, 2016; Taylor and Rees, 2016; Macmillan et al, 2013). However with most attention paid to presenting and elaborating the broad concept of SAFs and allied fields frameworks, there is limited focus upon empirical manifestations of social skill per se. We work on the assumption that non-profit social skills merit much more direct and systematic attention. Accordingly, we present empirical evidence, in the form of semi-structured interviews with key actors within the field and analysis in an attempt to identify tactics and strategies which may manifest social skill employed by TSOs as they seek to locate themselves as responsive and significant policy actors in the area under scrutiny. Second, while most of our results are affirmative of the value of this approach, we will also develop the claim that in relation to the specific case of TSOs in a British commissioning environment, we need to attend to considerations which appear to be either absent from, or at least given insufficient attention in, the framework. For example, TSOs which foster a multi-field orientation, rather than developing a singular position with any one specific field. We refer to this activity as “positional agility”, in which TSOs develop the capacity to position themselves flexibly in relation to the State, rather than necessarily settling on a single stable “position” close to, or at a distance from it. In doing so, we offer a more nuanced understanding of sector-State relationships, differentiating them from the better understood incorporation and withdrawal tendencies, and develop a stylised framework which embodies this wider spectrum of possibilities, and provides insight into how these contentious relationships may be successfully navigated. As a result, this paper makes an explicit original contribution to the current research and debates, presenting empirical data which identifies four tactics deployed by socially skilled TSO’s in order to gain advantage across multiple fields.

The first section of this paper presents a brief overview of the research context drawing on current literature, here we define the concept of social skill and discuss strategic action fields theory and how this relates to TSOs. We finish the overview of the research context with a brief summary of commissioning of children's services in England. The second section outlines the qualitative methodology and data analysis techniques applied. The third section highlights the specific findings from this research, presenting a series of tactics employed by TSOs to secure advantageous positions within and across fields. The final section aims to offer an overall conclusion to the paper and the wider contribution to knowledge.

**RESEARCH CONTEXT**

***Strategic Action Fields and Social Skill***

To form an appropriate response to our research challenges of what does social skill look like in practice, and how this manifests itself, we must first define what we mean by social skill. At the broadest level, discussed by economic sociologist Neil Fligstein (2001), whose formulations have influenced the generic Strategic Action Fields (SAF) literature, *‘social skill can be defined as the ability to motivate cooperation in other actors by providing those actors with common meaning and identities in which actions can be undertaken and justified’* (p.398). In an early paper, a descriptive list of fifteen tactics was suggested (Fligstein, 1997, pp. 399 - 401). In later work, with social movement scholar Doug McAdam, the concept was developed further drawing on literature from diverse sociologists (including Bourdieu, Coleman, Di Maggio, Goffman, and Padgett and Ansell; see Fligstein & McAdam, 2012, chapter 2). Social skills are whittled down to a more focussed itemisation and are said to include:

* the ability to frame stories to induce cooperation from others;
* agenda setting, that is setting the terms and constraints of the conversation for others;
* the adoption of pragmatic approaches to situations, simultaneously accepting what the field has to offer, whilst also asking for more, though being aware of how far to go;
* juggling multiple strategies at once and positioning themselves as interested in others, rather than being narrowly self-interested, engaging in brokering and supporting collective identity making.

How can social skills be socially situated? Although increasing in prominence in social science, fields theory itself encompasses variations of similar conceptual frameworks which generally accept a shared orientation to social action (Barman, 2016). These predominantly exist as the Bourdieusian (Bourdieu, 1993), new institutionalist (Dimaggio and Powell, 1988), and strategic action field (SAF) approaches (Fligstein, 1997, 2001; Fligstein and McAdam, 2011 & 2012). Central to Fligstein and McAdam (2012)’s conceptualisation are the SAFs where social action is played out, and which are defined as;

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

The main difference here from how policy fields are typically understood in mainstream policy sector studies (see Parsons, 1995; John, 1998) is the heavy emphasis on the extent to which such fields involve a persistent ongoing process of subjective sense-making, rather than being ‘objective’, politically driven arenas (see also Sabatier and Weible, 2014). According to Fligstein and McAdam (2012) actors (including TSOs, but also other agencies) are characterised as ‘incumbents’ or ‘challengers’ according to the amount of relational power they accrue, connecting them with their field “positioning”. Incumbents wield the most power and therefore the field predominantly reflects their needs and interests. Any State institutions involved in fields, are both themselves considered ‘fields’ and would be deemed part of this core infrastructure, and relatively stable as formal bureaucracies compared to other sectors with an authoritative rule-making and enforcement role. They face inwards into policy fields, but also connect outwards to the macro environment. The latter, ‘challengers’ beyond the State, in contrast, includes actors who have the least power and are not favoured within the field.

The incumbent-challenger relationship is key in understanding the strategic activity within the field itself. Agencies position themselves as strategic actors within the field through a complex, conscious or unconscious, acknowledgement of the ‘rules of the game’ and thus demonstrate varying degrees of political interest in these rules, and position themselves in the power relations which underpin it (Bourdieu, 1993). In this context, actors try to affirm their rationales and identities, functioning with agency to demonstrate their positions and ‘playing’ their roles, whilst helping to reproduce the institutional structures they collectively inhabit. That is, they pursue a set of actions and behaviours which are considered legitimate (accepted as the ‘right action’) within the field of activity, and in line with the values, norms and ideologies found in the field – either shared across the field as a whole, or associated with their particular position within it. Strategic agency within a field in this sense inevitably involves the expression and application of normative beliefs and commitments. Such expressions of commitment, in both formal and informal practices, will involve contention and friction when the values and beliefs of challengers and incumbents are not aligned. In this way, an ongoing process of joint sense making unfolds, and is articulated in practice through ‘jockeying for position’ as the process of building or breaking value-laden relationships unfolds.

