Negotiating Tensions Across Organizational Boundaries:
Communication and Nonprofit Refugee Resettlement Organizations

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Introduction

The United Nations defines refugees as persons who have crossed national borders due to a “well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion” ("Convention relating to the status of refugees," 1951). While 14 million refugees met this definition in 2006 (Schweid, 2007), Lee (1996) argues that at least 25 million other migrants should be considered refugees as well (see also Myers, 1997; Pipher, 2002).

Non-governmental, nonprofit mediating organizations are critical to addressing refugee needs and ensuring a mutually beneficial resettlement process for refugees and their communities (Patrick, 2004). However, Ngai and Koehn (2005) argue that displaced persons present special challenges for boundary-spanning communication in these organizations (between staff, refugees, and the external community).

Unfortunately, when communication is mentioned in discussions of nonprofit mediating organizations generally or refugee resettlement organizations in particular, it is often treated as a tool to be used by nonprofit organizational staff to gain compliance from their clients. For instance, doctors and nurses often report that communication barriers between medical staff and refugee clients prevent refugees from adequately following medical directions and from receiving optimal care (see Bischoff, et al., 2003; Jones & Gill, 1998). However, this treatment of communication typically presumes that refugee-clients are both passive and delinquent in their communication and fails to examine the ways in which both refugees and organizational staff experience and respond to communicative tensions which span organizational boundaries in more complex ways.
This project, therefore, investigates the context of nonprofit refugee resettlement organizations and argues that communication scholars interested in nonprofit organizing need to more systematically investigate the complexity of boundary-spanning communicative tensions which arise and are managed in the interactions between staff and clients in nonprofit organizations.

**Rationale**

Although voluntary and nonprofit organizations share many individual characteristics with other organizations, the various collections of characteristics that are observable in many voluntary organizations create a profile that is quite different from most for-profit organizations. As O’Neill and Young (1988) argue, legal constraints, revenue sources, types of personnel, and the nature of governance in voluntary organizations make them unique from for-profit organizations. Implications of those differences show up in management and employee values, incentives and constraints, “thus creating differences in how the basic functions of management are carried out” (Fottler, 1981, p. 4). Since organizations are fundamentally constituted through communication (Putnam, Nicotera, & McPhee, 2009), the unique organizational structures and constraints found in voluntary organizations are produced and reproduced through communication.

Krohling Peruzzo (2009) explains that communication in third sector (voluntary) organizations focuses primarily on social action and human development on behalf of the community and “provides an alternative to traditional professional practice” (p. 664). However, Lewis (2005) argues that voluntary organizations, which comprise what she calls the civil society sector, “have gone largely unstudied in terms of important managerial and communicative issues” (p. 240). Lewis furthers that organizational communication scholars have not paid
significant theoretical attention to nonprofit organizations. While many studies of organizational communication dynamics have taken place within voluntary and nonprofit organizations (NPOs), “these studies have most often left unexamined and untested theories relating to the specific unique features of NPOs” (Lewis, 2005, p. 241).

**Communication Across Voluntary Organizational Boundaries**

Though under-explored in the communication literature, one communicative relationship that must be studied in voluntary organizations is boundary-spanning communication inherent in the relationship between the staff (paid or nonpaid) of voluntary organizations and the clients they hope to serve. As Fraser (1989) explains, both organizational staff and organizational scholars often render voluntary organization clients as passive, positioning them “as potential recipients of predefined services rather than as agents involved in interpreting their needs and shaping their life conditions” (p. 174). In this sense, communication within organizations is emphasized, and clients are simply seen as recipients of internally-produced missions-statements, policies and/or goals. However, Trethewey (1997) argues that the marginalized and normalized client is rarely completely passive and submissive. Rather, marginal voices, like those of the client, often actively shape communication across voluntary organizational boundaries by challenging dominant organizational discourses in a plurality of ways.

Specifically, Trethewey (1997) found that voluntary organizational clients used six communication strategies to resist problematic policies at one particular voluntary organization, including (a) parodying and refusing confessional practices, (b) fighting bureaucracies and bureaucrats, (c) playing games, (d) breaking rules, (e) bitching and (f) revisioning relationships. Throughout her study, Trethewey found that clients often accommodated relationships with the social worker and reproduced the dominant discourse that positions clients as dependent and
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deficient. Yet, many clients simultaneously reinvented those dependent relationships to enable
them to “fight for their rights as clients in other agencies and to secure their own needs at WSSO
[the voluntary organization being studied]” (Trethewey, 1997, p. 296). Specifically, two forms of
client resistance, parodying and refusing confessional practices and revisioning relationships,
transformed organizational practices. Whether and to what extent refugees are able to engage in
such resistance practices in light of the power disparities inherent in refugee resettlement
organizations is an important area for this analysis.

Similarly, Papa, Singhal and Papa (2005) sought to understand the complex nature of
communication between organizational staff and clients in voluntary organizations seeking to
foster social change. As they explain, when a group of disempowered people organize for social
change, those in organizational power may ironically sustain their privileges by reinforcing
control or further denying rights to the poor. Thus, an organization seeking to offer
empowerment in one sphere may unwittingly lead to oppression in another sphere. Thus, Papa,
Singhal and Papa argue that dialectic tensions between (1) control and emancipation, (2)
oppression and empowerment, (3) dissemination and dialogue, and (4) fragmentation and unity
structure the boundary-crossing organizational communication experiences of staff and clients in
social change organizations (see also Papa, Auwal, & Singhal, 1995, 1997; Papa, Singhal,
Ghanekar, & Papa, 2000).

