Managing conflicting logics: Organizational and individual responses to inherent contradictions in nonprofit organizations

Sarah Langer M. Sc.
Chemnitz University of Technology

„We are not loved, and it would be bad if we were“
(Member of the Counseling Project for Victims of Far-right Motivated and Racist Violence)

Organizations operating in voluntary capacities, otherwise known as the third sector\(^1\), are acknowledged as an alternative to conventional organizational models of private and public business. More specifically, the more alternative forms of organization are often attributed by critical scholars as being a resilient practice to the contemporary homogenizing challenges of neoliberal regulation. In contrast to public and for-profit organizations, nonprofit organizations are attributed to possess a specific scope of action beyond profit maximizing and bureaucratic regulation due to their non-state, self-governing and nonprofit oriented characteristic. These ‘third-way’ characteristics of nonprofit organizations are often stressed due to their origins as grassroots organizations. Indeed, many nonprofit organizations have a long tradition of self-organization in response to economic, social and political needs, often in the face of official repression (Reedy & Learmonth, 2009). Nonprofit organizations are thus often portrayed as reservoirs of innovative and unconventional organizational concepts and ideas. The increasing academic attention they have gained over the last decades may give a hint on how nonprofit organizations serve as objects of projection for hopes of an emancipative change in contemporary capitalist society. The question arises as to why scholars are only now interested in its alternative options. Can this be a sign of crisis and managerial despair?

Contrarily, former grassroots nonprofit organizations progressively transform into professional organizations and gain social relevance in the function of delivering social services in various spheres of society. Their contemporary organizational distinctiveness is based on a complex placement between various societal areas. Based on this process of professionalization and the related complex embedding of nonprofit organizations in contemporary neoliberal regulation, scholars have started to question the ascribed autonomy of nonprofit organizations and their unconventional capacity to produce alternatives. Indeed, an increasing convergence of nonprofit organizations with free-market

\(^1\) Instead of using the term ‘voluntary organization’, I will rather refer to ‘nonprofit organizations’ as defined by Salamon (Salomon, 2010) as formal, nongovernmental, self-governing, not-for-profit oriented and voluntary organizations.
as well as governmental organizations is widely observed among scholars. A considerable debate explored the phenomena with differentiating concepts ranging from ‘marketization’ (i.e. Salamon, 1993) to ‘commercialization’ (i.e. Weisbrod 1998; Tuckman 1998, Young 1998) and ‘managerialism’ (i.e. Roberts et al. 2005) to ‘professionalization’ (i.e. Hwang & Powell 2006, O’Reilly 2011, Markowitz & Tice 2002).

Although scholars have theoretically discussed the increasing expectations for nonprofit organizations to be more businesslike, there has been little empirical examination of how nonprofit practitioners themselves experience the conflicted organizational situation of negotiating potentially contradicting aims (Sanders & McClellan, 2012). Practitioners in nonprofit organizations find themselves in a paradoxical situation between meeting external expectations in providing effective and conforming services to multiple stakeholders such as clients and sponsors while simultaneously pursuing their distinct organizational mission. Hence, this paper aims to investigate the tensions that accompany the professionalization of nonprofit organizations in light of their efforts to maintain compositional and structural autonomy as an essential basis for their work mission.

The inherent organizational contradictions of nonprofit organizations are therefore not conceptualized as being a problem to be solved, but rather as shaping individual and organizational practice. This paper thus aims to examine the question at the organizational and individual level with a focus on the perspective of nonprofit practitioners and their working situation. As they constantly need to reconcile the inherent contradictions between external demands for being businesslike and the pursuit of a social mission, the study focuses attention on nonprofit organizations as contradictory workplaces. A tension centered focus seeks insight into the ways that organizational members reconcile these contradictory logics through organizational practice and structure.

The paper draws from findings based on a qualitative organizational analysis of a socio-political nonprofit organization involved in social work projects addressing far-right and racist discrimination in eastern Germany. The case of the Counseling Project for Victims of Far-right Motivated and Racist Violence is examined to describe situational conflicting demands in order to explore individual and organizational responses to the contradictory working situation.