If these are the relationships and institutions which shape action, where does social skill fit into this process? According to Fligstein and McAdam (2012) social skill in action can be identified through the tactics employed by socially skilled actors within any given field. While such tactics may have little or no impact if a field is characterised by high concentrations of structurally embedded power, in other situations they can be of real significance in shaping practices and outcomes. Tactics are said to be effective if they do two things simultaneously: induce co-operation by appealing to the identity, belief, and interests of others, while framing action ‘against opponents’ (pp.50-51). These ingredients are said to reflect ‘the ability of actors to transcend their narrow worldview, take the position of the “other” and figure out how either to get the “other” to cooperate or to effectively blunt or counter the “other’s” advantage’ (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012: 55). Thus, the socially skilled actor is portrayed as switching between cooperation and competition/opposition to help settle fields in order to reproduce or secure greater advantage within that field.

***Social Skill and TSOs***

Many of the ideas developed generically in the SAF approach dovetail with standard accounts of the role and functioning of the third sector. Based on existing research and knowledge we would expect TSOs to manifest these capabilities, at least to some degree, and under the right conditions. For example, many definitional approaches have stressed the significance of the value-base and collective normative orientation of these organisations for their priorities, modus operandi and actual achievements (see Enjolras, 2015; Kendall and Knapp, 1996; Kendall, 2003; Smerelli, 2013). At the same time, the notion that there will be contestation over values and logics in this sphere was prefigured in Evers’ (1995) formulation of the third sector as expressive of a ‘tension field’ between contrasting state, market and community commitments. There has been considerable attention in the literature to these organisations’ attempts to empower the vulnerable through their contributions to agenda setting at both national and European level (Brandsen et al. 2009; Enjolras et al, 2018). Furthermore, policy discourses have identifyed TSOs as often being ‘innovative’, exhibiting a willingness to experiment with multiple, alternative approaches, and being trusted to be effective in so doing by virtue of beliefs about their motivations and capabilities, linked to their embeddedness in local

These affinities and links suggest a promising agenda, and help us to understand why the SAF and the third sector seem to connect (see Aldoff, 2015; Barman, 2016; Lune, 2015). However, with the partial exception of Taylor and Rees (2016), we suggest the representations of these organisations’ functioning in existing studies (including the aforementioned accounts) have been too restrictive in three primary senses.

***- First,*** they have not sought to explicate tactics predicated on social skill *per se*, but have more generally referred to fields as a way of portraying TSOs’ operating environments, and the power imbalances they may encounter in structured meso-level contexts.

***- Second,*** within given fields, the ways in which such organisations’ tactically manifest social skill in terms of their tendency towards multiple-pathway experimentation, their simultaneous navigation of collaborative and competitive processes, and their abilities to move with agility in terms of multiple agendas for policy and practice, have not really been examined. These potentially dynamic features are hard to characterise, and involve fluidity and evasiveness, exhibiting an aversion to fixity in terms of ‘positioning’ in practice. The emphasis in the literature highlighted above has drawn attention to ways in which established successful practices and collaborative relationship building, has resulted in stabilising efforts to achieve secure, well bounded positions, predominantly manifesting what Fligstein & MacAdam refer to as either challenger or incumbent status. While the logic of the SAF approach indeed requires that we recognise and represent such stabilities (as this is bound up with the way in which social order is developed and expressed in the model), we would suggest that it should not preclude us from *also* recognising the potential relevance of versatility and agility in terms of navigating and occupying space *between* positions. Put slightly differently, jockeying could be not just ‘for position’ to consolidate positional power, but could also be oriented towards finding ‘space’ or ‘room’ (cf. Macmillan et al, 2013), shifting *across* positions and expressing shared commitments in a rather more permissive, open-ended and fluid way. Given our observations concerning TSOs’ potentially relevant characteristics, this dynamism could be something we should actively expect to find manifested in those fields where they are significant actors.

***- Third,*** accommodating TSOs in the framework could benefit from refocussing through acknowledging the significance of identities and involvements across multiple fields. Conceptually, the SAF approach envisages a plurality of fields, and actively encourages creativity in terms of thinking about actors as involved in a web of overlapping and interdependent fields. The problem here is that, in line with Fligstein and McAdam’s (2012) own suggestions for empirical operationalisation, in practice studies have focussed (implicitly or explicitly) on social skill as manifested essentially within singular fields, with dynamics outside this frame of reference bracketed in applied work, and understood as external and outwith the ‘jockeying’ process which is considered the core focus of investigation.

***Empirical Case: Commissioning Children’s Preventative Services***

This paper’s conceptual thematization of social skill *per se* is our response to the first issue, and will be fleshed out empirically in the balance of the paper. The best way to underscore the potential significance of the second factor - what we are calling here the relevance of positional agility - will be through identifying actual manifestations, understood as expressions of social skill, in explicating our case study findings in what follows, as part of that exposition. However, to situate the importance of multi-field orientation, we need to preface those results by first pinpointing what it concretely means, and show why it is salient to attend to more than a singular field in characterising the situation of the TSOs, that is, our third factor. The simplest way to do this is by starting with the ‘policy field’ formulation and then extend this to embrace the web of other relevant involvements, so as to explicitly situate organisations in multiple arenas.

