How to Be Both:
Negotiating Professionalism and Activism in the Nonprofit Sector

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Abstract

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In this paper, I identify a conflict between professionalism and activism in the contemporary U.S. nonprofit sector (NPS). These two dimensions of the sector conflict in that they value and prioritize different facets of the NPS, are structured by different institutional logics, and have incompatible attitudes toward rationalization processes. I make the argument that the professionalism impulse shaping the sector threatens to overpower and displace the activism impulse. To evidence the conflict between activism and professionalism, I interviewed 12 nonprofit professionals employed at food justice organizations in Philadelphia and New York. From these interviews, I learned that despite the increasing professionalization of the NPS, nonprofit employees continue to enact the activist core of the sector by drawing motivation from personal activist commitments, approaching optimization and efficiency-maximizing processes with skepticism, centralizing community organizing and advocacy in their work, and strategically using relationships with funders to further their goals. Finally, I question what is at stake when all activism within a social movement landscape is confined within organizational forms.
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The fight is never about grapes or lettuce. It is always about people.
- Cesar Chavez

Introduction

In the U.S. civil society landscape we know today, professionally staffed nonprofit organizations are commonplace. This was not always the case, though. The fairly recent professionalization of the nonprofit sector (NPS), beginning in the 1980s, has dramatically changed the way that organizations conduct their operations and pursue their goals. In this paper, I begin by examining the identity of the NPS and the values that form its core. I primarily focus on two opposing impulses that have shaped, and continue to shape, the development of the sector: professionalism and activism. To explicate the conflict between these impulses, I define “professionalism” and “activism” in the context of today’s NPS and illustrate the ways that these forces manifest on the level of organizational identity as well as in the lives of nonprofit staff.

The NPS literature has thoroughly established the fact that nonprofit organizations experience organizational identity conflicts (Chenhall, Hall, and Smith 2016; Knutsen 2012; Knutsen and Brower 2010). However, there is a gap in the research when it comes to understanding how this conflict is experienced and understood by individuals who work for nonprofit organizations. Using interview data from conversations with 12 food justice nonprofit professionals, I mediate between the organizational and individual levels to understand what the activism/professionalism conflict looks like in everyday life, as well as which strategies are deployed to navigate this conflict. Tracing the interplay between different dimensions of the sector reveals how individuals and organizations reconcile the seemingly incompatible pursuit of professionalism and activism.
Section I: The Conflicted Identity of the Nonprofit Sector

The Origins of the Sector

This investigation interrogates the character of nonprofit organizations, so it is essential to begin by understanding the basic identity of the sector. In the world of administration, nonprofit organizations are designated by a 501(c)(3) legal status, which exempts them from federal income taxes. Beyond this, it is difficult to point to one trait or characteristic that all nonprofits have in common. This organizational diversity means that efforts to comprehensively theorize the NPS have been strained. Much of the current literature does not acknowledge the complexity of the sector as it exists, leading to broad generalizations and oversimplification (Knutsen 2012).

Though this diversity has created trouble for researchers and academics, it is also what makes the sector a unique and compelling area for research. The NPS has historically fulfilled several key social, economic and religious functions. Nonprofits have played an influential role in the development of American political culture. Smith and Pekkanen (2012:36) explain that Alexis de Tocqueville saw “nonprofit associations [as] central to American democracy [for their ability to] protect individuals from an oppressive majority and offer expressions of pluralism and diversity in the polity.” Reflecting on the historical role that nonprofits have played in creating contemporary ideas about democratic citizenship makes clear why “some consider the expression of values to be the fundamental nonprofit characteristic” (Knutsen 2012). Values—their cultivation and expression—have historically given the NPS a reason to exist, as this need could not be fulfilled through other avenues as effectively. What is also worth noting about early voluntary associations is that they were often fairly informal networks or groupings, which contrasts with the rigidly structured groups and organizations present today (Bromley and Meyer
Increased formalization is not the only way that the contemporary sector deviates from its origins. Several dramatic transformations have occurred, changing the sector into something that barely resembles its earlier form. The next section traces the forces that have acted upon the NPS as it develops that can account for many of these changes.