**Tensions in the face of increasing professionalization**

The growing pervasion of nonprofit organizations with business rationality is widely observed among scholars and described in various concepts. There is a shared diagnosis of nonprofit organizations becoming more businesslike in their actions, structures and

---

2 The ‘Counseling Project for Victims of Far-right Motivated and Racist Violence’ will subsequently be abbreviated as the ‘Counseling Project’. 
philosophies (Meyer M. , 2009). Within nonprofit research some scholars investigate this phenomenon, as part of professionalization research, from a sociological perspective on professional groups.

Evetts (2009) promoted the idea of professionalism as a management tool and thereby as a powerful mechanism to support occupational change and social control. She specifies this perspective when she differentiates between two forms of professionalism in contemporary societies; organizational and occupational professionalization. Occupational professionalization refers to the discourse constructed within professional groups, incorporating collegial authority, discretion and occupational control of the work. This extends further to include practitioner trust by clients and employers, controls operationalized by practitioners and professional ethics monitored by institutions and associations. Organizational professionalism then means a discourse of control that is increasingly being used by managers in work organizations. This refers to rational-legal forms of authority as well as hierarchical structures of responsibility and decision making. This also includes standardized processes and practices such as accountability and externalized forms of regulation, target setting and performance review as well as organizational control by managerialism (Evetts, 2009, S. 24).

In reference to Evetts’ bi-dimensional concept, I use the term professionalization in nonprofit organizations as embracing two dimensions: The individual professionalization from voluntary to professional work as well as an incorporation of an organizational professionalization in the form of an increasing formalization of organizational processes and structures. The latter organizational dimension thus also refers to processes of standardization and rationalization of work processes and practices. The aim of this perspective is then to understand the contradictions of professionalization and its consequences at several different analytical levels while not losing the view for the organizationally specific. The reason for suggesting a concept of a bi-dimensional professionalization is that it can describe occupational effects such as the organization’s opportunity of paying and educating their former voluntary members, which opens a connection to the classical occupational professionalization as is used in the sociology of professions. Furthermore, since professionalization is discussed also at the organizational level, the concept can also incorporate organizational effects that accompany phenomena such as managerialism or bureaucratization. The analytical perspective for the question on impacts of conflicting logics in the professionalizing process of nonprofit organization thus seeks to be wider.

So far, two questions have been central in the contemporary debate on professionalization research on nonprofit organizations: Firstly, attention was raised to the drivers of the generally observed transformation on nonprofit organizations. Secondly the

---

3 Anglo-American NPO-research seems to be located as a field of special interest in management research as important contributions from the German scientific debate are rather based in sociology, political science, public administrative science and law (Wex, 2004).
corresponding consequences for the practice and structures of nonprofit organizations as well as the sector as a whole were examined (Wex, 2004). Despite the concept of professionalization being termed very differently among authors, there is some agreement on the drivers of nonprofit organizations moving from informal voluntary to more formalized and professionalized activities. It is acknowledged that the collaboration with governments and the private sector have a significant impact on nonprofit organizations (Dobrai & Farkas, 2010). Often being dependent on funds from private and government sectors, the agendas of sponsoring institutions’ influence, i.e. staff selection and accounting. However, when the question about the impact of professionalization processes on nonprofit organizations is addressed, analyses are ambivalent in their conclusions. While there is an appreciation of certain improvements of nonprofit organizations’ practice, scholars also raise concerns of co-optation and recuperation, specifically with more activist organizations (Chatterton & Pickerill, 2010). Improvements are seen for example in the gain of project management skills or greater stability due to governmental funds (Dobrai & Farkas, 2010). Yet, other authors stress paradoxical effects on organizational dynamics that leave practitioners with conflicting demands (Markowitz & Tice 2002, Cumming 2008, O’Reilly 2011). Scholars are becoming conscious of their specific paradoxical situation between meeting external expectations in providing effective and conforming services to multiple stakeholders such as clients and sponsors, all the while simultaneously trying to pursue their specific organizational mission. Still, very little empirical attention has been paid to nonprofit practitioners’ very own experience of negotiating sometimes contradicting aims as part of the professionalization process (Sanders & McClellan, 2012). This paper therefore considers the practitioners’ perspective on the tensions that go with the professionalization of nonprofit organizations.