In looking at this area at its most basic level, our ‘singular field’ would be preventative social care services (often also referred to as early intervention services) and support for the client group children and families, which would be considered part of the ‘industry’ of personal social services, or social care (see Salamon and Anheier, 1996; Stone and Sandfort, 2009). The field of preventative services is a relatively new policy area which has, even in a short period of time, experienced significant turbulence. Arising from a refocussing of child protection policy and practice in England in the early and mid 1990’s following the 1989 Children’s Act, the concept of preventative services for children is relatively recent. The Act highlighted a necessity to extend focus from a narrow emphasis on children ‘suffering or likely to suffer harm’ (Children Act 1989, s.31 (2)(a)) and instead for local authorities to have a broader general duty to ‘safeguard and promote the welfare of children in their area who are in need’ (Children Act 1989, s17(1)). Emerging from this was the concept and duty of preventative services, and whilst some local authorities were slow on the uptake (Parton and Williams, 2017), the election of the New Labour government in May 1997 saw significant investment in early intervention, family support and parenting programmes.

The launch of the Every Child Matter’s (ECM) programme in 2004 (DfES, 2004) sought to ensure ‘a shift to prevention whilst strengthening protection’ (DfES, 2004: 3), with an ambition to improve outcomes for all children. The Children Act 2004 saw the ECM agenda enshrined in English law, with it a considerable increase in the size and remit of the State, and a wider range of services and practitioners having a role in supporting children. The ECM agenda and subsequent Children’s Act 2004 embraced a sustained push towards commissioning (Rees, 2014) and coupled with the wider New Labour’s policies to ‘open up’ public service delivery to a broader range of organisations, many TSOs organisations entered into commissioning relationships with the State. However, the tragic death of 17month old baby Peter Connolly as a result of abuse in 2007, sparked a huge social reaction in which practitioners and senior managers were held directly responsible and suspended from practice. As a result, policy focus took a more risk adverse approach, shifting away from supporting families, and instead towards early intervention being about intervening at the earliest stage, using all legal force available, resulting in a surge in numbers of children referred to social care (Parton and Williams, 2017).

Following the economic crisis in 2008/9 the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition government, elected in 2010, abandoned the ECM agenda, and established an independent review of the policy field of child protection/ prevention. Chaired by Eileen Munro, and referred to as the Munro review, recommendations focused on multi-agency working. However, with the government openly focusing on the ‘reduction of public finance debt’, funding for early intervention services were cut by almost one quarter in their first year in office (CIPFA, 2011), with the funding for voluntary sector in this field particularly impacted (Gill et al., 2011). Simultaneously a new approach to preventative policy was adopted which abandoned ‘supporting families’, and emphasised ‘rescuing children from chaotic, neglectful and abusive homes’ (Parton and Williams, 2017). This resulted in a wave of commissioning of children’s services which focused on highly prescriptive, targeted, short-term interventions, which were in contrast to the longer term, relationship based approaches adopted by most TSOs within this field (Gill et al., 2011).

The policy field of preventative services continued to feel financial strain throughout the Coalitions term, and into the Conservative Government from 2015 onwards. Embracing a ‘doing more for less’ culture (Hulme et al, 2015; Vibert 2016), a report by Action for Children (2017), in partnership with The Children’s Society and the National Children’s Bureau highlighted a £4billion reduction in funding available across central and local government, predicting a 72% reduction in early intervention funding nationally by 2020 based on current trends. Simultaneously children’s social care demand is rising; between 2008 and 2015 local authorities in England experienced a 22% increase in referrals, alongside a 16% increase in the numbers of children in care (Vibert, 2016). Indeed, across the field as a whole the discourse of commissioning has increasingly shared a NPM frame of references. Within the particular case of preventative work, strengthening of an overarching locally evolving discourse has also been accompanied by a particularly strong recent trajectory of moving towards ‘objectifying’ risk factors, achieving measurable outcomes, and developing ‘scientific’ diagnoses of ‘problem families’ under the impetus of central government initiatives, which seek to reframe policy responsibilities at the level of individuals and families, rather than broader society at large (Garrett, 2014; Parr, 2009).

When we consider this policy field through Fligstein and McAdam’s conceptualisation of fields theory and in the case of English commissioning relationships, we can to begin to get a sense of the structure of the field. First we consider proximate relationships primarily at the local level, where policy delivery responsibilities are chiefly situated, involving connections between TSOs and commissioners, professionals, State and market organisations. However, it is important to note that even at this policy field level, relationships are both broader and more narrow than this formulation might suggest: broader, because meeting the needs of this client group typically involves engaging with actors in adjacent and related fields (most obviously, community development, children’s health, housing support and educational services); and narrower, because ‘preventative work’ involves a particular constellation of specialist institutions and constituencies – a subfield – which are differentiated from the broader whole in terms of the identities of actors, and the particular agendas which animate them (for example specialist support services such as domestic abuse services, young carers support and emotional wellbeing projects could all be considered embedded sub-fields of the wider field of preventative services). We observe that the State actors, principally commissioners and commissioning organisations as primarily incumbent actors within the field, ‘wielding disproportionate influence’, whilst TSO’s, for the most part occupy positions of challengers. However we must also acknowledge the potential multiple role of the State within this field environment. State actors occupy roles directly within the field, for example as Commissioners, as a State field within itself, for example a local authority and as part of the broader field environment, occupying a formal hierarchal position responsible for the delivery of statutory services for children and families. Similarly, whilst TSOs may be considered to occupy incumbent positions, they do not all occupy this position equally, with some wielding considerably more influence than others (Cunningham, 2008). Furthermore, the onset of contention from the broader field environment, an example in this case would be the responses resulting from the tragedy surrounding Baby Peter Connelly, have resulted in periods of unsettlement within this policy field area which have fundementally altered the shared understanding of the purpose of the field and what is perceived as legitimate action. TSO’s navigation of this changing policy arena requires both sophisticated tactics and entrepreneurship if they are to challenge the reframing of the policy debates, which are often in tension with their core mission.

