Being business-like while pursuing a social mission: Acknowledging the inherent tensions in US nonprofit organizing

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Abstract

Nonprofit organizations face an increasing expectation to be more business-like. Although scholars have theoretically explored this phenomenon and studied its influence in various contexts, there has been little empirical examination of the ways in which nonprofit practitioners *themselves* describe and make sense of their organizations and their work as business-like. Specifically, scholars have not explored the ways in which nonprofit practitioners communicatively reconcile the inherent tensions between being business-like and the pursuit of a social mission. Based on findings from an eight-month ethnographic field study of a US nonprofit organization, this article describes the sophisticated ways in which nonprofit practitioners understand, define and negotiate the need to be business-like within the nonprofit context and the central role of communication in that process. Additionally, critical assessment of these findings reveals the political qualities of talking about nonprofit organizing as being business-like, leading to potential transformative redefinitions of the business-like imperative that acknowledge rather than suppress conflicts inherent in the practice of nonprofit organizing.

The increasing expectation for nonprofit organizations to be more business-like has been the subject of considerable debate among scholars, particularly within the United States. For some, being

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business-like is a necessary reality that all nonprofits must accept in order to successfully provide sustainable solutions in competitive markets (see Dees and Anderson, 2003; Herzlinger, 1996; Van Til, 2000). For others, being business-like invites an opposing ideology and set of practices that threaten the nonprofit sector's ability to remain distinct from other sectors and uniquely address social problems (see Brainard and Siplon, 2004; Bush, 1992; Eikenberry and Kluver, 2004). These opposing views call attention to the tension-filled question of how nonprofit organizations can 'simultaneously emulate private enterprise and yet perform their social missions' (Weisbord, 1998: 12). Yet in addressing this issue, research has done little to understand how nonprofit practitioners themselves talk about being business-like in everyday interactions (see Dart, 2004). In addition, research has not yet investigated the specific ways in which nonprofit practitioners reconcile the pursuit of a social mission with the assumptions of profit, self-interest and competition that are embedded within the idea of being business-like (Herzlinger, 1996).

Although being business-like does not have to oppose the pursuit of a social mission, the terms *business* and *nonprofit* are, by legal and lexical definition, antithetical. The term business refers to a commercial enterprise focused on earning profit for individual owners and shareholders (Bush, 1992; Herzlinger, 1996). Conversely, the term nonprofit refers to an organization whose mission contributes to the common good and that legally cannot distribute earnings or profit to any stakeholder (Frumkin, 2002). Therefore, engaging in nonprofit work in a business-like manner conceptually draws upon a contradiction. We argue that understanding how nonprofit practitioners negotiate this tension is a practical matter (Young, 2005) and central concern when studying nonprofit organizing (Sanders, 2008). As such, this phenomenon warrants detailed exploration and analysis in order to develop more responsive theoretical and practical models (Trethewey and Ashcraft, 2004) about how nonprofit organizations can remain firmly grounded in their unique dedication to the common good while harnessing the assumed virtues of being business-like that make that notion so compelling.

We explore this question through critical analysis of data collected from an eight-month ethnographic field study of a single US nonprofit organization. Consequently, our analysis and findings reflect the distinct characteristics of the US nonprofit sector, which operates within a highly marketized society. However, rather than seeking to develop generalizable claims about a very broad and diverse organizational sector (O'Neill, 2002) that 'exists in very different contexts and are linked to distinct histories, cultures, and political traditions' throughout the world (Anheier and Salamon, 2006: 91), the purpose of our approach is to highlight and examine local, situated understandings of the business-like imperative to reveal the communicative quality of organizing as it is taken up by practitioners in everyday organizational talk and interaction. And because nonprofit endeavours in any national or cultural context must operate within and respond to a global market economy, these findings can provide an empirical understanding of how the debate over the value and influence of being business-like in nonprofit work is understood at a local, organizational level. We hope doing so can also inform related trends such as the growing use of entrepreneurial efforts in the European public sector (Zerbinati and Souitaris, 2005).

Specifically, this study offers two theoretical contributions to understanding the distinct features (Lewis, 2005) of nonprofit organizing. First, findings suggest that the tension between being business-like and fulfilling a social mission exists as an ontological feature of nonprofit organizational life. Second, the sophisticated and flexible ways in which nonprofit practitioners redefine what it means to be business-like illustrate how being business-like in the nonprofit sector can be understood as a communicative practice rather than only as a set of operational processes or organizational structures. These theoretical contributions demonstrate the central role of communication in

keeping these competing concerns in productive tension, and invite critical reconsideration of the usefulness of business terms to describe how a nonprofit organization operates.

Business-like concerns and organizational tensions in the nonprofit sector

Nonprofit organizations operate with a uniquely complex imperative—working diligently to secure the financial resources necessary to fulfill their social missions. As Weisbord (1998) explained, 'From one source or another, such collective goods—socially valuable but privately unprofitable— must be financed' (p. 19). The financing of collective goods has become more difficult over the past several decades as the growth of nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations around the world has swelled (O'Neill, 2002; Salamon, 1994) amid growing competition for funding and resources as well as an increased responsibility to address pressing social issues (Frumkin, 2002; Salamon, 2003). To deal with this challenge, nonprofit organizations are increasingly expected to be more business-like in the pursuit and management of financial resources (Dees and Anderson, 2003).

Being business-like in the nonprofit sector is heralded by many as a much-needed development that will lead to more efficient use of resources, increased accountability and more sustainable solutions to social problems. As a result, becoming more business-like is often framed as a natural and normal progression in nonprofit management. For example, Van Til (2000) noted that non-profit practitioners 'have all become, at least in part, businesspersons' who pursue their business within 'the organizational milieu of the [nonprofit] sector' (p. 112). Herzlinger (1996) claimed that without being business-like, nonprofit organizations are prone to disorder because they lack the accountability mechanisms of business, including self-interest stemming from ownership, efficiency that comes with competition and profit measure.

Although many scholars and practitioners readily embrace this move toward more business-like practice, there have also been substantial warnings against it. Bush (1992) offered one of the earliest cautions, contending that while 'nonprofits can learn much from the private sector, there are inherent dangers in following blindly the growing belief that nonprofits must be more business-like in every sense of the word' (p. 392). The primary reason for nonprofit organizations to be cautious about becoming more business-like is the incompatibility of for-profit and nonprofit value orientations. For example, values such as altruism, voluntary action, cooperation and social justice (O'Connell, 1988) are distinct from the economic and competition-centred values of for-profit work that engages in commercial activities that produce individual-level goods and services for those who can afford them (Brainard and Siplon, 2004). Economic models of organizing, then, may open the door to marketization that could compromise the democratic ideals of fairness and justice that create civil society and hinder the nonprofit sector's ability to successfully address social problems (Eikenberry, 2009).