Forces Shaping the Nonprofit Sector

The nature of the nonprofit sector has changed significantly in recent years, but what exactly has motivated these changes? Salamon (2012:4) identifies four forces, or impulses, that continue to shape and influence today’s nonprofit sector. These four impulses are: voluntarism, professionalism, civic activism and commercialism. Thematically, I choose to group voluntarism and activism together, and to group professionalism and commercialism together as these two groupings have similar ideological foundations.

The voluntaristic impulse is grounded in the expression of values and emphasizes individual voluntary involvement to work toward the common good. This orientation eschews professionalism and formalization in favor of more casual civic engagement. The civic activism impulse stems from the notion that nonprofits have the capacity, and therefore an obligation, to address pressing social concerns. This impulse is one toward mobilization that takes advantage of the nonprofit sector’s ability to organize individuals to address shared concerns and goals, often involving policy change. Organizations that are primarily focused on civic activism may describe themselves as a base for social movement participants. These groups are known in the literatures as social movement organizations (SMO) (McCarthy and Zald 1977).

Salamon (2012) defines professionalism as “the emphasis on specialized, subject-matter knowledge gained through formal training and delivered by paid experts” (16). While the forces of professionalism have enriched the sector in significant ways, they have also partially degraded
the sector’s voluntary character. The U.S. government has been a driving force of professionalism by providing organizations with funds to hire full-time staff and encouraging these organizations to take on service provision roles (Salamon 2012). However, funding from philanthropic foundations has also been identified as a driving force behind the increasing professionalization of the sector (Jenkins and Eckert 1986; McCarthy, Britt, and Wolfson 1991).

In a similar vein, the commercialism/managerialism impulse captures the business-like tendencies of the sector, including an increasing interest in efficiency and innovation. This impulse is measurement-driven with a careful eye toward the logic of the market, conceptualizing an organization’s clients as customers.

As mentioned before, civic activism and voluntarism are grouped together, as well as professionalism and managerialism, because these two groupings have similar ideological bases. For the sake of simplicity, these two groupings are referred to as “professionalism” and “activism.” In this analysis, the terms professionalism and activism are both made more capacious than their standard definitions. Used together, they refer to conceptual umbrellas that capture ideologically opposed processes and practices. Here, professionalism does not only refer to adherence to a set of professional standards or membership within a professional organization. Instead it refers to a broader set of ideas that are explored in the coming sections: bureaucracy, rationalization, marketization, and standardization. On the other hand, activism, instead of signifying mere participation in advocacy, refers to the expression of values, radical social change, movement building and critical thinking. “Professionalism-aligned processes” and “activist-aligned processes” more accurately describe the way these terms are being deployed. Just as important as understanding what these terms signify is capturing the rift between them.
This tension is explained in later sections. First, we look at the forms that professionalism and activism take today before diving into the conflict between them.

**Section II: Understanding Professionalism and Activism**

*Professionalism*

There was once a time when the worlds of social change and social service were powered by volunteers and amateurs (Frumkin 2005; Kreutzer and Jäger 2011). Today’s nonprofit sector, though still more reliant on volunteer labor than other fields, is powered largely by paid staff and working professionals. This new culture of professionalism in the nonprofit sector exerts a powerful influence over organizational activities as well as staff member conduct. The ideological function of professionalism must not be ignored. In the context of social justice organizations, it limits and shapes collective understandings of what social change looks like and who is capable of creating it.

Freidson (1986) understands professional institutions as sites where knowledge and power combine and are exercised. Through this lens, professionals become “agents of formal knowledge,” giving them the ability to exert control over others through their specialized training and access to restricted institutions and spaces. Formal knowledge is distinct from other types of knowledge because it is characterized primarily by rationalization, “the pervasive use of reason, sustained where possible by measurement, to gain the end of functional efficiency” (Freidson 1986:3). The formal knowledge of professionals is ordered into specializations and disciplines.

In the context of the NPS, the word “professional” is often used to make a distinction between credentialed, highly educated people and volunteers. In fact, the increasing influence of professionalism of the NPS has led to conversations about the most appropriate name for the sector. Frumkin (2005) dives into a terminological debate over the most accurate descriptor. In
the past, “the voluntary sector” has been popular, but more recently this phrase has been rejected by some on the grounds that “it obscur[es] the growing professionalism of nonprofit activity...

