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Nothing to fear, but fear itself? Exploring the importance of mortality anxiety for interest group research

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Abstract

This paper explores how the concept of ‘mortality anxiety’ fits into the literature on interest groups. Most of the relevant literature has used mortality anxiety as a proxy for organizational survival. Recent studies, however, highlight that this is not a very accurate proxy, hereby questioning the overall usefulness of the concept for the literature. This paper argues that mortality anxiety may still have an important place in the literature, but not in the way it was originally intended, namely to understand the political strategies of interest organizations. Organizations which fear for their survival, we argue, should make substantially different strategic choices than organizations absent of this fear. As a consequence, mortality anxiety is still a critical variable for the interest groups and non-profit literature. We empirically illustrate our argument based on data from a survey project in five countries ($N=2904$): Belgium, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, and Slovenia.

Keywords Interest group · Mortality anxiety · Strategies

Introduction

The question of what exactly drives interest group behaviour has a long tradition of competing answers. Most notable is the dichotomy between the logic of influence and the logic of survival (see Lowery and Gray 1996). In the latter, a concept that has recently seen increased attention is mortality anxiety (Gray and Lowery 1997; Halpin and Thomas 2012; Heylen et al. 2018). Mortality anxiety, i.e. the fear of organizations of ceasing to exist in the near future, has been identified as a possible

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bridge between population characteristics and individual interest group behaviour. More explicitly, it carries the implication that, if the main goal of interest groups were to survive, any (perceived) threats to their existence could determine their behaviour (Gray and Lowery 1997; Halpin and Thomas 2012). As such, this concept can play an important role in explaining interest group behaviour.

So far it remains unclear, however, whether mortality anxiety is indeed a useful concept for the population ecology literature, let alone a critical one for the broader interest groups theory. Moreover, the question of what exactly mortality anxiety is in relation to the behaviour of interest groups and how it should be used to understand and explain said behaviour remains unanswered. In this paper, we employ a multifaceted conception of mortality anxiety and demonstrate the use of this conceptualization to measure interest group behaviour. Interest groups' fears are diverse, and different fears lead to different reactions in behaviour. Our findings suggest that when mortality anxiety is interpreted as multifaceted and as a determining factor, it can be a working indicator for explaining the survival behaviour of interest groups.

Before we can start explaining interest group behaviour using mortality anxiety, first it has to be clear whether mortality anxiety is actually a relevant phenomenon and not epiphenomenal to population-level developments. Although mortality anxiety carries a potential, its position vis-à-vis established concepts remains unclear. Its current conceptualization inhibits an effective role in explaining interest group behaviour. It has been grouped together with concepts such as density and competition in potentially measuring the same dimension of the logic of survival. However, mortality anxiety has, as we will argue, not always proven to be a very accurate predictor of actual survival rates of organizations. Furthermore, mortality anxiety is traditionally viewed as an outcome, as a response to population-level developments, rather than, as we propose, an instigator of behaviour. Our conclusion is that mortality anxiety has not been properly theorized and its current form does not allow us to employ it to measure interest group behaviour. So before we can demonstrate our use of the concept, it is necessary to provide a new perspective on mortality anxiety. The first goal of this paper is, therefore, to introduce our multidimensional version of mortality anxiety.

The second goal is to demonstrate that mortality anxiety is indispensable in understanding the *strategies* of organizations in relation to changing resource environments. Indeed, as the relevant literature suggests, mortality anxiety is not an accurate proxy for actual survival rates, but we propose that this might not matter as interest group leaders are not consciously aware of this. The important part is that their fear of mortality is real and it therefore seems viable that it will affect their strategic considerations. For instance, if interest groups fear that a lack of funding will eventually lead them to go bankrupt, regardless of whether this fear is warranted or not, they may increase their visibility to potential members through media campaigns (Bob 2005). Such adaptive strategies by individual organizations start with the perception of serious threats and possibilities that are often, but not necessarily, linked to macro-population dynamics. Hence, it makes mortality anxiety of critical importance for the literature on interest group strategies and influence, provided it is placed in the right theoretical framework.



As stated above, the theoretical approach to mortality anxiety is left wanting and a sound systematic approach is necessary to employ the concept usefully. Therefore, in this paper, we also inquire into the more specific nature of the concept while providing a systematic approach to mortality anxiety. That is, we argue that mortality anxiety is not a unidimensional concept, but should be understood in light of the *object of fear*. Hitherto, this has been overlooked, as the ‘fear’ of dying has been regarded to be one and the same. However, organizations can fear death for many reasons and this should have a different effect on their strategic behaviour. To encompass these differences in a useful, systematic way, we rely on Stinchcombe’s (1965) conceptualization of the key sources of organizational survival: wealth, power, and legitimacy. We therefore expect that these distinct types of mortality anxiety trigger *different types* of strategic choices, in line with the type of fear organizational leaders have for their survival.