**Conflicting logics in the organizational practice**

The following section presents the theoretical background for the study which is fundamentally based on the aim of investigating the impact of multiple societal environments on a nonprofit organization and consequently, its practitioners. A theoretical frame within sociological neo-institutionalism was thus chosen to understand institutions as “shapers of interest and politics” (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991, S. 28). The conflicting tensions at the organizational level at which practitioners have to negotiate are then discussed in light of the neo-institutional approach of Friedland & Alford (1991). Their institutional logics approach provides a conceptual connection between a macro structural perspective and a more micro perspective. I consequently draw on their competing logic imagery to shed light on how being confronted with various kinds of logics is the foundation of a conflicted working situation for practitioners in nonprofit organizations.

The core idea surrounding the approach of Friedland & Alford is the concept of logic, which refers to a set of material practices and symbolic constructions that essentially shape decision making and action (Friedland & Alford, 1991, S. 248). They define the capitalist
market, the bureaucratic state, political democracy, the nuclear family and Christian religion as contending institutional orders of contemporary western society. The focus of Friedland & Alford’s institutional logics approach lies on the impacts of different, sometimes contradicting institutional logics on organizations and individuals. However, they conceptualize these institutional logics as historically limited as they are “symbolically grounded, organizationally structured, politically defended, technically and materially constrained” (Friedland & Alford, 1991, S. 248). This perspective enables the viewing of institutional logics as shaping the action of individual and organizational actors while they also have some hand in shaping and changing institutional logics.

Central to the analysis of my study is the idea of potentially contradictory institutions that make multiple logics available to organizational actors. The main focus of investigation is to understand these contradictions and to specify organizational conflicts between and the compliance with institutional logics, and eventually how they shape individual and organizational action. Friedland & Alford’s approach offers a conflict perspective that I suggest as very insightful for the understanding of the organizational dynamics of nonprofit organizations and the conflicted workplaces of its practitioners. Their constant negotiation of contending logics, e.g. when trying to meet external demands for being businesslike while pursuing a social mission, becomes a practical matter of nonprofit practitioners. The suggested tension centered focus then conceptualizes the organizational contradictions of nonprofit organizations as inherent, fundamentally shaping individual and organizational practice.

The Case of the Counseling Project for Victims of Far-right Motivated and Racist Violence in eastern Germany

I will draw on findings from a case study of a socio-political nonprofit organization involved in social work addressing far-right and racist discrimination in eastern Germany. The case of the ‘Counseling Project for Victims of Far-right Motivated and Racist Violence’ is examined to describe situational conflicting demands in order to explore individual and organizational responses to the contradictory working situation.

The selection of the Counseling Project for Victims of Far-right Motivated and Racist Violence for an organizational analysis is based on the following two specific characteristics: Firstly, the organization underwent a revealing organizational process of professionalization. Specifically, it transformed from a loose association of voluntary members’ self-organization in response to the social need of supporting respective victims into a professional nonprofit organization with salaried staff principally based on government funding. Secondly, the Counseling Project is embedded in a paradoxical field of conflict between external demands for businesslike operations and necessary organizational autonomy as the basis of their supportive mission on behalf of the victims. I will specify the organizational profile of the Counseling Project as embedded in a specific socio-political context in the following section.
The Counseling Project was founded in 2001 by a regional project started in each of the eastern German federal states. Although the Counseling Project was a pilot project largely funded by a government program against far-right extremism at that time, its origin goes back to locally and informally organized antifascist activists. They started their first self-governed counseling center for victims of far-right motivated and racist violence in 2000 with the mission to “counter the trivialization and break the silence surrounding far-right extremism with practical solidarity on behalf of the victims” (Opferperspektive e.V., 2005). A year later, regionally spread voluntary initiatives saw government funding as a chance to finance their early voluntary work, and thus expand their social mission in regional as well as professional terms. Since 2001, the Counseling Project has been principally funded by three subsequent government programs for actions against far-right extremism in Germany.

With their specific approach of supporting victims of far-right motivated and racist violence, the Counseling Project broke new grounds in social and political work. The focus of their work is the perspective of the victims and their relevance in societal discussion on far-right violence. In their self-concept of a lobby organization for the victims, the Counseling Project follows a twofold strategy: The professional consultation and support of victims to cope with the immaterial and material consequences of assault, and the socio-political intervention by activating solidarity and strengthening the victims’ voices in public discourse.

