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## How pragmatic sociology can enable research to embrace the complexities of the third sector

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The objective of this article is to show how the theoretical framework of pragmatic sociology can enable research to recognise and reflect on the uncertainties and ambiguities of the third sector.

The key question of this article is how third sector research can respond to times of upheaval and organisational ambiguity.

The authors conclude that both crises and everyday practice within the third sector trigger tests of organisational values which require actors to justify their actions. Using pragmatic sociology to evaluate their responses offers a promising springboard for research which acknowledges conflict and nuance within an alternative conception of power relationships.

[#COVID19](#) [#organisationalvalues](#) [#pragmaticsociology](#) [#thirdsectorresearch](#) [#uncertainty](#)

### Background & Context



- The theoretical framework of pragmatic sociology aims at explaining the interplay of different schemes of value (**'orders of worth'**) within and between organisations and understanding how this affects practice.
- According to pragmatic sociology, decisions around organisational behaviour lead to different orders of worth being pitted against other in a self-reflective process of normative value determination (a **'test'**) which determines whether an organisation's actions can be justified or whether change is required.
- Examining the responses of actors to a test enables **solid empirical data** to be gathered which evidences conflicting normative values and approaches within a framework in which power relations are determined rather than assumed.
- The use of the pragmatic sociology framework enables third sector research to reflect the **multiple different influences** on behaviour and actions within organisations and not shy away from the uncertainty these create.
- The possibilities of using this framework to understand the pluralism of values in the third sector were highlighted during the **COVID-19** pandemic, and it could be of use in helping **future research** understand the everyday ambiguities of organisational practice.



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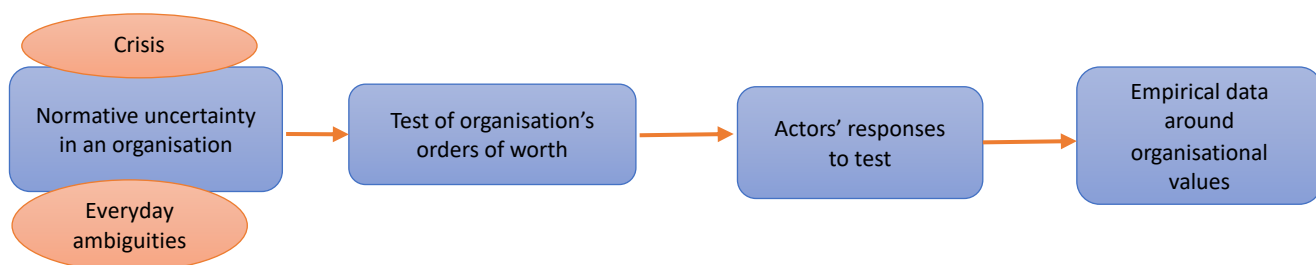
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## Take aways & Learnings



- Third sector research must acknowledge and engage with the multiplicity of orders of worth within organisations and not avoid complexity or uncertainty.
- Pragmatic sociology offers an opportunity to do so: its theoretical framework enables an empirically-based assessment of the drivers behind organisational action.
- The story-based methods of pragmatic sociology can describe the values and drivers shaping the development of third sector practice in the face of external challenges such as COVID-19, as well as account for the multi-faceted nature of its organisations.
- Pragmatic sociology also offers a new approach to the investigation of power relationships between subjects, arguing that these should only be ascertained once analysis is complete and should result from the actors themselves, not be imposed upon them by the researcher.
- There are many future research possibilities for the framework, including investigating the relationship between the decisions of individual organisations and wider sectoral developments, and the prioritisation of the use of funds within organisations.

**Figure 1:** The application of pragmatic sociology to third sector research



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