The paper is structured as follows. Firstly, we provide an overview of the broader relevance and origin of this paper. Next, we analyse the concept of mortality and suggest our multidimensional understanding of the concept. Following this, we hypothesize the possible effect of mortality anxiety by linking it to the strategic behaviour of interest groups. This comprises parts I and II. In part III, we briefly highlight our research design. In part IV, we illustrate the plausibility of our argument based on data from a large-scale survey in five countries ($N=2904$): Belgium, Lithuania, the Netherlands, and Slovenia. Part VI gives a conclusion and suggests some paths for further research.

From mortality to anxiety

The reason that the potential of mortality in explaining interest group behaviour has hitherto been overlooked is largely due to its origin within the population ecology literature. Mortality anxiety, or the fear of organizations to cease to exist in the (near) future, saw the light in the search for an explanation of mortality within the population ecology framework, being first used by Gray and Lowery (1997) as a proxy for mortality. Whereas at the beginning of interest group literature most prominent questions focused on the formation stage of interest groups, the approach as advocated by Gray and Lowery also furthered thinking about interest group mortality. An implicit assumption up to this point was, as Halpin and Thomas (2012: 215) note, that interest groups would ‘just’ keep on surviving. However, with the rise of population ecology literature, it became apparent that a lot of groups do not survive; the volatility of group populations is a constant finding (see Halpin and Thomas 2012; Schlozman 2012; Lowery and Gray 1995). Due to the finality of resources, increased density should create scarcity, which in turn should be reflected in the population structure. When a community surpasses its carrying capacity, the mortality rate of interest groups rises (Gray and Lowery 2001: 388).

Mortality and behaviour were difficult to capture within a cross-sectional model, as a dead organization does not display any behaviour. Anxiety about dying, however, could be measured and used as proxy for the actual death of organizations. This works as follows: an increase in density leads to increased competition for



resources, which in turn leads to insecurity about whether the organization will be able to secure enough resources for organizational maintenance (Gray and Lowery 1997). Survival therefore is not only dependent upon individual interest group characteristics, but also shaped by population traits, which condition the chances for survival (see also Lowery and Gray 1996; Hannan and Carroll 1992; Hannan and Freeman 1989). As such, there should be some population-level determinants for levels of mortality anxiety and most of the relevant literature tries to explain levels of mortality anxiety by linking it to organizational traits and population characteristics (see for example Heylen et al. 2018; Halpin and Thomas 2012).

The hitherto use of mortality anxiety within these studies, however, has been somewhat disappointing in its results; it almost begs the question whether the concept actually has any use for interest group theory. We perceive the reason for these results to be twofold: firstly, mortality anxiety is mainly used a dependent variable (see Heylen et al. 2018; Halpin and Thomas 2012) rather than as an indicator of behaviour. Mortality anxiety is often integrated in a theoretical framework in which the anxiety levels are an outcome of other indicators of organizational survival, while current studies (Heylen et al. 2018) seem to suggest that they are—empirically—not closely related at all. For instance, Heylen et al. (2018: 18) conclude that ‘(...) anxiety is not about resource endowment, organization type or membership as such, but rather about how an organization is related to its environment and how this interaction is experienced by the leadership’. We argue that mortality anxiety fits this description and deserves a closer look. Secondly, mortality anxiety is approached as a one-dimensional concept rather than as multifaceted. This is reflected in the ambiguous findings in the literature on what actually influences levels of mortality anxiety. Whereas density is still an important explanatory variable for Gray and Lowery (1997), it appears to be a poor predictor of mortality anxiety in later tests (Heylen et al. 2018; Halpin and Thomas 2012). The findings in the literature are ambiguous and diverse, which, to us, suggests that the concept might be more complex than ‘just’ a fear of dying. This can be the result of a too-broad take on mortality anxiety, which denies the existence of different fears with different *objects of fear*.

Concluding, we suggest taking mortality anxiety as an independent variable and approaching it as a multifaceted concept. In doing so, we contend that mortality anxiety might be the most accurate indicator of interest group behaviour. We will outline our views on this new approach below.

Mortality as indicator of behaviour

The most pivotal consequence of a reinvention of the concept is that it opens up the possibility to measure behaviour directly, as opposed to what has been done in the past. So far, in this line of research, proxies have been used in lieu of a direct indicator of behaviour, and it has been common to explain the choices of strategy by interest groups based on population characteristics, such as density or competition, or on organizational characteristics such as group type. While this has had some success in predicting or explaining behaviour (e.g. Gray and Lowery 1997; Halpin



and Jordan 2009; Lowery et al. 2012; Holyoke 2017), we contend that scholars can do better. If interest groups are indeed driven by a logic of survival, mortality anxiety will be a much better indicator of behaviour, as it actually measures the fear that would prompt organizations into action. It thus measures how the interest group interprets its environment and, as this can differ among interest groups, a population characteristic is less accurate than the perceived fear.