Methods

The research was conducted under the premise of a qualitative organizational analysis (Titscher et al., 2008) with the purpose of gaining insight into the depth of a particular case. An extensive qualitative inquiry into the Counseling Project also implied the consideration of its embedding in a distinctive socio-political context as relevant and not to be excluded determining environment. The Counseling Projects’ relations to its multiple societal environments were recognized as a constitutive factor for the organizational practices and structures. However, with an explorative intent to research qualitatively, the attention was directed towards an interpretative understanding of the nonprofit practitioners’ local practices.

Data collection

The research is based on a qualitative organizational analysis of the Counseling Project conducted in 2012. In order to enable an inner-organizational comparative analysis, data were collected in two projects with similar institutional conditions but regionally different socio-political environments. I chose a multi-methodological approach with data being gathered from two sources. Firstly, expert interviews were conducted with practitioners of two regionally different projects, and secondly, relevant documents were submitted by the practitioners themselves.
The expert interviews as a methodological approach in interpretive organizational analysis intended to reconstruct the social reality as reflected in the experiences, perspectives and sense-making of experts (Liebold & Trinczek, 2009). I explicitly chose the practitioners based on their expertise with the intent to gain a privileged insight into that which incorporates their very specific operational knowledge and problem perspective as well as their reflection expertise (Froschauer & Lueger, ExpertInnengespräche in der interpretativen Sozialforschung, 2009) which also includes greater contexts, i.e. the socio-political environment. The interviews were focused on the problem perspective and experience of the practitioners as fulltime, paid staff members to reconstruct the underlying orientations and existing practices. The organizational positions of the four interviewed persons ranged from fulltime counselors to part time counselors with coordinative and managerial responsibilities for the project. This selection proved to be particularly insightful as the interviewed practitioners were confronted in their daily work with the challenges of professionalization while at the same time also being partly responsible for the professionalization process.

The second source of data collection, the Counseling Project’s own documents, were identified as representing materialized products of communicated decisions and social relations in organizations (Froschauer, Artefaktanalyse, 2009). The collected documents included the charter of the nonprofit regulating organization, the conceptual design of the Counseling Project, annual reports, periodical newsletters, self-given quality standards and common position papers. In an iterative process, the documents fulfilled two purposes: As an orientation for generating organizational profiles as a source of explication at the beginning of data collection, and as a point of reference on which the practitioners themselves later commented on in the interviews.

Data analysis

With concern to both sources of data, the expert interviews as well as the collected documents, I used an analytical approach of qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2010). The analyzing process was structured by the practitioners evaluation of aspects relevant to the research question, and secondly by the interrelated comparison of data from the two regionally different projects. Furthermore, the qualitative content analysis allowed for the inductive elaboration of a system of categories which incorporates the following: (1) The specific challenges to the organizational practice, (2) the tension-filled areas of conflicting logics and finally (3) the corresponding organizational as well as individual responses that were reported by interviewees.
Insight: managing conflicting logics

Socio-political context and challenges for organizational practice

Reflecting the socio-political context of the Counseling Project, three important inter-organizational relations stand out as essential external influences on the daily practice: The financial and regulatory dependence on governmental institutions, the cooperative relations to local partners and initiatives and eventually the relations with the public discourse. As the Counseling Project is largely financed (92%) by government funds, its continuity is highly dependent on government’s collaboration and thus on a conforming organizational practice to government regulations that are manifested in the respective funding regulations. Secondly, the collaboration with local partners proves to be an essential condition for the successful local work, especially as increasing funding cuts need to be compensated by a powerful local network. But these cooperative relations are consequently sources of normative expectations on intensifying political activism directed towards the practitioners. The public discourse eventually influences the societal approval of the Counseling Project and its mission to specifically support victims of far-right motivated and racist violence where topics of racism, anti-Semitism and far-right motivated violence are still local taboo.

Several striking challenges to the organizational practice were stated by the practitioners as resulting from these interdependencies. Increased expectations for accountability towards the sponsoring institutions led to additional work related capacities that had to be allotted away from core counseling activities. The risky financial situation due to funding cuts and the uncertain future of the project due to the funding program’s end in late 2013 opened a free-market competitive struggle for funds and precarious working conditions for the paid practitioners with continuing fears of pay cuts or even job loss.