Although a number of studies have empirically explored the ways in which business-like concerns play out in various nonprofit contexts (e.g. Dart, 2004; Glynn, 2000; Golden-Biddle and Rao, 1997; Jager and Beyes, 2010; Oakes et al., 1998; Ruud, 2000; Toepler, 2006), there has been little empirical examination of the ways in which nonprofit practitioners *themselves* describe and make sense of their organizations and their work as business-like. Moreover, research has focused on competition and conflict between nonprofit and business orientations with an implicit desire for resolution. Given the tension-filled, ambiguous space between the market and the state in which the nonprofit sector exists (Brainard and Siplon, 2004; Frumkin, 2002), we argue that it is more productive to understand how nonprofit practitioners negotiate and live with these differing concerns in everyday organizational life.

To do so, we draw upon Trethewey and Ashcraft's (2004) theoretical framework of organizational tensions, which recognizes the theoretical and empirical value of embracing the 'dilemmatic character of organizing' (p. 81). This perspective embraces tension as a normal outcome of the contradictions that inherently underlie communication that seeks to coordinate the actions and co-orient the meanings of actors situated in complex conditions. As a result, tension becomes an exceedingly practical matter that organizational members must negotiate in their everyday lives (Tracy, 2004), and communication plays a central role in the construction and management of tension in local, situated practice.

Embracing the dilemmatic qualities of the tensions associated with the business-like imperative in the nonprofit sector offers the possibility of conducting rich analyses of the communication practices that nonprofit practitioners use to deal with organizational tensions. Such analyses will aid in developing 'organizational theories that are at once more complex and responsive to actual practice' (Trethewey and Ashcraft, 2004: 171). Additionally, this approach helps avoid stereotypical characterizations of nonprofit and for-profit work that assumes nonprofit work is always and inherently altruistic (Leal, 2006) and that business can only be concerned with profit maximization and self-interest (Tomlinson and Schwabenland, 2010). Rather, a tension-centred focus simply seeks insight into how nonprofit practitioners make sense of the antithetical terms of business and nonprofit in everyday practices.

The theoretical implications of this approach are twofold. First, the need to be business-like while pursuing a social mission is conceptualized as a tension to be negotiated, rather than a problem to be resolved. As such, practitioners must simultaneously deal—to some extent—with these seemingly distinct goals as they pursue their work. Second, communication is the means by which the relationship and compatibility between being business-like and fulfilling a social mission is negotiated. Indeed, managing the business-like imperative rests on the communicative practices and locally shared meanings employed to simultaneously address those distinct demands. In exploring this topic, however, we recognize the need for a critical sensitivity to the politics that underlie the use of business language in non-business areas of society (Deetz, 1992).

Communication and conflict suppression

Critical scholarship attempts to expose and challenge self-evident and unproblematic ways of organizing with the aim of revealing hidden power relations that marginalize some interests in support of others (e.g. Acker, 1991; Alvesson and Deetz, 2000, Ashcraft and Mumby, 2004). This type of work has revealed organizations as tension-filled sites of meaning making (Murphy, 1998) and directs attention to the suppression of conflicts inherent in tension-filled organizing processes and practices. As particular meanings emerge out of the power-laden, historical contexts of organization, local practices of communication recreate naturalized understandings (Deetz, 1992; Foucault, 1980) that obscure alternative ways of knowing the organization. The implicit and often uncontested logics reconstituted in everyday organizational talk suppress conflict by limiting alternative ways of understanding and practicing organization.

Revealing these taken-for-granted ways of talking as non-arbitrary constructions that reduce tensions inherent in systems of organizational knowledge requires attention to language as the source of meanings and communication as (re)productive of the values that guide organization (Deetz, 2003; McClellan et al., 2010). In particular, we embrace the notion that communication is constitutive of organization and the ways in which people talk about their organizations shape what the organization becomes by creating the rules and resources that guide the conversations and practices of organizational life (Kuhn and Ashcraft, 2003; McPhee and Zaug, 2000; Taylor,

1999). Engaging this constitutive quality of communication directs attention to organizing discourses in the form of everyday talk and local practices of meaning making with a focus on examining the normalized understandings that provide a limited interpretive frame for understanding organization. Inspired by the critical scholarship of Habermas (1984) and Foucault (1980), some critical scholars have explored the ways instrumental values are treated as neutral and normal aspects of organizational discourse. For instance, Holmer-Nadesan (1997) examined the way a good worker is constituted within the seemingly neutral practice of personality testing at work, Clair (1996) studied the economic values (re)presented in the colloquialism 'a real job', Alvesson and Willmott (2002) exposed the managerial values embedded in the presentation of organizational identity and du Gay (1996) revealed potential problems associated with contemporary workers embracing an entrepreneurial attitude. Such critical interest in communication demonstrates how taken-for granted ways of talking about organizational life suppress conflicts of meaning inherent to the practice of organizing.

Two studies with a similar critical orientation highlight the constitutive influence of business discourse in nonprofit work. Oakes et al. (1998) found that the introduction of business planning processes in Canadian museums and cultural centres moved these organizations away from a primary focus on the work of documenting historical events and culture toward a strategic implementation of organizational resources directed at consumer markets, revenue streams and business planning. Indeed, over time Oakes and colleagues found that work focused more on business plans than mission-based plans. Additionally, Ruud (2000) offered a rich description of when business ideology prevails at the expense of nonprofit value orientations. In his ethnographic study of a metropolitan symphony orchestra in the US, Ruud found that administrators who espoused a business ideology perceived the symphony to be like any other business and were constantly at odds with musicians who privileged artistic values rather than being market driven. Ruud's analysis found that business discourse nearly always trumped artistic concerns in official organizational decision-making, resulting in significant degenerative conflict that led to strikes, lockouts and delayed performances. These studies reveal that the problems resulting from being business-like did not primarily stem from structural changes. Instead, issues arose when ideologies and logics embedded in business discourses were taken up in communication to create normalized ways of organizing that contradicted the values of nonprofit work.

While this work demonstrates the potential influence of business ideology in nonprofit work, our critical interest is not focused on exposing the ideologies of business that permeate the discourse of the nonprofit sector. Rather, our goal is to explore how local meanings of nonprofit organizing emerge in conversations about nonprofit work among nonprofit practitioners. Specifically, our interest is in revealing how contradictory logics are reconciled through local, situated talk and practice to examine the distinct tensions associated with nonprofit organizing. By exploring seemingly unproblematic ways of understanding nonprofit work, our critical focus is to reveal how conflicts of meaning remain hidden, obscured or treated as inconsequential within every day, taken-for-granted ways of talking about and practicing nonprofit organizing.