A starting point for reinventing mortality anxiety is therefore the suggestion of Heylen et al. (2018) that mortality anxiety is more about how the interaction of an organization with its environment as experienced by the leadership, rather than telling us something about mortality or its determinants. Instead of taking it as an outcome of population developments, we suggest seeing it as the initiation of behaviour: it is how an organization experiences its environment.

Mortality anxiety, if present, would suggest that interest groups are indeed aware of their survival prospects, hinting at the existence of a logic of survival. To have mortality anxiety, organizations need to be aware of their survival being threatened. Therefore, actions taken based on this fear would *confirm* the existence of a logic of survival as an explanatory mechanism within interest group behaviour. As Lowery (2007: 46–47) puts it, ‘the most fundamental goal of organizations must be to survive as organizations. All other goals organizations might have are necessarily secondary considerations since failure to survive will preclude them’. So any action that results from mortality anxiety can be traced back to the logic of survival more adequately than other indicators of fear for organizational survival. This means that scholars interested in the logic of survival should be interested in the concept of mortality anxiety.

As such, mortality anxiety might be the closest indicator available to assess the importance of survival imperatives for interest group strategies. This means that mortality anxiety can be extremely useful in explaining the behaviour of interest groups, as most likely it is the fear of the effects of developments influenced by things like competition or density that translates into strategic behaviour by organizational leaders to protect the organizations from the perceived threats. However, in order to explain interest group behaviour, it might not be important at all to know what actually leads to the death of interest groups. Behaviour depends upon how the fears are ‘translated’ into behaviour. Though this might very well be an incorrect assessment of what is actually threatening or ‘killing’ the organization, it will still drive the choices of the organization. Moreover, the leadership of different interest groups can have diverse ideas about what is threatening their organization, which would naturally lead to different behaviour. This means that, due to the fact that leadership can carry diverse fears, mortality anxiety cannot be a simple and one-dimensional concept. Rather what is pivotal is what an organization *thinks* is threatening its survival, for this is what it will base strategic choices on.



A new approach to mortality anxiety

Our emphasis on explaining interest group behaviour requires a new framework for an approach to mortality anxiety that aims to explain interest group (survival) *behaviour* and its effects. In theory, mortality anxiety has the potential to be an influential concept to help understand how groups are driven by their fear for survival. However, given the limited conceptualization within the literature, it is in its current form not suitable for such a purpose. So while the literature on interest group survival has included mortality anxiety as an encompassing concept (i.e. is the organization afraid it will cease to exist or not?)—which makes sense, as for dying it does not really matter what the object of fear is—it is important for organizations' *behaviour*. We expect that groups will behave differently according to the object of fear: whether it is due to a loss of relevance in the political process or due to a lack of membership support. To test this expectation in a systematic way, we propose three types of what we deem to be fundamental fears that organizations might experience, which should lead to certain strategic choices but not others. This is just a selection, as there may be many more fears that groups experience. To distinguish in a systematic way between the types of fear groups might experience we follow Stinchcombe (1965), who stated in his seminal chapter *Social Structure and Organizations* that the survival of organizations depends on three basic organizational resources: wealth (material resources), power, and legitimacy. Without these basic resources organizations cannot survive. So if any of these three pillars of existence is threatened, an organization *should* act upon this by adapting their strategies to mitigate these threats. A caveat is due, as this is not an exhaustive and encompassing framework; rather it is a start to test whether our ideas about mortality anxiety are correct. In the next sections, we provide some examples of how this might work.

First, leaders of organizations will always worry about not having enough resources in the future to continue their organizational activity. Securing sufficient *financial and other material resources* is perhaps the most direct type of fear that groups face when it comes to their survival, and is commonly a priority for any organizational leader. Without the mobilization of resources organizations will simply cease to exist. It is therefore logical that organizations worry about their solvency, such as through membership donations (Schmitter and Streeck 1999). As a consequence, we would expect interest groups to consider the financial ramifications in developing lobby strategies: the more concerns groups have about financial solvency, the more they will invest in strategies which might help garner income. Outside lobbying is the most common as this increases the public visibility of an organization to current and potential members. We are certainly not the first to argue this, yet former studies have not linked it to the actual fear that groups indicate having, but instead rely on proxies such as the competition for resources or group type (e.g. Dür and Matteo 2016; Hanegraaff et al. 2016; Dellmuth and Tallberg 2017). We thus link the explicit fear that organizations indicate having in securing financial means for their survival to the relative use of outside lobbying (Hanegraaff and Poletti 2019). We expect that, all else being equal, groups that fear that they cannot attract enough financial means will increase their outside lobbying efforts to gain



exposure. This way, the explicit fear around financial solvency drives the strategic choices these groups make. Obviously, it does not mean that there are no other ways of countering insolvency. We expect, however, that it is likely that this effect will hold, and therefore, it a useful start to our empirical test. We of course encourage other scholars to explore other causal mechanisms.