In summary, the Counseling Project is situated in a tension filled context between necessary governmental cooperation for financial support, continuing fear of funding cuts and biased support for clients and conflict-laden public relations. These tensions are to be specified under the concept of conflicting logics in the next section.

Tension-filled areas of conflicting logics

The tension-filled organizational contexts were condensed into two distinct fields of logic that emerged as extraordinarily significant and contradictory in the daily organizational practice as reflected on by the practitioners.

Quality improvement: “That seems to have a different meaning.”

Interestingly, two differing logics of professionalization were conflicting in the Counseling Projects’ managing of quality improvement. An insightful divide emerged between an internal, self-determined quality improvement and an instructed quality management which was part of the funding regulations in a second government program. Firstly, the Counseling Project’s own quality improvement had already started at its beginning as a self-determined
collective professionalization process with regular quality circles gathering all regionally
different projects. This self-organized ongoing quality improvement resulted in specific,
common principles of counseling and quality standards as well as numerous advanced
trainings for organization members. The interviewed practitioners emphasized the
importance of this quality improvement process as self-organized professionalization which
enabled them to collectively empower themselves in a completely new field of social work,
and to advance the professional support for their clients. The instructed quality
improvement starting with expectations from governmental funding institutions in 2007 was
reflected by the practitioners as being ignorant of their already ongoing quality
improvement and interpreted as enforcing control over the efficient application of funds and
their compositional work. The contradictory moment of these conflicting logics in
practitioners’ daily work was especially evident in the absurd simultaneousness of funding
cuts and governmental expectations to provide extensive quality management measures in
addition to their self-organized quality improvement.

Partisanship and independence: “If we say ‘we’, then we say ‘the victims’”

Partisanship and independence are both principles as part of the common, self-given quality
standards of the Counseling Project working as a social and political nonprofit organization.
This logic clearly conflicts with the Counseling Project’s structural dependency on
government institutions as a financial source. One of the practitioners describes this
inherent conflict in her work as follows:

“That is why we are not loved that much, because we quite clearly position ourselves and
find clear words. And it is logical, whenever the Counseling Project pipes up, that there can’t
be anything nice to report, because it is in the nature of our work. That is obvious, that we
clearly call it out, because who else would do it, the victims themselves?” (Counselor)

This inherent conflict proved as particularly tension-filled in the implementation of the so
called “Extremismusklausel”. This clause, introduced with the second government funding
program, obliges the Counseling Project’s members and cooperative partners to officially
declare themselves part of the “free democratic basic order” and to work serving the
principles of the German constitution. By conforming to the “Extremismusklausel” the
practitioners not only come under pressure to legitimate their political independence
towards their clients and cooperation partners, but also risk betraying their fundamental
work principles and, eventually the confidence of their clients.

Quite obviously, two conflicting logics emerge in the daily organizational practice of
the Counseling Project. According to the logic of the governmental funding institution, the
continuance of the Counseling Project is dependent on conforming to the
“Extremismusklausel” as meeting the institutional expectations for financial support. This
stands contrary to the organizational logic of partisanship and independence as essential
principles for their professional work and meeting external expectations of clients and
cooperation partners. A substantial, inherent contradiction emerges as a challenge in the
practitioners’ daily work. The question is thus how the organizational members reconcile these contradictions.

**Organizational and individual responses**

Very diverse ways of dealing with contradictory logics emerged in the daily practice of the Counseling Project. These organizational as well as individual responses to the tension filled Counselors’ workplace varied from conforming strategies to more resistant strategies aiming to manipulate the conflicted conditions of the Counseling Project.

Firstly, the distinct organizational structure of the Counseling Project with local teams working in 2-3 persons was repeatedly described by the interviewed organizational members as an organizational, but also individual strategy of relief to the inconsistencies of competing logics. The strictly organized team structure is further supplemented by regular small and large team meetings, supervisions as well as supra-regional two day meetings which organizationally enable collective reflection and are also included in the self-given quality standards. Secondly, “trust work” was reported as a necessary approach to retain the trust of clients and cooperation partners while necessarily adjusting to governmental funding regulations. Regarding the requirements for the “Extremismusklausel”, a Counselor indicated: “In the end we said we would sign this and work just as before, and we won’t report any information and won’t scrutinize anybody.” This can be interpreted as a decoupling of conflicting logics by trying to sustain legitimation towards funding institutions, e.g. by conforming to the “Extremismusklausel”, while supporting unchanged commitment and loyalty to the local community. Decoupling of competing logics occurred as legitimate organizational routine in the Counseling Project, especially in trying to meet the requirements of government funding programs: “We submit our concept and then we loosely interpret it” (Counselor).