Methods

The overall aims of this study are to reclaim the inherent tensions often treated as invisible or inconsequential in everyday nonprofit organizational life and engender alternative forms of talk that might lead to more useful ways of nonprofit organizing. To accomplish these objectives, we draw upon Alvesson and Deetz's (2000) critical methodology, which engages three simultaneous moments of analysis: understanding and insight, distanciation and critique and generative

transformation (see also, Deetz and McClellan, 2009). *Understanding and insight* involves gaining interpretive understanding of local practices and everyday talk among organizational participants to reveal organizational realities as constituted through communication. *Distanciation and critique* involves questioning established realities, exposing tacit values embedded in the language used within an organization and revealing the ways particular understandings become marginalized or absent in everyday talk. Finally, *generative transformation* extends the critical effort by identifying alternative ways of talking that could generate new meanings, practices and ways of organizing to inform more positive organizational futures. As such, our goal is to gain insight to the ways non-profit practitioners talk about being business-like, critique the meanings emergent in this talk and offer possible alternative ways of talking about nonprofit work that recognize and support the tension-filled space between operating within the demands of a market economy and pursuing a social mission.

Embracing this critical methodology, our attention is first directed toward gaining interpretive understanding and insight of the local, everyday talk and practices of nonprofit practitioners. Specifically, the data analysed in this study are taken from the first author's ethnographic study of a single US nonprofit organization. As an organizational ethnography, the purpose of this effort is to 'inform larger theoretical and practical concerns, lending variation, incongruity, process, nuance, and texture to more conventional [research] accounts' (Ashcraft and Kedrowicz, 2002: 95). This qualitative inquiry into organizational life (Taylor and Trujillo, 2001) is followed by a focus on distanciation and critique, in which we engage in a critical interpretation of the language used to reveal hidden, obscured meanings not readily apparent within everyday discourse. Finally, we conclude this analysis with an exploration of generative transformation, in which we consider alternative ways to talk about nonprofit work. Overall, our purpose is to place these three simultaneous moments of critical inquiry into conversation in order to reveal the complexities of nonprofit work and offer valuable in-depth understanding of the local practices of being business-like in a nonprofit organization and the implications of engaging in this type of talk.

Research site

This study was conducted at the National Sports Center for the Disabled (NSCD) whose mission is to 'impact lives daily' through outdoor therapeutic recreational experiences.[1] Although the NSCD started as a one-person operation that provided ski lessons for amputees, it has become the largest adaptive sports organization in the world. Its programs include skiing, snowboarding, snowshoeing, rafting, hiking, canoeing, fishing, camping, rock climbing, biking and soccer for people with any physical or cognitive disability. At the time of this study, the NSCD provided approximately 15,000 therapeutic adaptive sports lessons each year and had an annual operating budget of nearly $5 million—most of which comes from fundraising, private donations and corporate sponsors. The NSCD had approximately 25 full-time staff members overseeing part-time seasonal employees and numerous volunteers.

The NSCD proved to be a useful research site for studying the meanings of being business-like in a nonprofit organization for two reasons. First, its sizeable budget and large and successful programs put the NSCD is in a constant state of fundraising and necessitates careful allocation of resources to both maintain and grow its programs. Therefore, there is constant pressure to demonstrate that expenses are yielding appropriate outcomes and that sources of income continue. Second, the role of full-time employees involves to some extent both fundraising and programming activities, which connects their daily work (at least in part) to business-like imperatives.

Data collection

With a desire to gain understanding and insight, the data collection for this study was based on an interpretive epistemology that claims that 'knowledge is gained through prolonged immersion and extensive dialogue practiced [by researchers] in actual social settings' and that 'intimate familiarity with the performance and significance of social practices … is a requirement for [their] adequate explanation' (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002: 11). The data analysed in this study were collected through participant observation and in-depth interviews (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002). This study specifically focuses on the experiences of full-time, paid staff members, which included executive leadership, program directors, development staff and office personnel. While we recognize that other organizational stakeholders such as board members, part-time seasonal staff and volunteers certainly offer important perspectives, the purpose of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding how full-time, paid nonprofit practitioners understand and talk about the business-like imperative as a part of daily work practices. The central role of this group in the daily management and framing of business-like concerns makes their experience and understanding a foundational aspect of understanding what it means to be business-like in a nonprofit organization.

Participant observation data were gathered from several different scenes, including office work, staff meetings, fundraising events and programming (e.g. sport camps, skiing, rock climbing). Observations documented the ways in which participants talked about and engaged their work, and enabled an understanding of both business-like and mission-based meanings of nonprofit work. In total, approximately 140 hours of observation generated approximately 75 pages of single-spaced fieldnotes. The interview process and protocol was also informed by understandings emergent through a long-term presence at the NCSD. For instance, the mutual trust established over several months of observation and participation provided significant background knowledge of practices, process and events that gave interviews more depth and focus. Each interview was conducted as a guided conversation that sought to understand 'the meaning of respondents' experiences' (Warren, 2002: 83) as it related to both individual experiences at the NSCD as well as respondents' interpretation of the experiences of other organizational members (Lindlof and Taylor, 2002). These interviews included 20 of the 25 full-time NSCD staff members across all functions of the daily operations of the organization. These interviews were conducted at the NSCD offices and typically lasted 20–90 minutes. Interview questions focused on why staff members worked at the NSCD, how their job contributed to the NSCD's mission and how they defined and understood what it meant to be business-like in a nonprofit organization. Interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the participants and transcribed in full, generating 138 single-spaced pages of text.

Data analysis

Recognizing that analysis, at least implicitly, occurs throughout the research process and always begins 'by identifying some important issues that guide the collection of data' (Ezzy, 2002: 12), the initial informal analysis of data was an iterative process of insight guided by the sensitizing concept of being business-like. Observations of the experiences and meanings of being business-like at the NSCD afforded the ability to refine and focus interview questions accordingly. Additionally, participants were asked to explain and interpret specific events and interactions that had been observed. The formal coding process at the conclusion of data collection involved creating electronic copies of all data and coding with an orientation toward gaining an understanding of how organizational members defined what it meant to be business-like and how they reconciled that

notion with pursuing a social mission. This process provided insights into meanings of being business-like in a nonprofit organization and allowed for the inductive elaboration and refinement of coding categories.

Additional analysis incorporated moments of critique and generative transformation. With a desire to be sensitive to the inherent politics of language use and engage in distanciation and critique, our attention was directed to the values embedded in the talk of being business-like, the ways in which such values are treated as neutral and unproblematic and how nonprofit practitioners negotiated the tension of being business-like in an attempt to accomplish nonprofit objectives. We concluded our analysis with a focus on generative transformation by offering alternative ways of talking about being business-like in a nonprofit organization. Specifically, we take two ways of talking latent in the data and consider how these discourses about nonprofit work might generatively transform the ways participants at NSCD understand and engage in nonprofit organizing.

