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What Tears Them Apart?

Dissolution in Instrumental and Expressive Voluntary Associations

Dan Sundblom¹

Abstract

This paper elaborates the instrumental-expressive typology to explore how endogenous and exogenous factors are linked to the dissolution of voluntary associations. Starting from a separation between associations' emphasis on societal influence and/or service delivery, or socializing in their activity, three categories along the instrumental-expressive dimension are tested against key-explanations in the study of nonprofit and voluntary organization death, such as liability of newness and smallness. The original sample, gathered in the late 1990s, includes 3377 registered voluntary associations, of which 517 have ended their activities to this day. The results suggest that there are significant differences along the instrumental-expressive dimension with regard to organizational dissolution and survival. An important finding is that organizational age and membership size do not correlate with the dissolution of purely instrumental associations, that is, associations that emphasize advocacy and service delivery, while they are good predictors of dissolution among the expressive associations.

Key-words: voluntary associations, dissolution, instrumental-expressive, organizational death, survival

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Introduction

What are the factors that undermine the possibility of voluntary associations to function, and that eventually lead to their dissolution? Previous studies on the dissolution and survival of associations have found that young age and small size decrease the probability of survival while, for example, external ties, extroverted activities and hierarchical structures increase survival chances (Wollebæk 2009) and that mission completion and resource inefficiency explains many dissolution (Fernandez 2008). However, as voluntary associations include a wide spectrum of organizations, with differences concerning, for example, purpose, rationale and organizational and institutional environments, one should not expect that the challenges associations face are the same across the associational field. As an illustration, the pressures which might jeopardize the existence of a bowling club are most likely different than those on an animal rights association or a labor union association. A conceptual challenge is that “voluntary association” is a normatively enforced category, which analytical use is somewhat problematic as it comprehends the thought of homogenous social structures while empirically the variations are often, in fact, tremendous.

Consequently, rather than grouping together all associations, this paper aims to show how factors linked with dissolution impact voluntary associations depending on the rationale of activity. Starting from a separation between associations’ emphasis on either societal influence and/or service delivery, or socializing in their activity, it does so by studying dissolution in three, analytically meaningful, broad categories of voluntary associations: instrumental, instrumental-expressive and expressive voluntary associations. Exploring the issue of associational dissolution by comparing three separate categories of associations can shed light on how internal and external conditions affect different associations and also how particular social change effect the associational landscape.

The data for this study was collected in Finland as part of the The Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project with a survey to voluntary associations in the late 1990s. The associational field in Finland, as well as the other Nordic countries is under “intense pressure” and the development is at the expense of Nordic particularism, which is characterized by, for example, popular mass movements, hierarchical organization patterns and the representative role of associations, bringing them towards other countries. Linked to this, culture, sports and recreation associations increase in popularity while many other areas of activity, such as advocacy and politics decline (Alapuro & Stenius 2010). In this paper, I emphasize two characteristics of the Nordic model of associations, which are found to be at risk, as they coincide with two key-explanations in the literature on associational dissolution: membership and hierarchical organizations patterns. First, the role of membership as an institution, thought of as the cornerstone of Nordic civil societies, is undermined as novel ways of resource mobilization are introduced making organizations more excluding and professionalized and less democratic than before (Papakostas 2011). Second, the diminishing role of hierarchical organizational

patterns as young and newly founded local associations to a lesser extent than before are part of a larger structure (Siisiäinen 2002, Tranvik & Selle 2008).

In this paper I look at the changes of the third sector from the perspective of dissolutions in voluntary associations in the Finnish context. Dissolution is equated with deregistration from the Register of Associations in Finland or long-time passivity. A predominant feature of the Finnish third sector is the high share of registered associations. Registration requires some formal work but grants legal status and recognition among other organizations. The sample therefore includes predominately local volunteer groups, or grassroots associations (GAs), which quite often go under the radar in research on the organizations of the nonprofit and voluntary sector (Smith 2000). The sample was gathered in the late 1990s in 49 municipalities across the country and includes a wide variety of associations, for example, teachers' associations, motorcycle clubs, political parties' local chapters, choirs, self-help groups and ice hockey clubs. Almost 20 years after, nearly one sixth of the 3377 identified associations have discontinued with their activities.