Following Stinchcombe, *power* is the second important pillar of organizational maintenance. While power is of course a rather ambiguous and capacious concept, it closely reflects insights about the importance of having a political impact to sustain membership. As Gray and Lowery (1997: 28) argue, ‘political influence and access to the policy process is one of the most vital resources for organizations to acquire as it contributes to an organization’s identity. This is important to legitimize advocacy expenses to members and in order to acquire new donations in the future’. While there are many ways in which a group’s power *can* be threatened, a group must at the very least have access to political institutions that have the power to impact the group’s constituency. Following our reasoning, a fear of a potential shift of power across governance institutions should trigger action among interest groups towards a new venue. Obviously, groups always want to be ‘where the heat is’ (Baumgartner et al. 2009), but we argue that this will be even more so, and earlier in the process, for groups which fear that they might become politically irrelevant in the future, and as a consequence cease to exist, due to these shifts in political authority. In short, notwithstanding differences in power, a change away from the venue where organizations are active will always result in a decline in their power. For example, an organization active on the national level but not on the European level will likely fear a loss of power when the locus of decisions on their subject(s) transfers to the European domain. This should lead to a change in behaviour to preclude this loss of influence. To operationalize this fear as behaviour, we expect interest groups that fear that increased Europeanization of politics will threaten their existence will adjust to this fear by increasing their European lobby activities, compared to interest groups that do not experience this particular type of fear for their survival.

The third and final important factor of organizational survival, according to Stinchcombe, is *legitimacy*. Organizations constantly need to offer ‘an acceptable theory of themselves’ to others that are important to the organization (Meyer and Scott 1983). This provides them a rationale for their existence and survival, and also sanctions the power relations of which they are part (Beetham 2013). In order to make this happen, organizations regularly try to make their goals desirable, their procedures appropriate, or their structure comprehensible to themselves and to others (Suchman 1995; Gnes and Vermeulen 2018, 2019). Leaders of organizations and others involved in the organizations are constantly working on this ‘acceptable theory of themselves’. Their perception of the way in which the public broadly perceive their organization and its message will influence strategic behaviour. The legitimacy of an organization is also an important aspect within interest group theory, as it can determine (to a certain extent) what the organization’s role is within the policy process (see Fisker 2013: 124–125 or Nownes 2004: 53–54).

If organizations lose their legitimacy, they might be less involved in the policy process and also have problems attracting members and funds given that the reason for their existence and their role in society is questioned. Examples of such a loss of



legitimacy are the decline in memberships of trade unions (Dufour and Hege 2010), political parties (Andeweg 2003), and other civic organizations (Putnam 2000). These developments are in part due to the increasing trend of individualization, which is something that is also visible with other types of interest. That is, more societal individualization means that people will be less eager or willing to engage in any form of collective action, including interest groups. At that point interest groups will lose political legitimacy, as they are no longer seen as appropriate for representing the interests of particular groups of people or organizations/businesses. A clear example is European trade unions which, due to declining membership, have lost some legitimacy in the political arena over the past decades. Thus, individualization poses a threat to the legitimacy of interest groups and it should prompt them to counter it by using a strategy that addresses it. This fear can be overcome by increasing the involvement of members to gain legitimacy and make them believe that the activities of certain interest groups are still legitimate. Or, as Schmitter and Streeck (1999) would frame this, move from a logic of influence to a logic of membership. As such, we expect that a fear for more individualization in society should increase membership involvement as this helps to tie interested members to the organization. This shows why membership has added value and, for organizational leaders to present a 'better theory of themselves', why theory organization is appropriate and therefore legitimate. Note that this does not mean that there are not other ways of increasing legitimacy in the face of death, e.g. joining lobbying alliances, but this is our specific prediction to test our general idea about mortality anxiety. Again, we encourage the exploration of alternative objects of fear and interest group behaviour in relation to issues of legitimacy.

In short, in exploring the importance of mortality anxiety for the broader interest group literature we use this tripartite approach to analyse whether the different fears of mortality anxiety lead to different strategies. It allows us to meaningfully assess whether the concept of mortality anxiety is indeed a good indicator for the effects of the logic of survival on interest group behaviour, and whether different types of fear trigger a different response by interest group leaders.

Research design

As many of the questions we have raised can only be answered empirically, we provide an empirical test for both propositions related to the role and place of mortality anxiety in the population ecology literature. To this end, we make use of data gathered in the Comparative Interest Group Survey (CIGS) (Beyers et al. 2016). This survey addresses the organizational characteristics, political activities and strategies of interest groups. At the moment, it has been set out and completed in Belgium, Italy, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Slovenia, and Sweden, and it is planned to be conducted in the UK, Germany, Spain, the Czech Republic, and Poland. Therefore, the countries we consider in this paper represent all the polities for which the data we need for this paper is currently available (see 'Appendix' for more information on the project).