Insight: being business-like in nonprofit work

The critical moment of gaining understanding and insight involves a careful investigation of organizing at the local level while interpreting what is important in ethnographic terms. As Alvesson and Deetz (2000) argued, critical researchers should be committed to 'local understanding and appreciation of the lives of real people in real situations' (p. 17). As such, our interpretive understanding is focused on the local practices of talk about nonprofit work and enables us to understand the ways in which knowledge is treated as objective and beyond question in organizational settings. This effort grounds our interpretive understanding in a critical analysis of everyday, local contexts. During this moment of insight, we remained sensitive to the power-laden, constitutive qualities of language use and aware of the tension-filled organizational contexts. Our analysis below reveals the sophisticated ways in which organizational members rearticulated understandings of the NSCD as a business, but redefined business-like in ways that aligned with their social mission.

Defining the nonprofit organization as a business

Although scholars have identified different practices related to being business-like in the nonprofit sector (e.g. Dart, 2004), it is also important to understand the extent to which nonprofit practitioners themselves explicitly make sense of their work as such. At the NSCD, the term business was often evoked by staff members in a variety of settings. On multiple occasions, the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) explained during ethnographic interviews that one of his primary responsibilities was running the NSCD in a 'business-like fashion'. Sponsors and donors wanted to see significant results, he explained, and therefore the NSCD had to be 'effective' in what it did. Within this framing, significant importance was placed on what the CEO called the 'business side' of the NSCD's operations.

The Chief Financial Officer (CFO) explained the value of focusing on the business side of their work: 'A lot of times, nonprofits are not run by people who have business skills. They have a mission and are very passionate about what they do but they are not a lot of times very [business] savvy'. This dynamic was apparent in a meeting where staff members were considering the viability of offering specific programs in cities where participation was low. The Vice President explained that their target attendance should be 75–100 rather than the 20–30 they were currently seeing. An intern interrupted and began arguing forcefully that the numbers should not matter; that they could still meet their mission with smaller groups. The Vice President responded with a discussion about cost-benefit analysis, and then added that while ideally the numbers should not matter, they had to

deal with the reality of their limited financial resources and their goal to reach the maximum number of people possible. Thus, for many staff members at the NSCD, being business-like was a significant point of emphasis and understood as the means by which the NSCD remained a viable organization. As the Office Manager pointed out:

> We have to function as a business in order to stay in business to serve [our participants] … If we don't function as a business as well as serve and build [participant] relationships, then we won't be around.

As a result, viewing the NSCD as a business was seen as common sense, and a basic requirement for good management.

When asked to elaborate on this understanding of the NSCD as a business, staff members were able to quickly and readily describe their organization as a business and their work as business-like. For example, the NSCD's Database Coordinator emphatically stated that nonprofit organizations are 'like a business':

> You still have your accounts payable, you still have your accounts due. You still have salaries—all these things—you still have employees to pay and issues just like businesses would have. You still have the same departments. You have to have human resources. The same things, not *exactly* the same, but many are the same.

Although the sentiment that nonprofits are indeed like a business was expressed with assurance, her recognition that nonprofits and businesses are not *exactly* the same was telling and was recognized by other staff members as well. A business development staff member, whose job description included soliciting donations from wealthy individuals and foundations, also explicitly labelled nonprofit organizations as businesses, but with one important caveat:

> Nonprofit is definitely a business. Nonprofit organizations are a business. Is it about money? No, it's about the service. To provide service we have to have money. *Service is the clear thing that came first*. The service is there because there is a need, but there's a cost.

The careful articulation of the primacy of service along with the necessity of money illustrates a definition of business-like that was shared across the NSCD staff. Being business-like was identified as raising and responsibly using money, but not associated with traditional business logics. Instead, the purpose of the NSCD running like a business was to provide services and grow programs. Consequently, many staff members at the NSCD highlighted money as their chief concern and central element of their 'business'. For example, an event coordinator explained: 'If we don't raise the money, we can't do the programs. So, in my opinion, I'd say it's a business. … But for us, there's much more of a cause. That is why we need the money'. These declarations were not expressed as condemnations of the pursuit of revenue. Rather, these statements were simple, matter-of-fact recognitions that it took money to fund programs, and that the NSCD's business was to generate as much money as possible.

In the analysis above, staff members carefully and explicitly articulated the connection between business *and* social mission, explaining that they are inseparably connected activities. In doing so, what emerged as interesting were the recurring qualifiers offered by NSCD staff members regarding *why* money is important and *for whom* it is intended. These subtle transformations of meaning direct our attention to the inherent tension in adapting the notion of business within the mission-centred nonprofit context. Whereas previous research has identified the problems that occur when business logic prevails at the expense of mission-based concerns (e.g. Oakes et al., 1998; Ruud,

2000), these initial findings show how members of the NSCD held these competing concerns in tension. The analysis below explores this communicative practice further, illustrating how staff members at the NSCD reconciled the use of business discourse by employing a sophisticated and flexible definition of the term business-like.

Reconciling being business-like in nonprofit work

Scholars and practitioners have warned about the adoption of business discourse in nonprofit work because of the accompanying assumptions of profit, self-interest and competition that are, by definition, tied to the term business (e.g. Bush, 1992: Eikenberry, 2009). Therefore, evoking business discourse in nonprofit work should require some form of reconciliation because of the many contradictory value orientations of nonprofit and business activities (Brainard and Siplon, 2004; O'Connell, 1989). At the NSCD, even within the explicit discourse of business, staff members significantly altered the notion of being business-like by carefully avoiding the use of business logics, thus reconciling a potential contradiction and suppressing conflicts in meaning by significantly adapting the term.

When asked to explain what he meant by running the NSCD in a business-like fashion, the CEO explained:

> To me, that is being good stewards for the resources you have, making sure they are used efficiently and well, and that you don't spend too much on overhead and costs … We want to be able to tell our shareholders that their money is being used well. It has an impact; it impacts a lot of people. That's our charge. That's what I mean by running [the NSCD] in a business-like fashion. It's really a return on investment the donors see. The return on that investment is how many lives it impacts and the changes it makes.

The CEO's understanding of what it meant to be business-like appealed to traditionally defined business-like concerns, but he altered their meanings significantly by framing donors as 'shareholders' and the NSCD's 'return on investment' as the number of lives that its programs affected.

The Director of Operations offered an even more detailed explanation if this adapted notion of business. The following extended excerpt from that interview elaborates on what it means to be business-like when programs and services are viewed as primary organizational goals and return on investment is viewed as the impact of services on individual lives.

> A: You have to run the NSCD like a business, because you have to be fiscally responsible not only to yourself but to your funders. I think if you're responsible in that way, then you are actually more responsible to your participants because you're going to ensure that this kind of programming can continue. And that's why it exists. There is no other reason for us to exist than to provide services to our participants. If we aren't business oriented, I don't know, tomorrow we could run out of money and close our doors.
>
> Q: So being business-like is responsibly managing and using resources?
>
> A: Yeah, absolutely … I think that in all areas of the NSCD now, we're running like a business. Individual departments within each division are more aware of budgets, and finances, [recognizing that people] can't let things go out the door, because then what will we have next time? … It does take money to run the place.
>
> Q: So if you are like a business, how do you explain profit motive?
>
> A: The profit isn't fiscal. It's not the dollars coming in. The profit is more success, more participants achieving the goals that they set so they can progress in life. That's the profit. If you went to a business and said, 'Does your business really work? What kind of proof do you have?' what they

would say is, 'Look at my books. Look at our investors. Look at the product that we sent out the door'. And so we might not say, 'Look at our books. Look at our investors and the profits we make', but our profits are in each individual who came through here and each note that we get back that says, 'Hey, I want you to be the first to know that I got a job!' … So that's our profit … helping people grow their independence and understand their abilities. That's the profit … It's not our profit. It's *their* [participant's emphasis] profit.