Instrumental and expressive associations

The instrumental – expressive typology offers an analytical tool for the categorization of voluntary association along their rationale of activity. It was first introduced by Gordon and Babchuk's (1959) to the study of voluntary associations as a way of separating between their stated objectives. Instrumental associations, they argued, “serve as social influence organizations designed to maintain or to create some normative condition or change” and “exist in order to attain goals that lie outside of the organization”. Their examples of instrumental associations include “The NAACP (*National Association for the Advancement of Colored People*), The League of Women Voters and a Neighborhood Improvement Council” (Gordon & Babchuk 1959, 25). Expressive associations, on the other hand, “provide the framework for immediate and continuing gratification to the individual“, and “provide the opportunity for carrying activities confined and self-contained within the organizations itself“. Examples of expressive associations are ““senior citizens” clubs, the Boys' Club, bowling, chess, and checkers associations” (Gordon & Babchuk 1959, 27).

Peter Frumkin (2009/2002) has recently developed a two-dimensional model of instrumental vs. expressive rationale on one side and demand- or supply side orientation on the other side to illustrate the functions of the nonprofit and voluntary sector. Frumkin's definition differs from Gordon and Babchuk's in at least three ways. First, it concentrates on nonprofit and voluntary organizations, not associations, and is therefore narrower in its focus. For example, the expressive associations in the last quote of Gordon and Babchuk would not be included in the Frumkin's framework. Second, Gordon and Babchuk offer a middle ground in their typology,

which is instrumental-expressive associations, while Frumkin does not, leaving no room for “hybrids”. Third, while Frumkin seems to be operating on an organizational level with his typology, in fact the function of the activity is paramount to him. Lu (2008, 74) observes that in Frumkin’s distinction “instrumental NPV (nonprofit and voluntary) actions are justified by the instrumental value in the outcomes, while expressive actions are justified by the expressive quality of the actions.”

All organizations, and especially associations, include both instrumental and expressive dynamics and thus a categorization in either two or more categories along the instrumental-expressive dimension will always be crude and dependent on, for example, context and the study’s objectives. In this study, I intend to bring back the typology to that of Gordon and Babchuk (1959). Thus, the instrumental dimension is equated with both service and advocacy functions. The expressive dimension is linked in this paper with social togetherness, which arguably is one of the main characteristics of expressive organizations.

Much of the literature on organizational death of NPV organizations focuses on instrumental associations. In the studies done on NPO success and failure, Helmig, Ingerfurth and Pinz (2014) note that they tend to focus on the economically most important sectors. In a research overview on success and failure in NPOs note that the focus of 147 articles, 102 (69.4 %) examine nonprofits in International Classification of Nonprofit Organizations (ICNPO) (Salomon & Anheier, 1992) categories 1 to 4, i.e., Culture and Recreation; Education and Research; Health; and Social Services. Of these 102 NPOs the health sector was by far the largest with 60 articles (58.8 %). The authors calls for more work on failure and success of NPOs in understudied sectors as “what is important in the health sector may not be crucial for environmental NPOs” and because this will “bring the field closer to a generalizable theory” (Helmig et al. 2014, 1527).

This study includes voluntary associations across the instrumental-expressive dimension and thus moves beyond the preference on solely instrumental organizations. The main assumption is that the rationale of the activity is of use when considering organizational death in voluntary associations and that it elaborates the knowledge on what factors lead to dissolution. This line of thought has been developed and empirically tested elsewhere (Sundblom, Lagerspetz, Keedus & Rikmann 2016).

