

TSRC seminar series

Seminar 3: 3rd March 2010, 4pm

Room 58/2097, School of Social Sciences, University of Southampton

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

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There has been a rapidly growing interest in longitudinal research methods in recent decades. Social scientists have increasingly sought to understand what it might mean to take time seriously in both quantitative and qualitative research design and analysis. Above all, attention to various conceptions of temporality, and extending the duration of research engagement offers the prospect of understanding the dynamic processes involved in social change. A longitudinal research gaze offers the promise of 'seeing things differently'. In two parts, this paper explores the implications of qualitative longitudinal research for developing an understanding of the third sector.

It discusses first the context and rationale behind 'Real Times', the Third Sector Research Centre's qualitative longitudinal research programme, and outlines the design and structure of the study. The second half of the presentation will explore a set of substantive issues which form one of several key concerns for the 'Real Times' programme. Questions surrounding the sustainability of third sector organisations in the UK have become increasingly salient during the economic downturn and changing political context, and tend now to be discussed in terms of organisational survival and 'resilience'. But little is known about the complex array of circumstances which might make for sustainable and 'resilient' third sector organisations, and about the everyday experiences of third sector organisations attempting to survive, develop and achieve their objectives.

The presentation will provide a theoretical and empirical examination of these concerns, concluding that third sector research, policy and practice might usefully be informed by wider theoretical debates, for example about structure and agency, in social science.

About the researcher:

Rob Macmillan has been researching different aspects of the third sector for around fifteen years. He joined the Third Sector Research Centre (TSRC) as a full time Research Fellow in February 2009, where he is leading the design, coordination and delivery of the programme of qualitative longitudinal research with third sector organisations. Rob's research interests concern how the third sector operates in practice, and how this is changing. In particular this covers rethinking the finance of third sector organisations, competition and collaboration within the third sector, and the issues around third sector 'capacity-building' and infrastructure support.

Previously Rob was a senior researcher at the Centre for Regional Economic and Social Research (CRESR) at Sheffield Hallam University. As well as an extended study of the role of second tier support agencies in developing and organising community-based projects in deprived rural areas (doctoral research project, University of Durham, 1999-2003), over the last five years Rob has undertaken a number of studies examining local third sector infrastructure support in the context of the national *ChangeUp* programme.