This exchange was particularly telling about the way in which being business-like was redefined at the NSCD. Notions of effectiveness, efficiency and responsibility to donors, employees and clients were emphasized as the salient elements of business-like efforts. In addition, the NSCD's 'profit' was (re)articulated as the improvement of individual lives by building confidence that led to empowerment. Interestingly, this 'profit' did not belong to the NSCD, but was something gained and kept by individual participants, transforming the meaning of profit away from notions of self-interest and competition. This discursive move constructed a motive based on organizational mission that *eschewed* profit for its own sake and *enabled* an adoption of the notion of business-like that did not work against the NSCD's social goals.

This understanding was evident in the NSCD's implementation of a new policy for taking lesson reservations and collecting fees that several staff members pointed to as an example of becoming more business-like. Previous to this change, reservations did not require a deposit, and as a result, cancelations did not have any financial penalty. The new policy required a 50 percent deposit on the lesson fee with full payment due 30 days prior to the lesson. If full payment was not received, then the lesson would be cancelled and filled with someone on the waiting list. The rationale behind this change was informed by the NSCD's adapted notion of business that focused on money but held service as the driving force. In separate conversations, both the Director of Operations and the Customer Service Manager explained that this policy—while seen as too stringent by some when it was first implemented—was necessary because each winter the NSCD turned away at least 4,000 requests for lessons and too many participants were simply not showing up. The Customer Service Manager was particularly careful in pointing out that this new policy was not primarily about money—particularly because the NSCD underwrote 80 percent of all lesson fees. Rather, the purpose of the policy was to maximize the number of participants in their programs and fill every lesson. Thus, being business-like, in this adapted form, was a seemingly natural identity as they sought to fulfill their social mission.

Attempts to gain understanding and insight into the local practices of talk reveals the ways staff members were able to articulate a flexible redefinition of what it means to be business-like to reconcile it with their mission to provide services and make a difference in the lives of people with disabilities. This discursive (re)construction was relatively inclusive, enabling staff members in all parts of the organization to frame the idea of being business-like as compatible with nonprofit goals and a social mission. Although this finding may seem somewhat self-evident (i.e. of course nonprofit practitioners would find ways to balance business and social mission goals), previous empirical illustrations of the use of business discourse and logic in the nonprofit sector (e.g. Oakes et al., 1998; Ruud, 2000) illustrate that achieving such compatibility is not automatic or easy. This insight also directs attention away from ideological meaning formations having a monolithic influence on practices and discourses, and toward the ways staff members at the NSCD articulated a sophisticated and flexible definition of being business-like that enabled them to describe themselves and their work as business-like while focusing on their social mission.

Critique: the politics of being business-like

While the interpretive findings above provide understanding and insight into how members of the NSCD creatively negotiated tensions between the meanings of nonprofit work as business-like while guided by a social mission, critical analysis requires recognition that the constitution of meanings always happens within relationships of power. By doing so, we can simultaneously question the 'conventions and structures of social orders and the forms of knowledge and privileged understanding that are complicit within such orders' (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000: 19). Thus, we engaged in a process of challenging naturalized meaning formations, examining suppressed conflicts in meaning and considering how possible meanings of nonprofit work are being precluded by this talk. In the discussion below, our critique of taken-for-granted meanings invites both practical and theoretical reconsideration of using the language of business or talking about being business-like as an appropriate label for how members of the NSCD described their thinking and practice.

Specifically, NSCD staff members made sense of the contradiction between being business-like and pursuing a social mission by redefining business nomenclature in terms of social outreach. Consider, for instance, how the phrase 'return on investment' was rearticulated in terms of the number of lives the organization impacts and changes. In this case, the notion of investment was reinterpreted in terms of social influence with the measurable return being transformed from profits or increased capital into improved conditions for individual participants. Similarly, the participants of this study defined 'profit' not in terms of dollars earned, but in terms of program participants successfully achieving their goals. Thus, achievement and success were defined not in terms of financial profit or increased capital for reinvestment, but in terms of whether or not the participants of the program achieved their individual goals. Thus, while the 'bottom line' of attaining a financially secure future was discussed, it was not so that a 'CEO can get a bonus', but reframed in terms of enabling the 'mission to continue'. The consequence of this framing, then, is that the inherent contradictions between economic demands and serving the common good of the communities they serve are nullified and rendered unproblematic. The taken-for-granted language of business (with its implied logics) is rearticulated in terms of positively affecting the lives of those with physical and cognitive disabilities to focus on the organization's social mission.

At the same time, when non-business-like ways of talking about nonprofit work were evoked, the inherent tensions with business logics were quickly suppressed when rearticulated within a business-like framework. For example, when the CEO described himself a steward of the NSCD's resources, he quickly identified donors as 'shareholders' and labelled mission-based outcomes as a 'return on investment'. When other participants described the need to carefully manage and use resources donated by supporters, this necessity was explained as having good 'business savvy' or necessary for 'running like a business'. Similarly, when the Director of Operations talked about the need for fiscal responsibility because it would 'ensure that this kind of programming could continue', she promptly reframed this objective as being 'business-oriented' and was able to describe participants' success in terms of 'profit'. As the examples above illustrate, staff members often evoked non-business-like discourses compatible with nonprofit work, yet quickly rearticulated these concepts within the language of business. As a result, different ways of understanding and talking about meeting the demands of a market economy while fulfilling a social mission were evoked. However, these emergent conflicts of meaning were suppressed and delegitimized when (re)framed within business discourse.

From a critical perspective, what is most intriguing (and problematic) is how this rearticulated business-like talk is presented in such normal and natural ways. Such framing may seem obvious

and insignificant, yet it is precisely the unproblematic quality of these rearticulations that makes these findings significant. Specifically, the unquestioning and unreflective use of business discourse to describe the organization's work suppressed the tension inherent in talking about pursuing a social mission in a market economy, rendering it as unimportant and thus non-existent. These ways of talking demand a critique as to why nonprofit practitioners, who might reject business logics, readily use business language to describe their organizational goals and concerns. Furthermore, the critical issue here is not that business logics are used, but in the consequences of alleviating the tension-filled space between financial imperatives and pursing a social mission in which the nonprofit sector exists.