As for our unit of analysis, individual interest groups, a key distinction can be made in the literature between the ‘behavioural definition’ (Baumgartner et al. 2009) and the ‘organizational definition’ (Jordan and Greenan 2012) of interest groups. In the first case, groups are defined based on their observable, policy-related activities; in the second case, the ‘interest group’ term is reserved only for membership associations. As for the CIGS, the latter definition is preferred and only non-profit organizations have been included in the survey. This fits our purposes as we also derive our expectations based on membership organizations. Overall, the response rate of the survey was 38 per cent, which is relatively high compared to other online surveys (Marchetti 2015). Moreover, the response rate was quite evenly distributed across countries. More precisely, response rates were as follows, from lowest to highest: Slovenia (36%); the Netherlands (38%); Lithuania (40%); and Belgium (41%).

The empirical section is operationalized as follows. In the first part of the analysis, we want to explore whether mortality anxiety is a relevant concept and empirically distinct from other key concepts in the population ecology literature, namely resource competition and density. *Mortality anxiety* was measured by the following question: ‘Sometimes, the very existence of an organization is challenged, by internal and/or external forces. Within the next 5 years, would you estimate that your organization will face a serious challenge to its existence related to the following threats?’ After this, the concepts of resources, Europeanization, and individualization were asked separately. Respondents could choose from five categories, ranging from highly unlikely to very likely. We then compare mortality anxiety with *competition for resources* and density. The former was measured by the following question: ‘In general, how much competition does your organization face from other organizations in its attempts to recruit members, increase donations, or obtain EU or national government funding etc.?’ Respondents could choose between five categories, ranging from ‘no competition’ (= 1) to ‘very strong competition’ (= 5). For *density*, we use the responses to the question: ‘How involved is your organization in the following policy areas?’ For each country, the number of organizations indicating to be ‘very active’ in a policy field is summed up. To make the density score comparable across countries, we rely on a relative density score, which means the proportional size of a policy field compared to the population of interest groups in a country.

In the second, main part of the analysis, we explore whether the three types of fears for survival (i.e. fear for a loss of financial resources, Europeanization, and individualization) affect organizational strategic choices in a logically consistent manner. The strategic choices are: (1) the relative use of outside lobbying, (2) the relative focus of lobby activities at the EU level, and (3) the intensity in which members are involved in decision-making. For *outside* lobbying we rely on a question asking about the relative importance of inside and outside lobbying. The total adds up to 100%. We rely on the percentage choosing outside lobbying. For *EU* lobbying, respondents were asked to indicate how much of their lobby efforts were directed at the national, EU, and global levels. The answers add up to 100%. We rely on the percentage dedicated to the EU. Finally, for *membership* involvement we rely on a question about how important members are for the development of lobby strategies.



Respondents could choose between ‘very important’, ‘important’, ‘somewhat important’, ‘limited importance’, and ‘not important’.

To make sure we produce robust findings and can isolate the effect of the different fears for survival, we control for various relevant indicators. The first is group type, following the well-known INTERARENA coding scheme (Baroni et al. 2014). This includes business groups, identity groups, institutional groups, leisure groups, occupational groups, public interest groups, religious groups, and unions. Next is budget, where we asked about the annual operating budget of the organization in 2016. The answering categories range from under 10 thousand euros (= 1) to 10 million euros (= 8). The third is professionalization, which combined several indicators ranging from 1 to 5: decision-making, hiring policy, staff training, and career prospects of employees. Our variable is an average score based on each of these indicators. The remaining control variable is country, for which we provide a dummy per country in the analysis (Belgium is the reference category).