***Research Questions:***

Setting a challenge for research, Fligstein (2001) states *‘analysts must spend time looking for entrepreneurs and examining their tactics’ (p.122).* We therefore consider how may we apply this challenge to TSOs, and begin to explicate how socially skilled tactics shape their development? And, as Fligstein repeatedly emphasises in his accounts that social skill appears to be unevenly distributed, how can we distinguish between situations in which it appears to be significant, and contexts in which it may be less so? The process of reviewing the literature and the theoretical approach of fields theory generated two research questions; 1) Can we identify what ‘social skill’ looks like in practice? And if so, 2) what tactics are employed by TSOs to secure advantage with any given field?

**METHODOLOGY**

This paper draws upon a single strand of work from a 3 year research study (between 2013-2016), which broadly sought to examine State and TSOs relationships, in the context of the delivery of children’s preventative services. The overall research project examined TSOs and Commissioners lived experiences of managing and negotiating relationships. Stage 1 of this study included financial analysis looking at patterns of income and spending of over 250 TSOs between 2008-2014 and questionnaires with 70 TSOs. Stage 2 of the study included interviews with 15 Commissioners. Results of these stages of the study are summarised elsewhere (see Body, 2016). The findings discussed in this strand of the study focus particularly on the final methodological step in the research project; in-depth semi-structured interviews carried out with 23 senior executives occupying the role of Chief Executive Officer from TSOs, all working within a single local authority area. All participating TSOs delivered services to children, young people and families which broadly fall under the children’s preventative agenda within a single local authority area. The local authority area is a large county, based within the South of England with approximately 16% of children recorded as living in poverty, however overall ranked within the least deprived 50% of all counties and unitary authorities in England. As a two tier authority commissioning arrangements for children’s preventative services are complex with the local authority holding statutory responsibility for children’s services and commissioning accordingly across a variety of different departments. Furhermore, local borough councils and other public sector bodies (for example NHS Clinical Commissioning Groups) simultaneously commission some local services based on perceived need. These separate public sector bodies are brought together under a single preventative services strategy. However, no single commissioning approach or practice is adopted within the local authority, or across the different commissioning organisations.

As listed above, as part of the wider study, 70 TSOs completed a questionnaire. These TSOs details were shared with the researchers via an open database of TSOs working locally in the field, held by the local authority. Of the 70 TSOs approached through questionnaires, a total of 42 stated a willingness to take part in the study further. All of these TSOs were contacted and invited to participate in the interviews, 28 of these organisations consented. A further 5 then withdrew from the process, for a variety of different reasons, leaving the 23 TSOs as listed in the table below. The final participants therefore included the following TSOs, listed by financial size and service delivery area:

**TABLE 1 HERE**

***Data Gathering and Analysis***

The research underwent university research ethical clearance. All participants were approached prior to interviews and provided with full details of the research aim (to explore how TSOs managed their distant and proximate relationships with the State and other stakeholders), process and intended outcomes. All consenting TSOs were interviewed for between 1 and 2 hours, following a loose but similar semi-structured interview schedule which explored the themes of relationships, experiences of commissioning processes, perceptions of strengths and weaknesses and discussion of specific examples. Interviews were carried out in the participants offices and venues, during the period of June – September in 2015. Data was analysed to draw out examples of social skill, and identification of trends in tactics and strategies employed to secure advantage (see Body, 2016).

The data analysis followed five distinct stages of analysis (Denscombe, 2007):

1) Data preparation - including the complete transcription and anonymization of interviews utilising the qualitative data analysis computer software package, NVivo.

2) Familiarity with data - including immersion within interviews and repetitative listening, recording observational notes and working inductively to begin identify collective themes.

3) Interpreting data - through coding and theme identification. Data were sorted, through NVivo, and encoded into a list of preset codes, drawn from the literature review, for example, ‘relationships’, ‘tactics’ and ‘collaborations’.

4) Verifying data - included circulation of a short preliminary report outlining key findings to participants for feedback, and TSOs provided supplementary information including case studies of commissioning processes, tendering documents, minutes of meetings, evaluations, business plans and reports to corroborate interviews. Supplementary information was not coded, but instead used to help provide depth of understanding of specific examples of commissioning raised in the interviews.

5) Representing the data in terms of themes, quotes and examples in preparation for this paper - all quotes and examples, and the context that they are used in, within this paper have been sent too and approved by the participants concerned.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

In response to the research questions derived from the literature review we identify two significant areas of findings for discussion, first, the *‘situational factors’* under which social skills can manifest themselves, and second, the *‘agility tactics’* employed by some TSOs to achieve significant gains.