Concern also emerges in the ways in which NCSD members rearticulate being business-like to resolve the tension between business logic and their nonprofit mission because it simultaneously re-legitimizes business-like logics as preferred ways of knowing the organization and suppresses alternative ways to know and practice nonprofit work. The consequence of redefining nonprofit work within significantly adapted business terminology is that the varied and complex qualities of nonprofit organizing are expressed only within the limited frame of being business-like. As a result, using business-like terms to talk about nonprofit work suppresses potential conflicts of meaning by advancing particular organizational understandings that serve to limit the horizon of other ways to understand and practice nonprofit organizing. When the tensions inherent in the discourse of nonprofit organizing are suppressed, other ways of organizing that could better suit a nonprofit organization are rendered at best obscure and at worse un-discussable.

This critique is even more problematic when considering that the NSCD's success in creating compatibility between being business-like and pursuing a social mission rested on members' ability to hold those two goals in tension by redefining what it meant to be business-like. The active assertion of nonprofit aims within the frame of business results in members of the NSCD actively consenting to the logics of business while attempting to do nonprofit work. Although initial assessment of the redefinitions of the term business-like are a seemingly productive attempt to use business terms to accomplish social aims, this type of appropriation of terms might be better understood as preventing the discursive options available for nonprofit practitioners by providing a limited frame for talking about nonprofit organizing as only in terms of business. This business-like frame disallows the potential for more robust understandings of nonprofit organizing from emerging in conversation. This moment of critique urges those theorizing about the nonprofit sector to be sensitive to the politics of employing business discourses and encourage alternative, and potentially more useful ways of talking about nonprofit work that acknowledge and keep in place the unique tensions and contradictions inherent in nonprofit organizing. The following section embraces the third moment of critical analysis and offers transformative redefinitions of nonprofit work that keeps these alternative meanings in productive tension.

Generative transformation: being nonprofit-like in a for-profit world

Our critical attention to the language used to talk about nonprofit work is aimed at not only revealing problematic forms of talk, but to also uncover the ways in which nonprofit practitioners might better define nonprofit work in their own terms and promote their own interests. As Alvesson and Deetz (2000) argued, interpretive research findings and critical analysis should lead to transformative redefinitions that offer new vocabularies, knowledge, and practical understandings that give clear 'indications of a more positive future' (p. 152). While the critical findings above critique the ways members of the NSCD actively suppressed nonprofit-like talk through the rearticulation of

ideas in terms of being business-like, the aim of engaging in generative transformation is to consider how alternative ways of talking might result in more positive ways of organizing. While methods for encouraging generative transformation can vary, the aim is to extend interpretive insight and propose alternative discourses grounded in empirical analysis that complicate privileged discourses and generate possibilities that keep organizational tensions alive. Focusing on the emergent (yet readily suppressed) tensions between financial imperatives and social mission in the findings above, we embrace alternative ways of talking about nonprofit work at the NSCD and extend them to consider how these ways of talking might engender new possibilities for nonprofit organizing. This task creates generative transformations (Deetz and McClellan, 2009) that offer alternative ways of talking about nonprofit work that might enable new vocabularies with the potential to resist, transform or otherwise allow for the alternative meanings and understandings to remain in tension rather than be suppressed.

In the discussion below, we highlight two emergent discourses that could lead to generative transformations by holding the contractions between financial imperatives and social goals in productive tension. While we label these discourses 'stewardship' and 'sustainability' their meanings were evoked, both implicitly and explicitly, by participants in order to create compatibility between business-like and mission-based work. However, considering the moment of generative transformation, we embrace these ways of talking as potentially useful ways to keep inherent tensions of nonprofit organizing in place. Specifically, we argue that these discourses offer alternative ways to keep the contradictions inherent in pursuing a social mission within a market economy in place. Both discourses attend to the financial and operational issues articulated as essential by members of the NSCD, but do not privilege business logics or suppress social aims and therefore enable a more productive tension between financial imperatives and social mission without creating the organizational dysfunctions identified in previous research (e.g. Golden-Biddle and Rao, 1997; Oakes et al., 1998; Ruud, 2000).

Stewardship. Staff members at the NSCD repeatedly explained that their responsibility was to watch over and carefully manage resource so that others—not themselves—would benefit. When the CEO explicitly identified his role as a steward, he explained that the NSCD's leadership needs to watch over and carefully manage resources for the benefit of their participants. Other staff members also implicitly identified their roles as stewards. For instance, the Director of Operations talked about the NSCD's success as belonging to participants and highlighted that staff members' responsibility was to watch over resources so they could continue to be of benefit to those they served. Overall, such talk evokes the notion of stewardship that might be offered as an alternative discourse potentially transforming the NCSD's way of organizing.

Stewardship theory in organization studies offers an alternative model for understanding organizations (Davis et al., 1997). Offering a long-term perspective and sense of service to organizational members and community, the discourse of stewardship provides an explicit framework for articulating personal responsibility for organizational success and the well-being of those who depend on the organization's services and resources (Hernandez, 2008). However, while the notion of stewardship emerged in the data presented above, when evoked in daily interactions was often quickly redefined in business terms enabling NSCD staff members to evoke business logics while still focusing on their social mission. Consequently, while the concept of stewardship was often evoked when talking about nonprofit work, it was suppressed and rearticulated, and therefore not drawn upon explicitly outside of a business framework as a means for describing the financial imperatives of nonprofit work.

Consider, however, if the discourse of stewardship was a more privileged way of talking about the NSCD's need to efficiently manage and use resources and more readily drawn upon by staff

members instead of business discourse. Talking of financial imperatives in terms of stewardship might keep the need to successfully function within the financial imperatives of the market in productive tension with the notion that the NSCD's money, facilities, resources and outcomes belonged to participants and that staff members are responsible for watching over and managing those resources in order to fulfill their social mission.

We suggest that articulating the NSCD's work in terms of stewardship could provide an alternative way to make sense of nonprofit work. Explicitly describing the management of money and resources in the nonprofit sector as stewardship may be more useful for nonprofit practitioners because it does not privilege the implicit logics embedded in the discourse of business. The notion of stewardship rejects the logics of private ownership, competition and self-interest that are central to the business construct and holds them in productive tension with active concern for social good. Indeed, the term stewardship cannot be easily interpreted using business logics, and thus the tension between financial responsibility and the common good are much more readily apparent. Using the terms 'business' and 'business-like' to describe the same process obscures the inherent tension of nonprofit work and leaves open the possibility of interpreting business in a literal sense which previous research has shown to lead to organizational dysfunction (e.g. Ruud, 2000). If NSCD staff members more frequently and explicitly drew upon notions of stewardship it might better enable the underlying values of nonprofit work (O'Connell, 1988) to exist in a productive tension with financial imperatives. Stewardship, as a term to talk about nonprofit work, promotes an organizing logic of maintaining resources for the use of others. Talking of the NSCD's work in terms of stewardship would prevent business logics from becoming the only logics informing nonprofit organizing and organize nonprofit work around an alternative vocabulary for action that better recognizes the unique circumstances and contexts of the nonprofit sector. In sum, it could be more useful for the NSCD's staff to talk of themselves as stewards rather than as business people because it may offer a discursive logic that actively engages the tensions between financial imperatives and social goals.