Thus, organizational communication scholars must explore the ways in which the
communication dynamics between nonprofit organizational staff and nonprofit organizational
clients experienced and managed in unique ways.

Specifically, this project seeks to understand these dynamics in the context of refugee
resettlement organizations. Given that nonprofit organizations are critical to providing for the
medical, mental health, employment and other needs of refugees who have resettled in the United States (e.g. Crampton, Dowell, & Woodward, 2001; Miller, 1999; Nawyn, 2006), the unique organizational boundary-spanning relationships between staff in refugee resettlement organizations and the refugee clients which they serve is an important area of study. Given the previous research on staff-client communication in nonprofit organizations (see Papa, Singhal & Papa, 2005; Trethewey, 1997), it appears that this particular communication is characterized by a variety of tensions and contradictions. When viewed through a more critical lens, a more complicated and complete understanding of the tensions inherent in the communicative interactions which characterize resettlement organizations will emerge.

**Method**

To better understand the ways in which communicative interactions are experienced and managed by nonprofit staff and refugee-clients in refugee resettlement organizations, I am conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews. My interview protocol consists of a series of open-ended questions designed to encourage both staff and refugee-clients of refugee resettlement organizations to elaborate on their ideas and experiences related to communicative interactions in voluntary organizations and the communicative tensions that emerge as a result.

Once the interviews are transcribed, I am analyzing the data by following the six-step thematic analysis process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

**Preliminary Results**

So far, a small pilot study has been conducted to help focus the research efforts of the larger overall study. Five Sudanese refugees have participated in semi-structured interviews about their experiences communicating with nonprofit workers in refugee resettlement organizations (Steimel, 2010). Four dialectical tensions emerged from participants’ stories about
their communication in and with nonprofit organizations. Refugees’ communication with workers in nonprofit organizations was characterized by tensions between: (a) dissemination and dialogue, (b) emancipation and control, (c) empowerment and oppression and (d) integration and separation.

_Tensions of dissemination and dialogue._ Initially, the refugee participants in my study all described a tension between their desire to rely on information communicated from/by the nonprofit organizational staff to survive in their new surroundings and their desire to share their own perspectives and experiences so that these organizations did not misdirect them.

_Tensions of emancipation and control._ Second, the refugees in this study described a tension which emerged because the communication from and with nonprofit organizational staff helped them gain economic emancipation and self-sufficiency while simultaneously forcing them to participate in rigid, controlling organizational systems.

_Tensions of empowerment and oppression._ Third, refugees described ways in which the communication from and with nonprofit organizational staff exposed them to new rights while also describing how the communication opened them up to abuses, both from organizational members and from others in the community.

_Tensions of integration and separation._ Fourth, refugees explained that communication from and with the organizations helped them connect with non-refugee Americans and build community. Simultaneously, however, refugees sought to maintain separation or uniqueness from non-refugee Americans.

Taken as a totality, these challenges demonstrated four ways that communication tensions affect characterize communication between staff and clients in nonprofit refugee resettlement organizations.
Discussion

At a theoretical level, though the larger study is ongoing, this initial, limited pilot study demonstrates that as Trethewey (1997) argues, the marginalized and normalized client is neither passive nor completely submissive to the communication disseminated by nonprofit organizations. Rather, clients experience such communication in complicated, tensional ways and seek to actively manage those tensions. Thus far, organizational communication research into communicative tensions has primarily focused on the way(s) in which tensions are experienced within organizations (e.g. between organizational workers or between workers and management). However, as Trethewey (1997), Papa, Singhal and Papa (2005) and Steimel (2010) indicate, communicative tensions including paradox, contradiction, and irony are inherent to the staff/client communication across organizational boundaries of voluntary nonprofit organizations as well. Thus, this study argues that we must extend our tensional approach to organizational communication by further exploring the ways in which communicative tensions operate across organizational boundaries.

At a practical level, future researchers should focus on identifying the strategies used by both refugees and by organizational workers to manage these communicative tensions in order to generate practical prescriptions for improving the resettlement process for the growing number of refugees worldwide. By continuing scholarship along these lines, researchers should be better able to understand both refugees’ and organizational workers’ accounts of the communicative tensions faced by refugees and organizational workers during the resettlement process. The more that can be learned about these communicative tensions and the strategies used to manage them, the more likely the refugee resettlement process will benefit refugees, the non-profit organizational members who interact with them, and their host communities.
My preliminary pilot study has four important limitations. First, the sample size of
refugees interviewed was quite small. Second, the nonprofit employees who interacted with the
refugees were not interviewed, limiting our understanding of the extent to which the tensions
were jointly experienced/understood. Third, while these four dialectical tensions are important,
organizational tensions are not limited to dialectical tensions. Trethewey and Ashcraft (2004)
explain that irony, paradox and double binds are also important organizational tensions. This
pilot study, therefore, identified a few, but certainly not all, tensions faced by refugee
resettlement organizations. Finally, I did not ask the refugees specifically how they chose to
respond to those tensions they experienced. This larger study, therefore, hopes to extend on this
exploratory study by developing our understanding of how nonprofit staff and clients experience
and manage boundary-spanning tensions in the refugee resettlement context.
References