***Situational factors***

We identify three contributory situational factors which can both enable or inhibit the associated agility tactics, which we discuss further in these findings, each of which we report on here.

First, the nature of the commissioning environment. Commissioning processes vary widely across public sector bodies, with a recognition of a continuum of commissioning approaches between what we term as relational and process driven (Rees, 2014). Relational approaches tended to seek a more collaborative, partnership approach between State and TSO actors, whereas process driven tend to be more hierarchical and bureaucratically driven by the State actor (see Bovaird and Loeffler, 2012; Crouch, 2011; Cunningham, 2008). Under more relational approaches, TSOs had the ‘space’ to deploy social skills (see the agility tactics below) to work with Commissioners, involving more formal collaborative orientations to jointly generate policy and practice conditions which tended to ‘reward’ TSOs with the trappings of ‘positional’ security.

Second, the financial dimension. At field level, generally skilful TSOs were those who achieved desirable resource positions through diversification across funding streams, but also within those streams themselves. So, for example, one TSO that demonstrated these behaviours, received over seventy per cent of their funding from the public sector, but the multiplicity of the sources from within the public sector meant they were not wholly dependent upon any one State funder, Commissioner or commissioning organisation. Here, it is important to note we are not looking at finances in isolation, but as a means to achieve the ‘normative mandates’ and practical actions considered to be aligned with fulfilling organisational commitments.

Third, institutional context, and its reproduction through relational orientations. In line with recent existing literature we recognise three archetypal positionings at a field level (see Cunningham, 2008; Taylor and Rees, 2016). First, ‘Conformity’, whereby TSOs, often larger in scale, placed a premium on responsiveness vis-a-vis shifting political and policy priorities, and were relatively willing to “follow the money” as long as core goals would not obviously be existentially challenged. These agencies were comfortable with regularly re-interpreting mission and values in the light of changing circumstances, with accompanying narratives of flexibility and adaptability used to emphasise the extent to which such moves did not, it was claimed, involve ‘mission drift’ or ‘sell out’. They worked closely as “insiders” with power-holding Commissioners in this sense. Second, ‘Outlying’ often involved smaller, highly specialist TSOs typically with much ‘tighter’ mission focus who made a virtue of ‘keeping a distance’, and saw their lack of intimacy with the sorts of mutual adjustments ongoing in policy and politics as a key marker of their own independent identities. If this meant they appeared to be “outsiders” or ‘challengers’, and exhibit an extremely strong aversion to ‘mission drift’ and, thus, a more precarious financial existence, this was believed to be a price worth paying to sustain a strong identity and clearly differentiated niche. Crucially, however, a significant minority of TSOs are identified, which we refer to here as collectively constituting the third type, ‘Intermediary’. These could not be understood in terms of the binary insider/outsider distinction, played out predictably in a singular policy field. At first glance, they couldappear ‘unstable’ or ‘unsettled’ in a negative sense, not occupying a clear relational niche vis-à-vis other actors, and exhibiting indeterminacy, vagueness or evasiveness about their ‘niche’ and identities. Yet as we shall see, this very indeterminacy could be a constructive stance, knowingly cultivated. Organisations in this category tactically developed ambiguity, at times appearing to ‘follow the money’, whilst at others, ‘walking away’ or ‘keeping a distance’. These TSOs could not be defined by size or service delivery area, but instead were characterised by a deliberate fluidity in their positioning vis-à-vis their environment..

***Deployment of Agility Tactics***

Of the 23 TSOs interviewed, 8 demonstrated the purposeful and consistent deployment of these intermediary ‘agility tactics’ to secure collective advantage in this wider sense - appearing to act with conformity in some situations, but then to dissent, challenge and contest at other moments. These TSOs, included, by size, 1 small TSO, 3 medium, 3 large and 1 major, each focusing on different service delivery areas. Focusing solely on these 8 TSOs, we now summarise four types of tactic consistently associated with them. Together these tactics demonstrate how this approach sets them apart from the other archetypes explored and could secure significant gains which were unattainable if only a conformist or outlying position were taken, and crucially, involved developing systematic connectivity beyond the boundaries of the singular field.

The first ‘agility tactic’ involved an evident capacity to *reach out to, and sustain relationships embracing a wide range of actors*, including many with agendas which could appear quite dissimilar, in order to expand the potential range of available opportunities.Whilst Fligstien and McAdam (2012) do not specifically identify this social skill amongst their tactics, they do highlight the ‘positioning of self as interested in others’ as a social skill amongst actors. Intermediary TSOs were found to be relatively willing and able to work formally and informally with other TSOs from across the entire societal sector field regardless of financial size, geographical reach or governance structure. This ability to use informal relationships to create practically valuable webs of knowledge and networks not only within but also *beyond* the proximate field of core preventative services set them apart from some other TSOs. So, in situations where other organisations were often tending to reproduce existing patterns, intermediaries made a point of sustaining an open, outward looking scanning approach within and beyond the most obvious Commissioning relationships. The contrast was most palpable with large conformist TSOs working in a very focussed way with local Commissioners, favouring limiting relational work, maintaining predictability and continuity, and heavily investing energies and effort into those proximate connections to secure resources and recognition. Intermediary TSO, on the other hand, while staying reasonably well linked in with core Commissioners, also actively sought to engage with and support a wide range of organisations within the field, the wider sector *and* adjacent policy fields, often on a relatively informal basis. For example, one medium sized TSO delivering a range of preventative services listed 104 other TSOs, from both within their field and adjacent sub-fields, it had recognised relationships with. 82 of these TSOs attended their 2016 Annual General Meeting, varying from micro, locally based TSOs to major, national and international TSOs. Drawing on these networks they made themselves aware of, and could quickly respond to a wide range of funding opportunities, advocate for their beneficiaries with support from their network and equally reciprocate this by providing support and advice to others, particularly to smaller TSOs. Here the organisation was clearly demonstrating their ability to transcend self interest, encourage cooperation and stimulate collective identity making (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012) In another example, a single preventative service TSO, facing a massive reduction in their contract budget, explained how it successfully used such links to head-off an otherwise potentially catastrophic outcome. 21 local TSOs, from across adjacent sub-fields of the third sector made common cause to challenge the decision with the commissioning organisation, and ensured a significant reduction in the cuts that would otherwise have taken place. In these and other examples, intermediary organisations were drawing on informal networks to help secure more advantageous positions across the sub-sector field of preventative services, the wider societal sector field of the third sector and the local political field.