Sustainability. Members of the NSCD also explained that their business-like efforts were a result of the need to keep the organization financially sound in order for their services to be available to those who would need them now as well as in the future. For instance, the data presented above illustrate how the concept of sustainability was implicitly evoked in talk about the purpose and overarching goal of the NSCD's business-like work. For instance, the Office Manager and the Director of Operations both clearly expressed the need to ensure long-term viability of the NSCD so that their services would be around for those who would need them in the future. Similarly, the Customer Services Manager explained that their reservation policy was meant to ensure the long-term viability of their skiing program and maximize the number of participants. Business development staff members also recognized that their efforts to raise money and market programs enabled services to continue and grow. This repeated understanding connects strongly to a discourse of sustainability and might be offered as a way to generatively transform how the NSCD understands its work.

Sustainability 'has become a master discourse within modern organizational life' (Guthrie et al., 2010: 449), and is often used to describe financial viability and long-term independent presence. Within the nonprofit sector, sustainability is also central to the pursuit of social missions (Unerman and O'Dwyer, 2010). Sustainability in the nonprofit sector is focused on revenue generation and economic growth (Dees and Anderson, 2003), but offers a means to describe such work in the context of service. As such, a discourse of sustainability might also be a useful way to understand nonprofit work that promotes productive tensions between financial imperatives and social

mission. However, similar to the discourse of stewardship, while the talk of nonprofit work in terms of sustainability was latent in everyday talk at the NSCD, it was also suppressed by the use of business-like terms. As such, the notion of sustainability was always labelled as 'business' and therefore could not be used as an explicit form of organizational sense making.

However, consider if the discourse of sustainability was the predominant way of talking about the NSCD's need to generate revenue to remain financially sound rather than labeling such activities as being business-like. Talking of the organization in terms of sustainability might more accurately reflect the widespread understanding of staff members that the NSCD's financial needs, revenue streams and policies were the means to remaining viable for the benefit of those they serve.

Additionally, talking of the NSCD's work in terms of sustainability offers an alternative discursive logic that maintains the tension between the financial imperatives of the market and pursuing a social mission. Aligning with staff members' recognition that they were interested and engaged in raising and managing money for their programs, this discourse draws upon notions of long-term vision, growth of programs and increasing revenue to promote social goals. Embracing the discourse of sustainability to make sense of fundraising, fee structures and other so-called business functions promotes a logic of maintenance and service to others, and keeps the inherent need for financial stability in tension with pursuit of a social mission. Using the term sustainability as a way to talk about the NSCD's work prevents logics embedded in the use of business language to become the only logics motivating nonprofit organizing and might help nonprofit practitioners organize their work around an alternative vocabulary for action that acknowledges and supports the unique situation associated with nonprofit work. Indeed, it is difficult to interpret the term sustainability using the business logic of profit maximization and self-interest. The tension between financial viability and existing for the common good of all stakeholders are much more readily apparent. In sum, it may be more useful to talk about the NSCD being sustainable rather than business-like as it offers an alternative discursive logic maintaining the unique tension between financial needs and social goals.

The two alternative discourses presented above offer suggestions for how the NSCD might talk about their work in ways that could maintain inherent discursive tensions that arise in nonprofit work. Specifically, they offer ways of talking about nonprofit organizing that acknowledge and support tensions between financial imperatives and social mission. These generative transformations, however, are not meant to serve as exemplars for how *every* nonprofit organization should talk about its work. Because the discourses of stewardship and sustainability emerged from the ethnographic data, they may be useful ways for members of the NSCD to talk about their work. As such, these proposals represent two possibilities for generative transformation if embraced by members of the NSCD. Our hope, however, is that these proposals serve to invite scholars and practitioners to seek out other ways to more productively talk about nonprofit organizing that does not suppress the inherent tension of pursuing a social mission within a market economy. Seeking alternative discourses that might promote generative transformations, as we have done in this study, helps avoid limiting the horizon of possible alternative ways to understand and practice nonprofit organizing and more readily reflect on what it means to engage in nonprofit work.

Theoretical implications

Although initial assessment of the redefinitions of the term business-like at the NSCD are a seemingly productive attempt to use business terms to accomplish social aims, this type of appropriation of terms might be better understood as preventing the discursive options available for nonprofit

practitioners by providing a limited frame for talking about nonprofit organizing as only in terms of business. While our findings are limited to this single case study and we cannot claim to offer a generalizable understanding of the business-like imperative in the nonprofit sector and its implications for broader theoretical concerns, the findings provide nuance and detail to previous research accounts, and therefore offer important theoretical considerations regarding the ontology of nonprofit organizations and the constitutive quality of communication in maintaining (or suppressing) the inherent tensions of nonprofit organizing.

First, the tension between managing financial imperatives and pursuing a social mission may be more productively conceptualized, not merely as an outcome of specific interactions and ideas, but rather as an ontological characteristic of contemporary nonprofit organizing. Because the nonprofit sector exists in a contested space between the market and the state that is continually riding the contractions of attending to both market and social concerns (Brainard and Siplon, 2004; Young, 2005), nonprofit organizing must attend in some way to these competing needs (Sanders, 2012). The findings of this study illustrate the careful and sophisticated ways nonprofit practitioners redefine the idea of being business-like in order to hold financial imperatives and a social mission in tension. However, our critical attention to the constitutive quality of language use maintains a concern with any single logic becoming naturalized and how local practices of communication suppress alternative, and potentially more useful, ways to understand nonprofit work. Thus, for nonprofits to sustain their unique place in society, we argue that they need to maintain this inherent tension and foster nonprofit-like ways of organizing.

Inscribing this tension as ontological and an irresolvable feature of nonprofit organizing enables scholars and practitioners to overcome a binary view of the market and mission constructs, and instead enables a view of these competing concepts as 'mutually implicative and coproductive' (Mumby, 2004: 21). Without explicitly recognizing and labelling the tension between being business-like and pursuing a social mission as ontological, we too often assume a binary relationship and frame one concern in ways that marginalize the other, misrepresenting the influence and necessity of each on nonprofit organizational life (Mumby, 2004). Given the increasing concerns about nonprofit marketization (e.g. Eikenberry, 2009), we argue that social mission and market concerns need to be understood as distinct yet interconnected, rather than collapsing them together in a singular discourse of business that can become so normalized that it obscures nonprofit-like ways of organizing.