As part of the process of receiving more and more funding from public sector agencies through contractual relationships, many nonprofit managers now take great pride in the fact that they have removed all vestiges of amateurism associated with volunteerism and have replaced it with the professional work of highly trained people” (Frumkin 2005:14). In this sense, “professional” creates distance between operations controlled by paid staff and those powered by volunteers.

The link between education and professionalism is well established (Freidson 1986; Wilensky 1964). Freidson (1986) identifies a standard path to professionalism, involving tailored educational experiences and skill acquisition that qualify the person to occupy the position. The Masters in Nonprofit Administration and related degrees are relatively recent developments that have legitimated the field and created more highly educated figures within it. One way to understand nonprofit management programs is as sites of standardization and homogenization. Universities and other institutions of higher education are ideal places for organizational norms to be established, creating a degree of uniformity throughout the field. This training has benefits for organizations, because standardized norms clear conduct guidelines for professional managers and staff (DiMaggio and Powell 1983:152).

What else is driving this professionalization? Much of the literature has attributed the professionalization of the nonprofit sector to increased funding from both government and foundation sources (Rodriguez 2017; Salamon 2012). These new sources of funding have made possible a shift from volunteer power to paid, permanent staff. Radical social change activists have cast suspicion upon these sources of funding, claiming that they distort movement goals, co-opt movement leaders and neutralize what would have otherwise been radical activist
undertakings (Rodriguez 2017). Even for organizations without radical aims, it is an indisputable fact that the receipt of external funding can transform organizational goals (Jenkins and Eckert 1986; McCarthy et al. 1991). Hwang and Powell (2009) seek to identify the effects of these imports of professionalism into the nonprofit sector. They find that funders have pushed for greater accountability and transparency in the organizations that receive their funding, which has led to new methods of evaluation, accounting and documentation on the part of the recipient organizations. These demands from funders have resulted in the increased use of strategic planning, financial audits and quantitative program evaluations in nonprofits.

When social movement theorists McCarthy and Zald (1977:24) sought to understand the impact of professionalism on social movement organizations, they proposed the following hypothesis: SMO professionals “are distinguished from their colleagues in these professions largely by their rejection of traditional institutional roles, careers, and reward structures. One consequence, we suspect, is a lower commitment to professionalism.” The next section, which describes nonprofits becoming businesslike, poses a challenge to this hypothesis by suggesting that many nonprofit professionals do in fact operate within traditional career and reward structures.

_Becoming Businesslike? Sector Bending and Blurring_

A trend in the literature is the observation, often stated in the form of a concern, that nonprofits are becoming “businesslike.” Though this term is used frequently, its definition is not consistent across different investigations. Perhaps this inconsistency tells us something important about the trend itself. One possible explanation for this terminological confusion is that the characteristics that have historically defined different sectors are becoming less clear. Bromley and Meyer (2017) assert, “it is not simply the case that nonprofits are becoming more like
government and business—the blurring is multidirectional” (945). Other authors understand the trend of nonprofits becoming businesslike as inevitable effect of organizational isomorphism, suggesting the organizational field exerts a homogenizing force which ultimately makes organizations begin to resemble one another (Ashworth, Boyne, and Delbridge 2007; Maier, Meyer, and Steinbereithner 2016).

Bromley and Meyer (2017) point out that formal organizations are not strictly the domain of businesses. Many of the practices frequently labeled “business-like” (auditing practices, codes of conduct) are actually more concerned with accountability and management than anything market-related, which suggests that “professional” or “managerial” would be more accurate terms. For these reasons, “business-like,” is not necessarily the most accurate descriptor. Nonetheless, the phenomenon is worth analyzing given its prevalence in the research.

Dees and Anderson (2003) review the risks and rewards that come along with blurring the lines between nonprofit and for-profit organizations. The term “‘sector-bending’ refers to a wide variety of approaches, activities and relationships that are blurring the distinctions between nonprofit and for-profit organizations either because they are behaving more similarly, operating in the same realms or both” (Dees and Anderson 2003:16). Dees and Anderson describe the potential benefits of sector-bending as more effective allocation of resources, increased accountability, and greater financial capacity. The risks of sector-bending include diminished advocacy activity and mission drift. Mission drift occurs when organizations lose sight of their original goals. For example, “social service organizations that intended to serve the very poor may find that it is easier to generate fees or contracts by serving clients who are less disadvantaged than to raise funds to subsidize their charity work” (Dees and Anderson 2003:21). In addition to mission drift, having to compete with for-profit service providers can also take
away time and energy that could have been directed toward advocacy activities. The authors note that there are mechanisms to prevent mission drift from happening, such as actively engaged funders, clearly written mission statements and strong leadership.