The second agility tactic involved *developing space for informal as well as formal relationship building and maintenance with the full range of relevant stakeholders.* As Fligtstein and McAdam (2012) note skilled social actors ‘include as many outliers as possible into the field and gain agreement on an overarching worldview and collective identity’ (p.53). In the case of TSOs, what is important to stress is that, in relation to Commissioners, while the formal language of ‘partnership’ and collaboration was adopted and the associated bureaucratic rules and routines adopted as appropriate, these structures tended to be considered as necessary, rather than sufficient, by intermediary TSOs. This pattern of avoiding seeing strict rules as the centre of gravity for organisational life, adopting a more pragmatic approach (Fligstein and McAdam, 2012) and investing in building wider ‘rapport’ involving strong ‘backstage’ as well as ‘front stage’ relations (cf Mair and Hehenberger, 2013), also applied to the wider webs of relationship prized by intermediaries, and thus obviously links closely to the first agility tactic. This combination of breadth of relationship, and emphasis on informality, was associated in the case of such intermediary TSOs with a confident willingness to be selective about opportunities taken and to ‘walk away’ from arrangements which were perceived as actually or potentially putting too much strain upon them in terms of mission or need orientation. In contrast, it was suggested that in these situations ‘conformist’ TSOs would be unwilling or unable to walk away (situations which, for their part, outlying TSOs would not find themselves in in the first place, almost by definition).

To ensure that the ‘walking away’ possibility happened not so frequently as to alienate other stakeholders and to allow the possibility of re-engagement - but not so rarely as not to create inward looking rigidities and locked in relationships - socially skilled TSOs sought to work with Commissioners to ensure a durable relational ‘spirit’ as well as in terms of formal procedure. Connections outside of these proximate relationships could help exert leverage, feeding back into Commissioning processes in ways which matched these TSOs’ collective goals. For example, one TSO bypassed a tendering process which was seen as involving an excessively rigid service philosophy, potentially pathologising families, and instead secured a separate contract based on match funding the project with another significantly larger project more in line with its own society centric, holistic approach. This had major repercussions, it drew attention to alternative approaches outside the immediate core Commissioning relationship, and signalled a policy direction of travel which obviously contradicted the immediate tender. While at one level this could seem to be a ‘missed opportunity’ or ‘aborted lines of equiry’ according to Fligstein and McAdam (2012), it had positive medium and long term knock on effects. The alternative funding stream allowed monitoring and evaluation targets which matched perceived service needs, confirmed the organisation’s autonomy, and, as the alternative programme unfolded effectively, created a new focal point for best practice within this area of policy, of which the Commissioners who had offered the ‘missed opportunity’ became aware. In the long term this then directly affected the latter’s behaviour in ways that realigned with TSOs’ priorities. It had the knock-on effect of fundamentally altering part of the policy monitoring requirements for core commissioning, where preventative policy was now reinterpreted away from being about primarily a very specific target group of identified ‘problem’ families towards the more holistic and wider definition of families ‘in need’ the TSOs collectively favoured. In this way, withdrawing from commissioning initially and being selective about opportunities taken, demonstrably adopting a successful alternative approach, and then re-engaging once core commissioning had been adapted, allowed this intermediary TSO to simultaneously influence both the policy field and the political field in line with their priorities and agenda (Fligstien and McAdam, 2012).

In effect, the TSO had utilised its linkages beyond the proximate field, including politically, to productively shape commissioning in the longer run, and this supported a perception that they could be trusted as innovative, and valuable to work with in terms of shaping priorities and philosophies, not just implementation. Exemplifying the advantages of this further down the line, was the idea that a ‘proper conversation’ was now ongoing, and this TSO had earned a partnership role in a meaningful sense:

*I think that has been a much more constructive way of building a relationship than just going cap in hand trying to deliver something for them under a contract when actually you can have a proper conversation about what they see as important and what we see as important. Sometimes we will have more innovative solutions to things, or see things have never been tendered, so one of the big services we now do has never been tendered because we solved the problem before we got to the tender process.* (CEO, Large TSO)