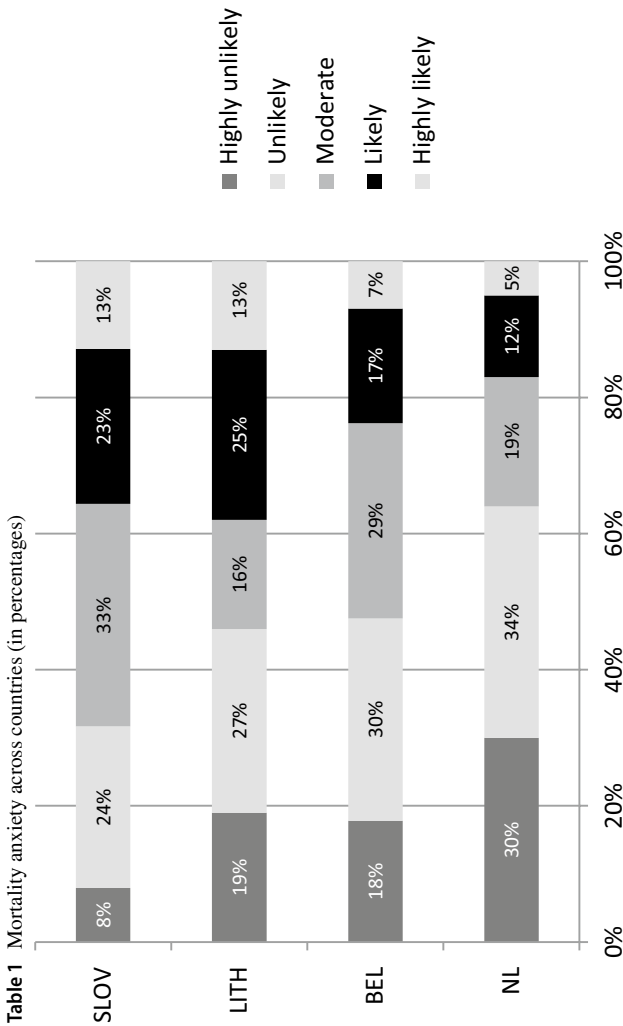
Empirical illustration

Our illustration starts with the question of how important mortality anxiety is for interest groups. If it is a trivial concept for interest groups, with barely any organizations being afraid to die, it cannot have a relevant impact on decision-making. To check this, we plotted, for each of the five countries, the distribution of the answers to our questions (see Table 1). Here, we see that there is significant variation across groups in countries, and across countries. In the Netherlands, 17 per cent indicates that it is likely or even very likely that they will cease to exist in the next 5 years. In Belgium, roughly a quarter of all organizations indicate that they feel there is a good chance of them dying within the same period. In Eastern European countries, mortality anxiety is the highest: over one third of organizations seriously fear for their survival in the coming half-decade.

These results clearly show that mortality anxiety is not an irrelevant phenomenon for organizations. This is perhaps not surprising, as a lot of interest groups do not survive, and volatility of group populations is a constant finding (see Halpin and Thomas 2012; Schlozman 2012; Lowery and Gray 1995; Hanegraaff et al. 2019). These results indicate that interest groups are aware of this and worry about the long-term survival of their organization, which confirms the first step of the theoretical mechanism: if an organization is conscious of its possible fate, it might take action to avert its seeming destiny. We can therefore conclude that mortality anxiety has, at the very least, the potential to affect group behaviour. Subsequently, we can move on to checking its distinction from density and competition.

In the next step, we explore whether mortality anxiety is empirically different from other concepts used in the population ecology literature. Tests with mortality anxiety in the literature have so far yielded ambiguous results, with Gray and Lowery attributing importance to both density and competition, while Halpin and Thomas (2012) drop density from their explanatory model. The latter is confirmed by Heylen et al. (2018) but with an emphasis on institutional factors. To illustrate our point, we plotted the correlations between mortality anxiety, competition and





Question: "Sometimes, the very existence of an organization is challenged, by internal and/or external forces. Within the next five years, would you estimate that your organization will face a serious challenge to its existence?"

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Table 2 Correlations between mortality anxiety, competition, and density

	Mortality	Competition	Density
Mortality	1		
Competition	0.23*	1	
Density	0.08*	-0.03	1

Significance: * < 0.05

density (see Table 2). The outcome confirms the findings by Heylen et al. (2018). There is no relation between competition and density, only a low correlation for the association between mortality anxiety and competition, and a very low correlation for the association between mortality anxiety and density. The results indicate that mortality anxiety is empirically neither the equivalent of density nor of competition for resources, which supports our claim in this paper.

Our final aim is to take mortality anxiety as an independent variable and test whether it has any explanatory power concerning the behaviour of organizations, and specifically their strategic choices. As said, we rely on an approach based on Stinchcombe's trio. These expectations represent the three general aspects of survival for interest groups that can be threatened, or rather be perceived as threatened. We plotted the three expectations in Table 3, controlling for group type, budget and level of professionalization (as explained in the research design).

The results support our contention that mortality anxiety is a valuable concept for explaining interest group survival behaviour and that it is a multidimensional concept, with different fears leading to different behaviours. We will briefly discuss the three fears and their effect on behaviour, starting with the first pillar, *wealth*. Based on our analysis presented in Table 3, we can see that a fear for increased competition has a significant effect on the choice to use outside lobbying strategies. This seems to confirm that interest groups that identify a threat to their resources as imperilling their survival address this threat by increasing their use of outside lobbying strategies. Importantly, fear of a loss of wealth does not affect the other two strategic choices, which confirms that it is indeed a *specific* fear that drives *specific* behaviour.

Table 3 Predicting strategies by different types of mortality anxiety (multilevel OLS regressions)

Type of mortality anxiety	Outside lobbying	EU venue shopping	Member involvement
<i>Fear of</i>			
Increased competition	+ **	n.s.	n.s.
Europeanization	n.s.	+***	n.s.
Individualization	n.s.	n.s.	+***

Each regression is a multilevel linear regression which estimates a random intercept for each of the 5 countries (not shown). All analyses are controlled for group type, budget, and level of professionalization. Regression coefficients, standard errors (in parentheses), and significance are presented, whereby: * $P < 0.05$; ** $P < 0.01$; *** $P < 0.001$; n.s. = not significant



Moving on to the second pillar, *power*, we expect that organizations that fear Europeanization or globalization are significantly more likely to change the venue of their lobbying efforts. The fear of a threat, in this case Europeanization or globalization, to the power needed for survival significantly affects their strategic choice regarding the locus of their lobbying efforts. Similar to the above, there is no effect on the other two strategic choices, which highlights that a behavioural reaction is specific to a certain threat only.