This way of reconciling competing logics is connected to a further strategy which proved equally functional to securing future resources. Governmental funding regulations on the organizational structure, such as to implement a managerial model of a single project manager, were compromised with visions of a collective, self-governed project management. One of the regional projects subverted to this instruction by drafting it into an organizational model of shared project management with two Counselors. However, as a more conforming way of reconciling conflicting logics, a process of becoming accustomed to the contradictory workplace was also prevalent among the interviewed Counselors. Especially in the long run of continuing funding cuts, the constant job insecurity of organization members was interpreted by some as a chronic dysfunction of the workplace.

An extraordinary, interesting and rather manipulative response to the tension filled workplace can ultimately be detected in the additional organizational field of strategy

---

4 Interpreting the organizational strategy of ‘decoupling’ is inspired by Meyer & Rowan’s (1977) neo-institutionalist approach to organizations’ institutionalization in discovering formal structures as myths.
development, which was both implicitly and explicitly mentioned by the interviewed Counselors. This is to be stressed as separate way of coping, as it exceeds the original socio-political mission of the Counseling Project. The continual strategy development explicitly responds to recurrent funding cuts and the feared alienation of an essentially autonomous organization mission. This addresses the organization’s recurrent insecure financial situation depending on the continuation of governmental funding programs. One of the Counselors stated:

„Well, I think that it is ultimately due to our resilience and commitment, that we still exist, that we are still being funded.”

The basis for constantly developing and advancing strategies can be found in the need for legitimating the Counseling Project as a professional organization which delivers services under the financial support of governmental programs while still pursuing their unique socio-political mission. The strategy development refers to financial and political strategies as well as systematic public relations work and networking with other nonprofit organizations. The networking with supra-regional nonprofit organizations then has the strategic goal to collectively struggle against further funding cuts of government institutions. Moreover, creating a political lobby by enhancing supportive relations to local politicians as well as establishing an academic advisory council are part of the diverse strategies to strengthen the counseling Projects “standing”. In comparison to grassroots, unsalaried nonprofit organizations, one of the Counselors who is also partly in charge of project management stated:

„Voluntary [unsalaried] organizations have the freedom to speak more freely, they can think less strategically because they sometimes do not need to maintain a good standing. Then again, concerning the intervention we were able to use our good standing for many victims; that you can really achieve something for these people, that is normally not heard of. Why should politicians listen to a small local initiative?“

As a consequence of the organization’s professionalization process, the counselors adopted a strategic role in addition to their professional counseling work. Referring this strategic work back to the reconciling of conflicting logics in the light of the organization’s professionalization process, one of the Counselors finally explained:

„That is, I think, also a sign of our professionalization, which we have found a routine way of coping with, or rather strategies that function.”

The professionalization of the Counseling Project then appears as a contradictory process which enables the organization to deal with the inconsistencies of conflicting logics in a more experienced and skilled way, while at the same time inscribing these competing logics into the daily work of the practitioners.
Discussion

The aim of the paper was to investigate the tensions that accompany the increasing professionalization of nonprofit organizations in light of their efforts to maintain compositional and structural autonomy. However, some limitations should be reflected: The selection of the case study suggests that the findings reflect a particular form of professionalization process which refers to grassroots activist initiatives founded by unpaid volunteers becoming professional nonprofit organization with paid staff.

First, the discovered conflicting logics became apparent as inherent to the examined organization and thus as shaping daily individual and organizational practice. As suggested by Sanders & McClelland, findings on tension filled workplaces in a US nonprofit organization, I agree on the proposal to understand the tensions between managing external financial imperatives and pursuing a socio-political mission as an ontological characteristic of contemporary nonprofit organizing (Sanders & McClellan, 2012).