Previous research and hypotheses

Although the dissolution of nonprofit organizations has been studied to some extent in the US (for example Hager 1999; Twombly 2003), the dissolution of voluntary associations has received little attention from scholars studying the nonprofit and voluntary field. The three exceptions are Fernandez (2008), Wollebæk (2009) and Sundblom et al. (2016). In his qualitative study of 41

officially dissolved Spanish voluntary associations in the Madrid's metropolitan area Fernandez (2008) found that resource mobilization, 26 associations, and mission completion, 16 associations, were the biggest causes for dissolution. Mission completion means that an organization fulfills its mission, or the mission becomes unobtainable, and decides to dissolve and there are many studies that verify this phenomenon (Hager et al. 1996; Hager 1999; Fernandez 2008). The problem in the context of this study is that it is not possible to identify why associations have dissolved. Nevertheless, one needs to keep in mind that almost a third of the (instrumental) associations might have been successful in their mission.

Wollebæk's (2009) research on the survival of Norwegian voluntary associations recognizes several factors that organizational leaders, at least in theory, can influence on and thus enhance the possibilities of survival. These include organizational composition and hierarchy, board diversity and external ties. Along these voluntaristic characteristics, he also found that many deterministic characteristics, which are presented here below, correlated with organizational longevity.

Starting with Stinchcombe's (1965) prediction regarding young organizations lesser possibilities to function and survive as compared with older organizations the *liability of newness* is well studied among NPOs (Hager, Galaskiewicz, Bielefeld, & Pins 1996; Hager, 1999; Twombly 2003) and even voluntary associations (Wollebæk 2009). As opposed to older, experienced organizations, young organizations "start from scratch" and the establishing of new roles, connections outside the organization and the routinization of activity is highly consuming. Higher age thus is expected to have a positive effect on organizational survival.

Hypothesis 1: Younger associations are more likely to end their activities than older organizations.

According to (Aldrich & Auster 1986) the liability of newness often coincides with the liability of smallness as most new organizations are small in size when they are founded. They find that the liability of smallness might actually be a stronger force as their results show that small organizations withhold the same high mortality rate even though they grow older. There is support for the liability of smallness in the study of NPOs and associations (Hager, Galaskiewicz, Bielefeld, & Pins 1996; Hager 1999; Twombly 2003; Wollebæk 2009). The second assumption is the liability of smallness and predicts that associations with a small membership are more likely to dissolve than large associations.

Hypothesis 2: Associations with a small number of members are more likely to dissolve than large associations.

The third assumption deals with hierarchical affiliations. The expectation is that associations that are part of a larger structure, regional or national, have a lower rate of

dissolution than those that are freestanding. The higher organizational levels can provide guidance, expertise and resources in times of crisis and thus even lessen the effects of the liabilities of newness and smallness.

Hypothesis 3: Associations with hierarchical affiliation are expected to have a lower dissolution rate than those with no affiliations.

Considering environmental factors that probably have an outcome on dissolutions, one can expect that the size of the municipality is of some importance. As the domicile is the main area of activity for most associations it also is the area within which resources are gathered and members recruited and therefore posits the backbone of association. In small municipalities the possibilities of survival are expected to be lesser than in large municipalities.

Hypothesis 4: The larger the domicile the better chances of survival.

Like other organizations associations too compete for resources with other actors. Competition is thus assumed to have a negative effect on associational survival. Negative competition effects are most likely in areas where private and state actors are active, such as the social service sector (Hager, Galaskiewicz, Bielefeld, & Pins 1996).

Hypothesis 5: Competition has a negative effect on survival.

The strong local government of Finland has traditionally been an important partner for local voluntary associations, providing them with resources, such as funds and localities. This partnership is challenged by newly founded associations as they less prone to withhold close ties with the municipalities (Siisiäinen & Kankainen 2009, 101). Municipal cooperation is, still, expected to strengthen associations and be associated with survival. Therefore, the assumption is that cooperation with the municipality will lower the risk of dissolution.

Hypothesis 6: Good relations to the municipality increases survival chances.

Considering the organization's environment as a source of resources the assumption is that many outside funding sources have a positive effect on survival. Although funders might expect a return for their inputs, as the theory resource dependency (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978) predicts, influencing the receiving parts activities, for survival many funders have a positive effect. This is because these ties can be used as access not only to economic but also social capital and as a form of legitimacy (Baum & Oliwer 1992). Associations embedded in their environment thus are expected to have a higher survival rate than those that are not.