Our third and final expectation, concerning *legitimacy*, is that organizations that fear individualization will increase their efforts around member involvement. Looking at Table 3, we are able to confirm our third conjecture as well. The fear of individualization has a significant effect on the member involvement efforts of interest organizations. This means that a perceived threat to the legitimacy of organizations will prompt them into action to maintain or increase their level of membership involvement, subsequently helping them to stay relevant as a legitimate representational organization. Once again, there is no link between this particular threat and the other organizational choices (outside lobbying or an EU focus), which emphasizes that it is critical to know the *type* of fear organizations perceive to face to understand the strategic choice interest groups leaders make.

Overall, we thus conclude that mortality is a relevant concept in explaining interest group strategic choices. Yet, to grasp the causal link between the fear of death and the choices interest groups make, one needs to consider the object of fear and relate this to a meaningful response by interest group leaders. In other words, if a group fears it will die due to limited funds, it will increase its visibility through outside lobbying; if a group fears it will die due to a lack of power, it will focus its energy towards more powerful venues; and if it fears a loss of legitimacy due to the individualization of society, it will include members more in the decision-making processes. This confirms our overall claim that, in the right framework, mortality anxiety is an extremely useful concept for explaining interest group behaviour.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have advocated for a focus on interest group behaviour and proposed a systematic approach to the behaviour of interest groups in their efforts for survival. Our systematic approach has been built around the concept of mortality anxiety, and we have shown that this is a useful concept in explaining and predicting the behaviour of interest groups. Notwithstanding the different possible goals of interest groups—some will actively struggle for their survival—using mortality anxiety to explain their behaviour has been demonstrated to be a fruitful approach. We have centred our efforts on the three pillars for survival as postulated by Stinchcombe, and our subsequent analysis has shown that interest groups indeed act upon what they fear is threatening their existence. If their wealth is threatened, they use strategies to increase their (chances of) wealth; if their power is threatened, they adapt their strategies to address this loss of power; and if they feel that their legitimacy is threatened, this urges them to act in order to maintain or increase their legitimacy. This confirms that the usefulness of mortality anxiety as a concept within



interest group theory has been hampered by its place within the wrong analytical framework, as well as the role it has been given within this framework. Our reconceptualization has proved to be a fruitful exercise, demonstrating the use of mortality anxiety as an explanatory concept for the survival behaviour of interest groups.

Another interesting contribution is the reconceptualization of mortality anxiety itself. Firstly, we have brought some clarity by establishing that mortality anxiety is indeed a concept distinct from density and competition. Secondly, and more importantly, whereas previously the concept was treated as being a general concept of fear, we contend that it is best treated as a relational concept and therefore best conceptualized in relation to an object of fear. Not every interest group fears the same thing in the same way and to the same extent. Distinguishing between different fears has been effective in interpreting interest group behaviour. Thirdly, we have highlighted the different roles that density, competition and mortality anxiety play concerning mortality and behaviour: in the literature it has been demonstrated that density and competition are significantly related to actual mortality, while mortality anxiety does not predict organizational death very accurately. However, in terms of strategic behaviour by organizations we see it the other way around. Mortality anxiety is a more powerful explanatory factor in the decisions taken by organizational leaders to cope with the threats they perceive than the actual threats themselves that are caused at the organizational population level by competition and density. This illustrates not only that organizational leaders are often unable to identify actual threats to their organizations, but also that the perceptions of these leaders are crucial in understanding the strategic behaviour of these organizations.

Our findings have implications for the broader work of interest group theory. The theoretical potential that has often been attributed to mortality anxiety, as a bridging concept between macro- and micro-level research, is misplaced. Mortality anxiety does not amount to a bridge between developments at the population level and individual interest group behaviour, translating population characteristics one-on-one into distinct behaviour. Nevertheless, it does seem to indicate a certain awareness of a conditional effect of population-level developments. Earlier literature was, in a sense, on the right track by assessing the effects of competition and density on mortality anxiety (see Heylen et al. 2018; Halpin and Thomas 2012). However, these previous findings remained somewhat ambiguous and were less refined due to the use of mortality anxiety as a general concept. Taking mortality anxiety as an independent variable that is related to objects of fear allows for a theoretical framework in which forms of mortality anxiety do have explanatory power. Moreover, it still has the potential to translate macro-conditions into micro-actions, albeit in a more specific way. This moves the mechanism into the realm of perceptions, as it now revolves around the perception of fear that organizations have. Put more simply, what organizations see as threats becomes important and this does not have to be congruent with 'objective' population developments. Indicative of this is the almost complete insignificance of density in our work, as well as in previous work, on competition, as well as the unimportance of any increase in member involvement, which Heylen et al. (2018) clearly find does not decrease mortality anxiety.