Secondly, taking up a contradictory ridden understanding of nonprofit organization opens the possibility for a conflict centered focus which can give interesting insight into the ways that organization members manage contradictory logics through organizational practice and structure: The case study revealed very diverse responses to the tension filled work life of practitioners; a strictly organized team structure and constant efforts to retain the trust of multiple ‘stakeholders’ all the while conforming and necessarily adjusting to government funding regulations. Moreover, the case study revealed strategy development as a separate organizational field with diverse strategies as a manipulative response. The findings of the case study thus show the nonprofit organization’s practitioners as sophisticated strategic actors in managing a conflicted workplace characterized by recurrent funding cuts and the feared alienation of their essentially autonomous organizational mission.

From a critical perspective however, these findings contribute to the understanding of the ambiguities of self-organization within nonprofit organizations under the influence of contemporary neoliberal regulation. Apart from illustrating nonprofit practitioners as elaborate and powerful actors in coping with their precarious working situation, this routine management of contradictory logics can be also viewed as problematic. The organizational field of strategy development was interpreted by practitioners as both a positive sign of professionalization in the form of an organizational skill in routinely managing the conflicting logics, but also as an additional workload to the actual mission of the practitioners. Furthermore, in a more critical reading, the strategy development can be understood not only as indicating a growing similarity to businesslike organization, but even more as practitioners conforming to the contradictions of contemporary capitalist society.

The professionalization of nonprofit organizations thus may be understood as a dialectical process of empowerment and disempowerment. The practitioners gain occupational qualification from voluntary to paid work and continuing quality improvement which empowers them in their daily professional work, and thus in pursuing their distinct social mission on behalf of their clients or members. Furthermore, the professionalization
may work as a reputation strategy to win social and political attention as well as a legitimization strategy to stress the societal relevance of the distinct organization’s mission. However, the professionalization of nonprofit organizations also leads to the disempowerment of its practitioners, apart from diverse external demands, most obviously observable in the organizational consequences of the funding institution’s regulative power. The professionalization process is characterized by a multiplication of expectations which are to be fulfilled. Nonprofit organizations are thus are confronted with meeting multiple and conflicting demands of different interest groups such as funding institutions, local cooperative partners, the public and eventually the clients. The observed decoupling strategies are then part of the daily ‘contradiction work’ as consequence of a professionalization process. The practitioners’ ‘contradiction work’ (Morgenroth & Negt, 2009) then is twofold: Working on the contradictions as solutions as they are to be found, and working in the contradictions as the actual social and political work is embedded in the tension filled working situation of conflicting logics.

The professionalization process certainly enhances the organization’s resources such as most obviously financial support and the qualification of its members, but at the same time it inscribes the conflicting logics even deeper into daily organizational life and eventually into the conflicted workplace of the practitioners. I suggest acknowledging this dialectical uniqueness of nonprofit organization as an irreconcilable practical matter of negotiating conflicting logics for nonprofit practitioners in contemporary capitalist society. Furthermore, it may become problematic as soon as the contradictory workplace is no longer critically reflected upon by practitioners whilst they routinely engage in meeting multiple demands, as well as securing the organization’s continuance in times of austerity. The successful ‘contradiction work’ in decoupling strategies and conforming organizational structures to funding regulations may mislead to signaling that the precarious and regulated practice of nonprofit organizations is manageable under contemporary neoliberal regulation.

A reflection upon the findings invites discussion about the role of critical scholars when researching nonprofit organizations. Instead of exploring how we can learn from and enhance alternative practices, I propose to diverge from a functional investigation of nonprofit organizations’ abilities to produce alternatives to the contemporary capitalist organizing of society. Nonprofit organizations have a long history of self-organization and alternatively, the question arises why only now scholars show increasing interest in its alternative organizing. The prevalent thesis of nonprofit organizations having consistent answers to the dysfunctionalities of the public and private sector may be the impulse for increasing scholarly interest. I would suggest discussing how the contribution of critical scholars may offer a possibility for nonprofit organizations to foster a reflexive process, thus reflecting and discussing upon the complexities of their self-organized work life and the organization’s potential alienation of its actual mission. Even more, practitioners in nonprofit organizations as well as scholars may consider the distinct ‘contradiction work’ as embedded in the precarious structural conditions of nonprofit organizing in contemporary capitalist societies. The contradictory pressure they are confronted with in their daily life are not to be
ignored or trivialized, but rather to be acknowledged as unique tensions inherent in today’s nonprofit organizing.

References