Hypothesis 7: Many different types of outside funding sources have a positive effect on survival.

The financial aspect of voluntary associations operation is increasingly important and associations in increasingly turn to external organizations for funding (Papakostas 2011) As with the number of members, total income to some extent reflects the associations potential to continue with the activities. It also shows the associations resource mobilizing capabilities and is expected to have a positive impact on survival.

Hypothesis 8: The higher total income, the smaller risk of dissolution.

When considering the possible differences between associations in what characteristics lead to dissolution, Sundblom et al. (2016) suggest that instrumental associations close because of reasons having to do with environments, resources and goals, while expressive associations close predominantly because of social reasons, that is, reasons having to do with the internal life of the organization. As the present study does not look at reasons for closure per se, but organizational characteristics that predict death, doing hypotheses on their findings is a challenge. In reviewing the results one can, nevertheless, keep in mind Sundblom et al. (2016) propositions that external reasons are critical for the dissolution of instrumental associations and that internal reasons are critical for expressive associations.

Data and methods

The survey data for this study was collected in between the fall of 1997 and the winter of 1998 under lead of Professor Voitto Helander for the The Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project. All in all 8 747 registered voluntary associations in 49 municipalities were contacted per mail and the return was 3898, 46 % (Helander & Laaksonen 1999). Out of the 3377 associations that were identified 517, that is 15.3 %, associations are considered as inactive. By comparing the associations that took part in the survey with the register for legally unregistered associations a total of legally 210 dissolved associations have been identified. This constitutes 6.2% of the total 3377 associations identified as either registered or dissolved. In addition, 307 associations, that is 8.3%, were regarded as inactive if they met two conditions: First, had not made a change in the registry data (change of bylaws, change of address, or change of persons entitled to sign for associations) since 1997. And second condition was that the association was not present on the internet in the 2010s. Internet presence was checked by doing a search on Google's search-engine on the associations' names and includes for example functioning and updated homepage, events or meeting notices, results in competitions and updates in social media.

The expressive/instrumental dimension is constructed with two variables on the emphasis of associational activities. The respondent has answered on a scale of one to five how much the activities emphasize social togetherness (1) to societal influence (5) and social togetherness (1) to

service production was used. The answers were recoded so that the answers 1-2 = 1, 3=2 and 4-5=3 and then the variables were summed together to constitute an additive index ranging from 2 to 6. The new variable was recoded so that low values (2 to 3) equals expressive, middle value (4) equals expressive-instrumental, and high values (5 to 6) equals instrumental. In this way associations which emphasize social togetherness over both societal influence and service production are expressive while those that emphasize both societal influence and service production over social togetherness are instrumental.

A question of obvious interest is how different associational activity fields distribute in the three categories. By comparing the four biggest categories in the ICNPO (Salomon & Anheier 1996) with the instrumental-expressive typology in the data shows that within the “Culture and recreation” category is as expected skewed toward the expressive side: 12.5% are instrumental, 21% are instrumental-expressive and 66.5 % are expressive. The second largest ICNPO-category “Business and professional associations, unions” is almost as clearly skewed to purely instrumental rationale: I 52.9%, IE 28% and E 19.1%. The “Law, advocacy and politics” distribution is more balanced: I 32.7%, IE 27.7% and E 39.6%. The fourth largest group is “Social Services” that is likewise balanced: I 36.8%, IE 27% and E34.4%.

The methods used in this study are cross tabulation and logistic regression and the dependent variable is dissolution, defined as deregistration or long term inactivity (see above). The program used for the statistics is IBM’s SPSS. The construction of the eight independent variables is explained in detail in the appendix.

Results

Table 1 shows how the dissolutions are distributed over the three categories. The expressive associations have the highest dissolution rate while instrumental-expressive associations have the lowest. The differences are rather small, within 3.2%, and the Chi-square test is not significant. Still, if one would like to draw some conclusions on the basis on this table it would be that associations that include both instrumental and expressive functions are most durable.

