Volunteering and professionalization: Tensions and Trends

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The last several decades have witnessed the proliferation and popularity of volunteering both as a means for individuals to connect with communities and social issues, and as a way of sustaining nonprofit organizations; indeed, it dominates contemporary discussions about civic engagement. While some social theorists have promoted volunteering as a benchmark to assess democratic participation, civic-mindedness, social capital and levels of community trust (Coleman, 1991; Putnam, 2000), others have questioned the uncomplicated association between volunteering, civic engagement and community (Ganesh & McAllum, 2009; Lie, Baines, & Wheelock, 2009; Milligan & Fyfe, 2005). Like Snyder (2001), we understand volunteering to be a “hybrid straining of helping” (p. 16309) that falls between spontaneous bystander intervention and highly obligated care-giving. Specifically, we propose that volunteering involves relatively sustained identity investments on the parts of those who volunteer, and, like Penner (2004), characterize its performance in organizational contexts as a definitional attribute.

The organizational production of volunteering is further significant in the context of the nonprofit sector’s historically documented vulnerability to a wide range of economic and policy shifts in other sectors (Van Til, 1988). In an era of sector-bending (Dees & Anderson, 2003) and intersectoral “partnerships,” structural differences among nonprofit, for-profit and government sectors have become increasingly blurred since the 1980s, with corresponding pressures to produce effective and efficient outcomes. Eisenberg and Eschenfelder (2009), for example, documented the growing number of partnerships between nonprofit organizations and business ventures, and this trend seems likely to continue (Billis, 2010). Likewise, in an earlier influential text, Drucker (1990) described successful nonprofit governance in terms of performance and output orientations rather than “good intentions.”

This emphasis on the achievement of outcomes also appears in government policy documents. Government decisions in a number of countries to slash spending and devolve services to nonprofit providers have meant demands for greater efficiency, transparency and accountability, and significantly, these moves have often been couched in terms of the need to professionalize the sector. Scholars and social critics have noted the increasing prevalence of professionalism as a discursive and normative referent in the organization of work structures, practices and identities in volunteer contexts (Milligan & Fyfe, 2005). Critics have argued that professionalization challenges popular perspectives of nonprofits’ commitment to
altruism and democracy (Rathgeb Smith & Lipsky, 1993, p. 3). Further, they suggest that the increased number of professional, paid workers in the sector, has resulted in nonprofits’ reliance on external funding and government contracts, and this in turn has eroded distinctive features of the sector (Harris, 2001), such as flexibility, responsiveness to and emergence from local needs, freedom to critique, and self-determination. Accordingly, this essay will examine relationships between volunteering and professionalization, positing that scholars need to simultaneously hold the two constructs in tension while also studying how discourses of professionalization increasingly affect the performance of volunteering in nonprofit organizations.

**Professionalism and professionalization** have been the subject of much critical attention in organizational communication studies (Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007). The two terms are, obviously, highly connected, and broadly speaking only differ inasmuch as the former indicates practice and identity and the latter emphasizes structure and process. Above all, ideas about professionalism and professionalization tend to be ambiguous and multi-dimensional, and we note at least four major domains of scholarly concern. First, scholars have been concerned with professionalization in the context of research on organizational form. For instance, they have paid attention to such issues as bureaucratization and rationalization (Ganesh, 2005). Second, they have paid attention to professionalization in the context of organizational strategy and its impact on core values. For instance, Simpson and Cheney (2007) examined the consequences of marketization as a major strategic influence on shifts in practice in a retirement village community. Third, one can understand professionalism as Ashcraft (2005) does as a particular kind of occupational identity position produced in conditions of late capitalist modernity, that is negotiated and resisted in myriad ways by a range of occupations (Lair et al, 2005). Finally, professionalization is also associated with particular kinds of social action, behavior and conduct. For example, professionalization is sometimes associated with a split between public and private codes of conduct embodied in such principles as impersonality, fairness, or promptness (Cheney et al, 2010). Viney (1983), for instance, compared how professional and nonprofessional orientations towards training programs impacted the experiences of volunteer telephone counsellors.

