Managing conflicting logics in the organizational practice of 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 Counselling Project for Victims of Far-right Motivated and Racist Violence)

Increased tensions in the face of professionalization

Although scholars have theoretically discussed the increasing expectations for nonprofit organizations to be more business-like, there has been little empirical examination of how nonprofit practitioners themselves experience the conflicted organizational situation of negotiating potentially contradicting aims (Sanders & McClellan, 2012).

The main focus of this research thus is to understand these contradictions as inherent organizational dynamic of nonprofit organizations: Practitioners in nonprofit organizations find themselves in a paradoxical situation of meeting external expectations in providing effective and conforming services to multiple stakeholders such as clients and sponsors while simultaneously pursuing their distinct organizational mission. As the constant negotiation of contending logics becomes a practical matter of nonprofit practitioners the study focuses attention on nonprofit organizations as contradictory workplaces.

How to manage conflicting logics in nonprofit organizing?

This research 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. A tension centred focus seeks insight into the ways that organizational members manage contradictory logics through organizational practice and structure.

Organisational and individual responses to inherent contradictions

As reported by the practitioners, the Counselling 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 as well as conflict-laden public relations. The results of the study reveal very diverse ways in dealing with these tensions:

The Counselling Project for Victims of Far-right Motivated and Racist Violence is a socio-political nonprofit organization involved in social work projects addressing far-right and racist discrimination in eastern Germany. First founded in 2001, it transformed from a loose association of voluntary members’ self-organization into a professional nonprofit organization with salaried staff principally based on government funding. The Counselling Project follows a twofold approach: 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.
Firstly, the **strictly organized team structure** of the Counselling 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 daily contradictions. This is further supplemented by regular small and large team meetings, supervisions as well as supra-regional two day meetings which proved central to the practitioners as enabling collective reflection and thus are part of the self-given quality standards.

Secondly, “**trust work**” was reported as a necessary approach to retain the trust of clients and cooperation partners all the while necessarily adjusting to governmental funding regulations. Especially under the pressure to meet the requirements of government funding programs the Counsellors **decoupled conflicting logics**: “We submit our concept and then we loosely interpret it” (Counsellor).

This **decoupling** of competing logics occurred as legitimate organizational routine in the Counselling Project, e.g. funding regulations to implement a managerial model of a single project manager, were compromised with the ideal of a collective, self-governed project management in form of an organizational model of shared project management by two half-time Counsellors.

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 Counsellors. After all the years, the precarious structural conditions of continuing funding cuts and constant job insecurity were interpreted by some practitioners as a chronic dysfunction of their workplace.

An extraordinary and rather manipulative response to the tension filled workplace emerged within the **additional organizational field of strategy development**. This organizational response exceeds the original socio-political mission of the Counselling Project and explicitly responds to recurrent funding cuts and the feared alienation of an essentially autonomous organization mission. One of the Counsellors 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 strategy development was composed of networking with supra-regional nonprofit organizations to collectively struggle against further funding cuts of government institutions; creating a political lobby by enhancing supportive relations to local politicians as well as establishing an academic advisory council to enhance the organizations legitimation.

**Professional nonprofit organizing as daily contradiction work**

The results of the study show that the Counsellors adopted the work of strategy development in addition to their professional counselling work as a consequence of the professionalization process. One of the Counsellors 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 Counselling Project appears as a **dialectical process**: it certainly enhances the organization’s resources such as most obviously financial support and the qualification of its members thus enabling...
practitioners to deal with the inconsistencies of conflicting logics in a more experienced and skilled way. However, at the same time this professionalization process inscribes the conflicting logics even deeper into daily organizational life and eventually into the conflicted workplace of the practitioners. From a critical perspective the findings contribute to the understanding of the ambiguities nonprofit organizing under the influence of contemporary neoliberal regulation. Apart from nonprofit practitioners being elaborate and powerful actors in coping with their precarious working situation, their professional and routine management of contradictory logics can be also viewed as problematic. Furthermore, in a more critical reading, the strategy development can be understood not only as indicating a growing similarity to business-like organization, but even more as conforming practice to the contradictions of contemporary capitalist society.

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: Practitioners are working on the contradictions as there are solutions to be found for the daily practice while the practitioners are at the same time working in the contradictions as the actual social and political work is embedded in the tension filled working situation of conflicting logics. Furthermore, it may become problematic as soon as the contradictory workplace is no longer critically reflected upon whilst routinely engaging 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 signalling that the precarious and regulated practice of nonprofit organizations is manageable under contemporary neoliberal regulation.

The contradictory pressure practitioners are confronted with in their daily work are not to be ignored or trivialized, but rather to be acknowledged as unique tensions inherent in today’s nonprofit organizing. Even more, practitioners in nonprofit organizations as well as scholars may consider the distinct ‘contradiction work’ as irreconcilable practical matter embedded in the precarious structural conditions of nonprofit organizing in contemporary capitalist societies. This then opens questions for regular, institutionalized spaces of collective reflection on the contradictions in daily nonprofit organizing.

References