Table 1. Dissolution rates

	Dissolved/inactive	Active	Total
Instrumental	93 (14.6%)	543 (85.4%)	636
Instrumental-Expressive	74 (12.2%)	535 (87.8%)	609
Expressive	187 (15.4%)	1027 (84.6%)	1241
Total	354 (14.4%)	2105 (85.6%)	2459

Turning to Table 2, starting with the fourth column, it shows that when considering all associations all but two variables, “Domicile population” and “Annual income”, correlate significantly at least on the 95 percent level in the expected direction. The only positive correlation is that between competition (=1) and dissolution. The models explanatory power lies at .237 Nagelkerke’s pseudo R^2 , which is decent for this sort of study. Overall then, these results affirm what can be expected from main theoretical assumptions and know from previous research on the dissolution of voluntary associations.

As to the main assumption about the differences between the three categories there are some noteworthy results. Remarkably, the liabilities of newness and smallness are not present in the purely instrumental associations while they are the only significant predictors for dissolutions in instrumental-expressive associations and the best predictors for expressive associations. Smallness or youngness as the key (deterministic) predictors in many studies are powerless for the service and advocacy combining associations. The result that membership size does not correlate with death goes well with the simulation of Van Puyvelde et al. (2015) which predicts that grassroots associations might opt for limiting their size for reasons of governance and in order to avoid mission drift. Also, small instrumental associations are nimbler and more flexible than large membership organizations of the classic Nordic model having thus considerable benefits in a faster moving world (Tranvik & Selle 2007). The fact that organizational age does not have explanatory power opens some interesting questions, such as, by which means has the learning period considerably lowered making young associations rigid? Is the answer to be found in ICT, university schooled professionals and/or information networks?

The answer this study provides is that instrumental associations’ hierarchical structures are the most important factor for survival, providing a shelter from harm as they bring with them the routine, expertise and roles, that is, the factors Stinchcombe (1965) identified as important for organizational survival. A more cynical explanation is that nonoperational polymorphic organizations are not allowed to dissolve but are kept alive artificially for various reasons, such as expected future needs or because of otherwise lost funding or gathered resources. Perhaps a more self-explanatory finding is that competition is harmful to the survival of instrumental associations while not for the other two categories. Municipal cooperation is also important to instrumental associations from as it probably provides both resources and legitimation to the association. The Pseudo R^2 Nagelkerke is .196, the lowest among the categories.

Table 2. Dissolution of associations since 1997: Logistic Regression

	Instrumental		Instr. – Express.		Expressive		All Associations	
	Regression coefficient B	Standard Error	Regression coefficient B	SE	Regression coefficient B	SE	Regression coefficient B	SE
Age (log)	– .23	.15	– .36**	.16	– .27***	.10	– .28****	.07
Members (log)	– .23*	.13	– .80****	.21	– .68****	.12	– .53****	.08
Hierarchical structure	– 1.05***	.37	.15	.47	– .55**	.24	– .53***	.18
Domicile population	– .19	.12	– .31	.13	– .05	.09	– .08	.06
Competition	.70**	.33	.48	.38	.21	.23	.36**	.16
Municipal cooperation	– .79**	.34	.08	.37	– .37*	.22	– .37**	.16
Outside funding sources	– .25	.16	– .33*	.18	– .23**	.11	– .27****	.08
Annual income (log)	– .06	.1	– .23*	.13	– .05	.08	– .10*	.05
Constant	4.17***	.1	5.23***	1.83	4.0****	1.15	4.17****	.80
Pseudo R ² Nagelkerke	.196		.302		.261		.237	

Note: N = 417 (Instrumental), 415 (Instr. – Express.), 881 (Express.), All Associations 1713

*p ≤ .10. **p ≤ .05. ***p ≤ .01. ****p ≤ .001.