We posit that scholars can productively understand the communicative and organizational constitution of both volunteering and professionalism by simultaneously holding them in tension while also studying how discourses of professionalization increasingly affect the performance of volunteering in nonprofit organizations. When
Volunteering and professionalism are held in tension, the very practices that constitute volunteering can be understood as forms of unpaid, amateur and low status labor (Tilly & Tilly, 1994). Most analyses of organizational volunteering have assumed that volunteers are not professional because unlike occupational groups that can close markets through the creation of elite networks, volunteers receive limited training, possess no specific body of knowledge, and have little power even if the work they engage in has significant social consequences (Etzioni, 1966, cited in Knijn & Verhagn, 2003). Merrell’s (2000) study of volunteers at a ‘well women clinic,’ for instance, showed that volunteers’ role precluded offering advice to clients because of their inferior, nonprofessional status vis-à-vis paid staff.

So, the ambiguous notion of professionalism can become usefully specific when contrasted with volunteering, inasmuch as it becomes possible to associate particular status dynamics, and forms of material, emotional, and embodied labor with the term. Several current understandings of volunteering do not resonate with Fournier’s (1999) “professional” competencies such as responsibility for actions and emotional neutrality. If, as some scholars have recommended, organizations should assume that volunteers are neither reliable nor accountable (J. Wilson & Pimm, 1996), only tasks that are peripheral to an organization’s core mission are understood as volunteering. These peripheral jobs tend to be monotonous, trivial or unskilled, unlike more high-status and implicitly professional functions such as board membership, which, while unpaid, is usually not understood as a form of volunteering, and is identified as a specialized form of nonprofit management (Brown & Iverson, 2004).

Further, dichotomizing volunteering and professionalism both highlights the gendered nature of professionalism and reinforces views of volunteering as inferior to a “real job” (Clair, 1996). That is, volunteering can be framed as a feminized form of labor that includes emotional, caring behaviors (Daniels, 1988). In this way, women’s contributions to the community are downgraded to “non-professional…pseudo-work [or] occupational therapy” (Pearce, 1993, p. 31). On the other hand, masculine, “professional” work emphasizes efficient, task-focused behaviours that gets things done (Watts, 2009). So, even when men “volunteer,” they tend to select leadership positions or public, political roles that are “complementary to their real work” (Little, 1997; J. Wilson, 2000, p. 228, our italics).

However, as indicated at the outset, it is not only necessary to hold volunteering in tension with professionalism, we also need to examine how professionalization is profoundly reshaping what counts as volunteering itself: such colonization is evident both in terms of the reshaping of the nonprofit sector, more specific practices that constitute volunteering, as well as volunteer identity itself. More broadly speaking, strategies to promote professionalism in
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nonprofit contexts have included “standard setting, monitoring and enforcement, inspection and oversight” (Morison, 2000, p. 101) for all organizational members, including volunteers. The underlying assumption is that adopting such practices will increase the productivity of nonprofits (Kaboolian, 1998), making them more attractive to funders. Such pressures result in new kinds of “operational discipline” (Frumpkin & Andre-Clark, 2000).

This new operational discipline in nonprofit practice is particularly evident in contemporary funding environments. In order to attract and retain external funding, many nonprofits have used market-based criteria to measure costs and benefits of interventions, evolving into what Brown, Kenny, Turner and Prince (2000) labeled the “welfare state industry” that is increasingly disconnected from community concerns and geared towards meeting statutorily mandated government requirements ranging from budgetary accountability and compliance to outcome measurement and public consultation. The ways in which the need to quantify success has directed organizational mission away from the communities that nonprofits were set up to serve deserves to be studied vigorously by communication scholars (Lewis, 2005). Indeed, scholars have noted that a focus on compliance paradoxically results in the identification of groups that are relatively easy to serve, and the abandonment of service delivery to groups that are more needy (Adams & Perlmutter, 1991; Weisbrod, 2004). Eventually, professionalization as a colonizing logic has implications for the bifurcation of the nonprofit sector, creating a two-tiered distinction between professionalized, “business-like” organizations on the one hand (Dart, 2004), and on the other, grass-roots, advocacy-oriented groups with strong connections to communities (Milligan & Fyfe, 2005).