The consequences of such ontological framing allow scholars and practitioners to move beyond implicit and unhelpful assumptions of rationality that create unnecessary binds between phenomena that must exist in tension. Embracing a tension-ridden ontology of nonprofit organizing might help scholars and practitioners abandon attempts to resolve conflicts of meaning and begin exploring the possibilities that arise when both financial imperatives and social mission are at play. Additionally, rather than simply focusing on how business ideologies usurp the ability to think otherwise in nonprofit work, concern can be directed to ways local practices of talk naturalize business-like ways of understanding that suppress rather than embrace tensions between the seemingly contradictory interests of nonprofit work. Critical scholarship has identified the value of recognizing irrationality as a natural and normal part of organizing within complex systems (see, e.g. Brunsson, 1989; Mumby, 2004; Trethewey and Ashcraft, 2004). Yet, doing so requires recognizing and adopting generative discourses that keep tensions alive and maintain nonprofit organizing as a unique and distinct endeavour and does not try to fit it neatly into a romanticized discourse of business, which too often seeks rationality and order and views tension as unproductive.

Second, recognizing the unique tension-filled ontology of nonprofit organizations places an emphasis on communication as a constitutive practice that maintains (or suppresses) those tensions.

As such, being business-like in the nonprofit sector can also be understood as a communicative practice, rather than only as a set of operational processes or organizational structures. Indeed, the productive reconciliation of being business-like in nonprofit work at the NSCD—compared to previous research that has illustrated the dysfunction created by business discourse—leads us to recognize the central role of communication in managing this tension. This study thus extends the theoretical framework that views communication as a productive, constitutive force (Kuhn, 2008) into the nonprofit sector. From this perspective, communication creates meaning and as a result, being business-like in nonprofit work is defined, negotiated and reconciled in everyday talk. It is through meanings taken up and imbued in everyday practices that the ontological features of nonprofit organizing described above are understood and engaged productively or misunderstood and obscured. As a result, how the tension between being business-like and pursuing a social mission is taken up at the local level is extremely important because that is where it is negotiated and defined. The constitutive quality of communication can therefore recognize the tension-filled ontology of nonprofit organizing or suppress conflicts inherent to nonprofit work, distorting the practice into a subset of business-like work.

While the study of the everyday ways nonprofit staff members talk about their work may seem mundane and of little concern, our analysis reveals how talking about nonprofit work in terms of business is not simply an empty use of business jargon. Rather, our findings highlight an important concern with the sophisticated ways in which nonprofit practitioners strive to redefine their unique organizing practice in terms of business to either legitimize their work or otherwise make sense of nonprofit work in terms of business. While this type of talk may seem inconsequential or non-substantive (i.e. they just use this talk to make their work sound business-like even though it does not really change anything; see Dart, 2004), embracing a constitutive perspective of language and a critical concern for the normalization of meaning generates a significant concern for how such mundane, taken-for-granted ways of talking serve as a productive force that suppresses the unique ontology of nonprofit organizing. In other words, nonprofit practitioners should avoid describing their complicated activities in the limited terms of business, and instead employ terms that embrace the complex tension between remaining financially stable in a market economy while fulfilling a social mission. Therefore, nonprofit organizations may—in ways that are distinct from their corporate and public counterparts—rely upon the constitutive force of communication to successfully negotiate who and what they need to become in both institutional and everyday talk. As a result, articulating nonprofit-like discourses, such as stewardship and sustainability, can acknowledge the contradictory nature of pursuing social goals within a market economy and aid in helping nonprofit organizations maintain their unique role in society even as the boundaries between public, for-profit and nonprofit sectors become increasingly blurred (Frumkin, 2002).

Directions for future research

The theoretical contributions described above provide important insight into the broader question of how organizations in all sectors can pursue social goals within the limited discourses of economics and business. Indeed, increasingly salient organizational forms and practices such as corporate social responsibility and social business will in some way have to understand and manage the tension between their social goals and the financial imperatives of a market economy. In addition, robust public sectors outside the United States will also have to manage their social goals within increasingly entrepreneurial understandings of funding and financial management (Hjorth, 2008; Zerbinati and Souitaris, 2005). If these social efforts are to be successful, then

organizations would need to recognize the inherent contradiction within such endeavours and the communicative work required to frame, negotiate and embrace the tensions that make these efforts successful. The theoretical contributions of this study offer a perspective on being non-profit-like that the for-profit and public sectors in a variety of national and economic contexts may find useful.

To do so, we suggest three specific areas for future research that expand upon the findings of this study and address its limitations. First, additional empirical investigation should explore how the tension between social goals and market imperatives is understood and maintained in a variety of organizational and national contexts. This would allow greater insight into the nuances associated with the discourse of being business-like while pursuing a social mission. For example, non-profit organizations that receive their revenue from fees and serve more affluent populations (e.g. hospitals, symphonies) or who have more steady streams of funding from the public sector (e.g. welfare, social services) might focus more on traditional notions of being business-like than those that receive their revenue from donations and focus on more complex social problems (e.g. poverty, global literacy). Additionally, corporate social responsibility programs and social businesses will experience and manage this tension in distinct ways, as they are more literally beholden to traditional definitions and imperatives of business.

Second, we encourage researchers to remain sensitive to the politics of language use and undertake more robust examinations of the business-like construct to develop alternate ways of understanding and talking about financial imperatives that draw upon the strengths and unique features of the nonprofit sector or to engender alternative forms of talking about being non-profit-like (Eikenberry, 2009). With evidence that being business-like may not represent what nonprofit practitioners actually mean when they describe meeting expectations of financial solvency and responsibility, research should explore the usefulness of alternate discourses of nonprofit work. Such knowledge will enable organizations in all sectors to more positively and productively deal with the inherent tension between pursuing social goals within a global market economy.

Third, additional theoretical and empirical investigation should explore how this tension is experienced beyond paid employees. Volunteers, boards of directors and donors, for example, play a significant role in nonprofit organizing as well as in other social endeavours and enterprises. Yet, their organizational experiences, scope of influence and overall impact on a social mission are very distinct from paid staff members. Research needs to understand how these stakeholders experience and understand what it means to be business-like while pursuing a social mission. Doing so would expand the claims of this study and recognize the inherent complexity of contributing to the common good and its multiple stakeholders.

Overall, this critical exploration of nonprofit work offers a unique contribution to the study of nonprofit organizing by demonstrating the constitutive (and potentially problematic) qualities of talking about nonprofit work as business-like. By gaining insight into the complex ways nonprofit practitioners understand and engage in their work reveals tensions inherent to nonprofit organizing and how business-like talk might serve to suppress rather than acknowledge these tensions. While scholars and practitioners debate the need for or elimination of business-like discourse and practice in nonprofit work, we are suggesting that understanding nonprofit organizing necessarily requires a productive tension between both financial imperatives and social mission. In other words, nonprofit organizations cannot be wholly business-like or wholly mission focused, and rather than attempting to reconcile this tension, those interested in nonprofit work might be better served to find ways of talking that recognize and support this unique quality.

Notes

1. While anonymity is typically requested by organizations participating in research, the NSCD suggested that we use their name in published research reports, citing the value of readers learning more about their organization.

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