Here we trace a clear, specific example of how utilising multiple involvements could allow for tactical disengagement and work as a ‘long run’ tactic, in the sense of ensuring policies and practices in commissioning evolved more supportively. Clearly, if such relationships were to move towards inappropriate favouritism towards individual organisations, this would imply the process had become disconnected from an orientation towards social need. So, it is important to stress that it was the combination of such organisations having earned a reputation for taking a collectively oriented (rather than narrowly self-interested) approach with the skilful identification of relevant opportunities, and selective availability of them, which allowed such ‘proper’ relationships to be seen as not only appropriate, but healthy and productive. Our interviewees were very sensitive to this point in recognising the danger of appearing to exert ‘undue influence’, and contrasting this with the legitimate use of knowledge to shape an agenda from which there was collective benefit. As another ‘intermediary’ TSO commented:

*I think under our aim if we are in the commissioning process for something we know is a big need then we have probably failed, because we should have been having, unless there is no answer or no alternative from a legal point of view they have to commission it, conversations before this. But we would certainly see our role as being involved in shaping that commissioning process by arguing what the key factors are. I don’t mean that in the sense of unduly influencing the process and putting it in our favour, I just mean if there are key issues we are best equipped to support.* (CEO, Medium TSO)

Intermediaries did acknowledge that once formal commissioning processes started, their relationships with Commissioners became more formal. However, the key point was that their very involvement in processes early on, and the ‘demonstration effects’ of working in other arenas beyond immediate commissioning relationships, could give these organisations real leverage in setting the agenda in terms of priorities, targets and models. A strong emphasis on these wider aspects of activity, over and above the delivery of Commissioned services, was part and parcel of being an intermediary, rather than occupying a more static service delivery niche.

In the case of the two forms of agility tactic discussed above, we have seen intermediary TSOs, by being fluidly connected across arenas and fields, as well as relating to core Commissioners of preventative services, achieving heightened awareness of a wider range of opportunities than they would otherwise have been, facilitating selectiveness in opportunity taking. This approach in turn allowed a greater influence over the policy agenda - through demonstration in services, creating the conditions for ‘proper conversations’ largely as a consequence. In addition, a third agility tactic which emerged from the evidence involved the *ability to shape the agenda subtlety and indirectly through practical activity and role diversification*. According to Fligstein and McAdam (2012) ‘if a skilled actor can get others to accept what the terms of the discussion are, much of the battle has been won’ (p.51). In this case, rather than helping to ‘join up’ activities by cross fertilising favoured models and techniques directly between fields, activities were undertaken and roles developed relatively distinctively and separately from one another to expand opportunities, but still overall creating desirable momentum for policy change. For example, one TSO entered the education field, a completely differentiated policy field than they had previously occupied, to deliver services direct to schools and at a distance from the nexus of traditional Commissioning relationships within children’s care and preventative services, while continuing with the latter nonetheless. While finding it was possible to run these quite separate streams of activity simultaneously, it also engaged with and secured funding from more generalist bodies in the third sector sphere – the Big Lottery Fund (a quango) and charitable trusts. Accordingly, the financial profile was diversified – as per the conventional model discussed at the start of this section – but the key point of difference here was that it was diversification not just within a singular field, but *outwith* it, across adjacent areas. This success across a multiplicity of discrete fields was said to be crucial in strengthening the organisations’ reputation, and created a virtuous circle whereby ‘*the more successful we have been, the more funding we have won and the more confident we have become – it’s a bit of a success brings success this’* (CEO, Large TSO).

Another aspect of such positive, indirect knock on effects involves distinct roles, not just in relation to service areas, but across the sector’s distinct “functions” inclusive of political advocacy work and relationship building (Kendall, 2003). In this study one TSO discussed how prior to the release of a new tender for domestic abuse services, they had campaigned on a political level locally, while working with a national charity to impact policy. At the same time, they were informally advising Commissioners on the tender content as a separate - but experientially related - endeavour. They then went on to lead a partnership of TSOs which secured the contract over local housing association competition. This success was believed to at least partly flowed from the credibility gained, by those other, separate, activities, even if this effect was solely bounded within the relevant policy field.