That being said, we have only made an exploratory inquiry into the potential of mortality anxiety and more work clearly needs to be done. Our aim was to



demonstrate the usefulness of the concept of mortality anxiety for interest group behaviour research, while simultaneously proposing a systematic approach to this. This work has opened up several inroads for new research. A first step would be to investigate the connection between population-level developments and forms of mortality anxiety (or more generally, the origins of forms of mortality anxiety), and moreover the question of how interest groups perceive threats and value solutions. A second and equally important step would be to explore what the *effect* of this mechanism is on populations as well as on the workings of the lobby system. The (potentially wrong) identification of threats and the subsequent process of continuous adjustment can have profound effects, also on the existence of the organizations, e.g. the wrong diagnosis or remedy can lead to organizational death, as organizations might be too late to act upon developments and therefore act in a counterproductive way. For instance, as we have seen, fear of a loss of legitimacy may lead organizations to increase membership influence. Yet, as Wilson (1974: 38) notes, ‘the extent to which member opinions constrain executive performance with respect to the benefit-producing activities of the organization varies with the marginal value of the benefit’. In other words, giving members more input in the organizations could endanger the financial stability of organizations in the long run as leaders are pushed for short-term success by their membership. While speculative, such processes would potentially connect mortality anxiety to actual mortality. Lastly, another interesting question would be to inquire to what extent the contention about the objects of fear holds in other political systems (e.g. the USA). We hope our work will inspire such future research.

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Compliance with ethical standards

Conflict of interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

Appendix: Comparative interest group survey

The project’s objective is to develop systematic knowledge about the organizational development as well as the political strategies of civil society organizations, interest groups, lobby groups, and advocacy organizations. The aim is to achieve a better understanding of the daily operations of civil society organizations across different national settings. For this purpose, the project involves various surveys and the systematic mapping of the interest group populations in different European countries, as well as at the EU level. At this moment, large surveys have been conducted in Slovenia, Belgium, Sweden, the Netherlands, Lithuania, Italy, and the EU level, in the first phase. Poland and Spain were included in the second phase, and additional surveys are planned for the Czech Republic, Germany, and the UK.



The response rate is quite evenly distributed across countries in our analysis. More precisely, response rates were as follows, from lowest to highest: Slovenia (36%); Netherlands (38%); Lithuania (40%); and Belgium (41%). While such response rates are quite good for interest groups surveys (Marchetti 2015), an important condition is that the responses are equally distributed among key group types. For this reason, all country teams dedicated a lot of resources to generating good response rates, reflected in the overall sample. For instance, respondents were called if they did not respond to requests, in order to motivate them to fill in the survey. Hereby, certain underrepresented groups were prioritized to make sure the sample was as valid as possible. The distribution across group types is listed in Table 4. Overall, the distribution among group types reflects other mapping studies, whereby business groups are the largest set of interest groups (ranging between 33 and 51 per cent), followed by NGOs (identity and public interest groups). Moreover, we also see that the percentage of business groups in the EU is 56 per cent, which is in line with other studies highlighting that business groups dominate interest group communities more at the EU level than at the national level. This is a first indication that any biases in the selection and/or response rates of group types should not be preoccupying.

Are there systematic biases in the sample we may not have picked up? Potentially yes, as in most cases it was the more wealthy organizations that declined to participate in the surveys, such as the national chambers of commerce. Importantly, however, this also applies to the more wealthy NGOs, such as Greenpeace. It therefore seems plausible that we overestimate the overall level of fear for survival among interest groups in the countries, but not specifically for a certain type of group. Hence, we are quite confident that the mechanism we describe in this paper can be generalized to the population. Moreover, in the analyses we include country dummies to account for variation across countries.

Another issue relates to the countries in our sample. On the one hand, there is a great diversity among countries in the EU, i.e. we have two Eastern European countries and two Western European countries. This means there is a large diversity in political systems and political cultures which should be beneficial for any

Table 4 Distribution among group types across countries

Type	BE	NL	LT	SL
Business	23	16	22	9
Professional	19	17	29	33
Union	2	1	6	8
Identity	15	22	14	14
Public	14	14	9	8
Leisure	20	13	8	22
Institutional	3	16	5	2
Rest	5	0	6	2
<i>N</i>	958	875	365	439



generalization. On the other hand, there needs to be some caution related to the interest mediation system as most countries score relatively high on corporatist scales (see Jahn 2014). This could affect the generalizability as it may be slightly different in countries with a pluralist system. This should be studied in future research.

Another indication that our results are not biased is because our data are, in key elements, in line with other research, using different datasets. For instance it is more commonly known that NGOs which face more competition for resources also rely more on outside lobbying than NGOs which face fewer such obstacles, while this does not affect business groups with varying levels of resource competition (e.g. Dür and Matteo 2016; Hanegraaff et al. 2016). While we use a different indicator, namely a direct measure of fear for survival, the mechanism is the same. This strengthens our belief that we have a valid sample. *In short*, the samples are certainly not perfect, but the best available. Moreover, we have no indication that there is a systematic bias in our data to invalidate the claims made in this paper compared to findings in other projects. We are therefore confident that the claims we make in this paper can be generalized to the populations of the respective countries under study.

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