The examination of such processes as marketization, routinization, formalization, and rationalization of volunteer practice (Bush, 1992; Dees & Anderson, 2003; Frumkin & Andre-Clark, 2000) enhances our ability to assess the bifurcating effect of professionalization a colonizing discourse and logic in nonprofit organizations. Concerns over legal liability have increased the formalization of organizational structures, volunteer roles and reporting requirements (Martinez, 2003). Studies from both the United States (Kelley, Lune, & Murphy, 2005) and Europe (Kreutzer & Jäger, 2010) have shown that as routinization reduces volunteers’ sense of autonomy, their organizational commitment also drops. Professionalization, from this perspective, vitiates the ability of volunteers to passionately connect to broader social issues that matter (Zakour & Gillespie, 1998). More generally, the “passion that existed in the sector; the human element and sense of what organisations ‘really

The impact of operational discipline upon the constitution of professional volunteer practice is also evident in some studies that have shown that professionalization results in volunteers spending less time engaging in service delivery because of restrictive prescriptions and regulations around core organizational functions. Instead, more energy is allocated to administrative tasks such as applying for grants and documenting effectiveness. The discursive tendency to characterize communities as “clients” is a case in point. Even when volunteers do connect with the people they serve, larger pressures to professionalize nonprofit practice affect how interaction unfolds with community “clients,” sometimes with problematic and even anti-democratic consequences. For example, in their detailed study of nonprofits in Ohio, Alexander, Nank and Stivers (1999) concluded that notions of technical expertise dominated organizational view of client interaction, resulting in it dismissing the lived experience of community residents, and sidelining “participatory deliberation as a waste of time because the professional answer to problems is already clear” (p. 462).

Thus, it is critical to examine professionalization and professionalism as comprising “techniques and procedures for directing human behavior” (Foucault, 1997, p. 73) that govern volunteers at a distance by encouraging them to adopt prescriptive practices drawn from the for-profit world. Rose, O’Malley and Valverde (2006) further suggested that the subjects created by professionalized strategies and technologies would “produce the ends of government by fulfilling themselves rather than being merely obedient” (p. 89). That is, professionalization brings with it greater responsibility (Miller & Rose, 1995) and hence volunteers choose to be “free” in specific ways (Rose, 1989), and interestingly, professionalism itself can represent a particular kind of volunteer empowerment. For instance, some have argued that volunteers should incorporate professionalism into their identity and enact a ‘professional spirit’ (Hodgson, 2002, p. 805). While the volunteerism literature refers to volunteers’ commitment and responsibility, it seldom explains what drives individuals to adopt an “image as an “empowered” and self governing person who appears to operate independently of formal state structure” (Hyatt, 2001, p. 206, cited in Bloom & Kilgore, 2003).

Finally, the analysis of the professionalization of volunteer practice could yield important insights into the ongoing evolution and transformation of what counts as professionalism itself. Despite the broad scope and imprecise usage in what counts as professional conduct (Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007), much academic research about and popular
social criticism of the volunteering-professionalism relationship relies on understandings of professionalism drawn from full-time, paid work contexts. That is, rather than either categorically assert that volunteers simply cannot “do” professionalism, it is possible that the construct of “professionalism” in third spaces may require wider interpretation (Ashcraft & Kedrowicz, 2002). While some have recognized that professionalism is not a construct that individuals simply receive and with which they passively identify (Hothe, 2008), we need to further assess whether and how professional volunteers identify as such, and contest these identity positions. Future research would therefore do well to focus on the fractured nature of professionalism in volunteering contexts. We look forward to such work.
References