A fourth and final agility tactic has in some sense been implicit in all the components discussed thus far, and brings us back to a core, overarching capability said to be a defining feature of social skill: the *ability to pursue coherently framed narrativisation across multi-fields and arenas*. Indeed, Fligstein and McAdam (2012) state ‘skilled actors will be pursuing a number of lines of action going simultaneoulsy’ (p.52), however we suggest that an important feature of this is the ability to not just pursue these ‘lines of action’ within a field but also *across* multiple fields. Our research suggested three ingredients were especially important in framing this narrative, all revolving around the idea that intermediary TSOs credibly claim to function in such a way as to put into practice their value based commitments and ‘normative mandates’ through their practical actions, and achieve a close integration of their favoured discourses with their actions. First, a discursive emphasis – even celebration – of ‘roads not taken’, ‘opportunities missed’, or decisions to ‘pull out’ on the basis that such involvements were incompatible with philosophies, missions and ultimately therefore values (see Anheier, 2014, for distinctions between these concepts). We have already seen examples of apparently ‘missed opportunities’. The emphasis for our purposes here is that these represent affirmative, confirmatory decisions, signifying authentic commitment, rather than regrettable instances of inertia or policy reversal. Indeed, the more organisations were involved across multi-fields and arenas, and the greater the extensity of ‘opportunities’ following from that, the more they exhibited a willingness to selectively resist inappropriate ones. This in turn would strengthen the claim of durable normative commitment, a strong adherence to TSO’s ‘invented traditions’, and a willingness and ability to disregard financial advancement if this was believed to entail potentialdistraction from core value-based action. Second, although we have stressed the extensity of diversification beyond core interests, the intermediaries kept rooted: they remained firmly anchored in a particular institutional nexus. This was typically, but not always, coincidental with the ideational territory occupied by local Commissioners themselves. Unlike ‘outliers’, they were resistant to the idea of ‘burning their bridges’ even when deciding to tactically cease involvement where contracting opportunities were out of kilter with their values. Rather, the tendency was to sustain those relationships, and, as we have seen, they could readily reconnect when it was judged that the moment was right once again. The basic reason for this seems to be that organisational roots, as well as future possible resourcing possibilities, were thought to be significantly located here, and obviously in a context of austerity, there were strong reasons to keep options open. Finally, it is important to stress that effective narrativisation involved not only convincing public sector bodies of shared values - subject to appropriate adoption of techniques for implementation - were at stake, but also ensuring these claims were acknowledged by peer TSOs. For example, one intermediary TSO pursued a youth services contract after predominantly being focused on younger children. On the whole, this was viewed as acceptable in the salient wider networks, as per the general view of this TSO taken by others, *‘they’ve got their values right’ (CEO, Medium TSO).* This meant that they had demonstrably found a way to embed their value commitments in their actual practices, and to be seen to have done so. Hence, as per Fligstein’s account, framing is important, but we have seen that this framing is disseminated as credible, socially and politically. In other words, it is important to stress these effective narratives were not just storylines individualistically perpetuated by the organisations who were the leading ‘characters’ within them (McBeth et al, 2014: 228) but were successfully and credibly embedded in shared discourses, and genuinely ‘bought into’ by the wider community of Commissioners, other public sector bodies, and other TSOs.

**CONCLUSION**

This paper sought to respond to two research questions raised by the literature; 1) Can we identify what ‘social skill’ looks like in practice? And if so, 2) what tactics are employed by VSOs to secure advantage with any given field? We have outlined through the exploration of commissioning approaches and tactics employed, how some TSOs, those we refer to as intermediaries, can employ social skills to secure positional advantage within any given field. In responding to these questions, this paper has also sought to acknowledge the extremely challenging nature of the Commissioning environment for TSOs, and the dysfunctions associated therewith (Milbourne and Murray, 2017; Rees and Mullins, 2016), but has made a new contribution to knowledge in this field, pointing to ways in which especially skilled TSOs – those we refer to as intermediaries - have been able to navigate this complex environment with considerable success. We have drawn on an elaborated formulation of ‘strategic action fields’ in general, and the notion of social skill in particular, to try to identify some of the tactics which seem to be important here. While these may in part be understood as situated within the relevant singular field, we have tried to draw attention to the relevance of accounting for connections, relationships and institutions which systematically stretch out beyond the core ‘home-base’.

In our chosen case, this has meant acknowledging the significance of linkages extending well beyond the immediate relationships of providers with the local Commissioners of preventative services for children. We consider that these capabilities seem to be manifestations of what we have called ‘positional agility’. We tried to show that the ‘intermediary’ TSOs, which particularly embody these agility tactics, moved skilfully between fields and arenas, discharging multiple functions (not just delivering services, while ultimately staying anchored at ‘home-base’).

The strength of this understanding of third sector relationships is that it partly situates capacities for change within the organisations themselves, and while acknowledging the strength of external pressures, shows how it is nevertheless possible to exert agency, even in the face of such a challenging environment. External factors can provide the catalysts for this ‘entrepreneurship’ but on a deeper level it requires a closer look at individual TSOs, the links between socially skilled leadership and how this may work both within and across fields. The mobilisation of social skill and retention of legitimacy allows these TSOs to capitalise on their ‘normative mandates’, challenging and contesting – or walking away from – the potential imposition of isomorphic forces (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), orchestrated by State actors or others, where this is seen as legitimate by themselves and by peer TSOs.

Fligstein and McAdam (2012) suggested it is this very ability to interweave and pursue multiple strategies of *‘social skill in action’* whilst retaining legitimacy which potentially places them in positions of ‘incumbency’. However, we have seen in our study that, paradoxically perhaps, at least some TSOs deliberately eschew the unconditional routinisation of relationships which seems to be implied by this terminology. Implicitly recognising that ‘incumbency’ has the potential to be associated with ‘incorporation’ or ‘capture’, perhaps, they exhibit a marked tendency to cultivate a more ambivalent and conditional relationship to the State, even if that sector does itself embody a concentration of positional power. We contribute to this discussion by suggesting that the seeds for recognition of the enduring relevance of ambivalence or indeterminacy, rather than unambiguous binary categorisation of actors as ‘challengers’ or ‘incumbents’, are actually to be found in the details of these authors’ own account of social skill - even though they do not themselves treat it as relevance for the purposes of classifying institutional actors.

Lastly, our final and perhaps most significant contribution uses another of Fligstein and McAdam’s favoured formulations, but with an emphasis they may not have intended, we therefore suggest that, while they do indeed seek to ‘take what the system offers’ – our point is that the ‘system’ must not be conflated with one singular policy field. Rather, it extends significantly beyond it, into arenas where the capabilities of TSOs are also relevant. By ensuring a wide ranging presence *across* arenas, *selectively* taking emerging opportunities, and working to build not only resources but also relationships from across a wide mixture of institutional settings so that their capacities and strong normative orientations can be collectively recognised and reproduced, agile TSOs both reproduce and change not only singular policy fields, but the functioning of the broader ‘system’.

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