That the associations in the instrumental-expressive category are most dependent on members is not very surprising. On the contrary, these middle-of-the-road associations, which combine either advocacy or service with social functions, are built around the strong membership which embodies the characteristic way of voluntary organizing in the Nordic countries, that is, the popular mass movements. They very much function in similar vein as Gordon and Babchuk (1959, 26) observed with instrumental-expressive organizations in the US, namely, at the local level they are expressively oriented, with some instrumental functions, while they on the higher organizational levels operate more instrumentally. In this category, organizational age does correlate at a significant level with survival. The Pseudo R² Nagelkerke of .302 shows the explanatory power of both size and age for this category of associations.

Moving on to expressive associations the table shows four significant variables and a Pseudo R² Nagelkerke of .261. Size and age are the best predictors while hierarchical structure and outside funding sources also make the cut within 95 percent significance. This suggests that the most exposed associations among purely expressive entities are those that are small and of young age, are not affiliated with any other organization and have none or a few outside funding

sources. The results for the expressive associations can also be read as a direct effect of the organizational changes that have taken place in new leisure associations since the 1990s, such as not being a member of a central federation and weak ties to other organizations (Siisiäinen 2015, 7).

Discussion and Conclusions

The changes in civil society taking place within the Nordic-context have been widely discussed in the literature (for example, Alapuro & Stenius 2010, Wijkström & Zimmer 2011). The essence of these writings is that different processes are taking place that undermine the traditional organizational characteristics of civil involvement, as, for example, the rationalization of civil society as the decreasing role of members, as actives and funding sources, in associations (Papakostas 2011), and the strengthening of other voluntary forms and institutions, such as social enterprise and philanthropy, at the cost of associations and membership (Wijkström 2015). The findings of this study can share some light on the actual transformation of the associational field.

This study has elaborated on how the longevity of associations depends on a core characteristic – rationale of activity. The categorization of associations along the line of instrumental-expressive typology has shown some significant differences in factors linked with dissolution. The results indicate that the number of members is of vital importance for three quarters of the associational field. It is only the purely instrumental associations, those which combine advocacy with service functions, which are untouched by organizational size when it comes to dissolutions. Nor are they affected by young age, but depend on external factors (competition) and relations to other organizations (municipality and member of a central federation) which is in line with what Sundblom et al. (2016) propose, while instrumental-expressive associations' chances of survival are lowest for small and young associations. Purely expressive associations have the most varied reasons to go out of activity and clearly benefit from external funding and being part of a larger organizational structure. The findings affirm the notion that small, non-affiliated, introvert and young expressive associations run a high risk of death.

Considering the findings of this study, it is safe to say that instrumental associations have successfully moved toward slimmed structures letting go of the long cherished (Nordic) membership organization model. Nevertheless, this traditional way of organizing still has a place in the expressive organizations. The conclusion, then, is that Papakostas's (2011) thesis on the rationalization of civil society is true for the "serious" part of the associational field, while not complete in the rest of the sector. On the other hand, participation in the activity of expressive associations in most cases requires membership, so that rules out the process of diminishing the role of members altogether.

This study has three major limitations. First, the only observation point is twenty years ago, which is a long time for organizations. Second, the sample is gathered in several municipalities across the country, resulting in a sample that is not an organizational population, which would allow the use of predictions from population ecology. Third, the explanatory variables available for this study in the data are not ideal, as they include relatively few characteristics which have been found to be important for studying organizational change.

Future quantitative studies on the change of voluntary associations should not treat the associational field as a monolithic entity, but categorize along fundamental analytical differences, such as along the instrumental-expressive dimensions. This will help to deepen and enrich the knowledge on the ever-present yet diverse and multifaceted social structure called voluntary association.

List of variables and coding in logistic regression

Age (log)	Logarithm of organizational age in 1997
Members (log)	Logarithm of individual members in 1997
Hierarchical structure	1 = Affiliated with regional or national organization
Domicile population (log)	Logarithm of domicile population in 1997
Competition	1 = Competition with another organization, whether association or public or private organization
Municipal cooperation	1 = Answers very important and important on question: How important is co-operation with the municipality for your association.
Outside funding sources	Additive index (0-6) of the following income sources: Public support, private donations, sales to private actors, sales to public actors, capital income and other incomes.
Annual Income (log)	Logarithm of annual income in 1996 (in 1000 Finnish Marks)

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