Competition with for-profit providers is another factor that is identified as making the NPS more business-like. Bromley and Meyer (2017) suggest that “the rise of market pressures drive[s] nonprofits to take on features of businesses and government” (941). This phenomenon is often described as marketization. Researchers identify the trend of marketization as stemming from the fact that nonprofit organizations exist in a for-profit world and must compete for clients and resources, effectively forcing them to adopt business-like practices to stay competitive (Maier et al. 2016).

Effects of Professionalism

One effect of growing professionalism is an increased focus on accountability. Though professionalism can seem like a threat to the value-driven core of nonprofits, Frumkin (2005) highlights increased accountability as one of the benefits of professionalization. Nonprofits are providers of crucial public goods, the dispensation of which is essential to the people who rely on their services. Take, for example, food banks and nonprofit health clinics. Because “the problems of clients can often involve life or death decisions on the part of service providers, professionalization has created a sense of confidence that those delivering services are prepared to do so effectively” (Frumkin 2005:100). Another observable trend that evidences that accountability is a growing concern for the nonprofit sector is the growing popularity of codes of conduct. Bromley and Orchard (2016) link this growth to the neoliberal transfer of responsibility from the government to nongovernmental organizations. These codes have a normative influence on organizational behavior by creating patterns of accountability that extend beyond individual
organizations into the organizational field. Codes of conduct are central to what the authors call an “accountability environment.” The pursuit of accountability can also be understood as a quest for legitimacy. Researchers have observed that the nonprofit sector is undergoing a legitimacy crisis (Maier et al. 2016; Salamon 2012) which explains a sharp increase in codes of conduct. Organizational theory suggests that “organizations pursue legitimacy by conforming to isomorphic pressures in their environment” (Ashworth et al. 2007:165). For this reason, organizations can often begin to resemble one another (by adopting codes of conduct, for example) as a strategy to pursue legitimacy and acceptance within the organizational field.

However, not all of the effects of professionalism have been regarded positively. Negative effects are most pronounced in organizations with more radical social change goals. As more funding became available from government and foundation sources for progressive social movements in the late 60s, some activist groups restructured to become professional social movement organizations, or SMOs (McCarthy and Zald 1977). In McCarthy and Zald’s discussion of resource mobilization theory, the authors establish a link between increased funding sources for social movements and increased formalization of the organizational structures that house these movements. Though this funding has the potential to make movements more effective, it can also skew their goals in the process. Rodriguez (2017) explores the effects that major philanthropic foundations like Ford, Soros, and Rockefeller have had on radical social movements. Similarly, Onyx et al. (2010) found that in Australia “many organizations that grew out of earlier social movements lost their strong activist orientation and collectivist work practices, and instead adopted more bureaucratic and professional structures, while seeking out stable and secure funding primarily from the government” (Almog-Bar and Schmid 2014:16). Philanthropic foundations, regardless of their political ideology, have been
known to shy away from funding advocacy activity, fearing that these actions might be interpreted as protests against the government (Almog-Bar and Schmid 2014). McCarthy, Britt, and Wolfson (1991) identify “channeling mechanisms” that have created isomorphic pressures for organizations, shaping them into similar forms and promoting the use of similar tactics. Elite patronage can act as a channeling mechanism by warping organizational goals to be more moderate and less radical. Another instance of channeling is described by Jenkins and Eckert (1986), who show the relationship between movement success and foundation patronage. Although most scholars writing on this topic focus on the negative effects of adopting professional organizational structures, McCarthy and Zald give fair consideration to the ways that social movements can benefit overall by having professionalized SMOs within their contingent. Professionalization is linked to overall social movement growth, which is beneficial in the grand scheme of the movement.

Another negative consequence of the formalization of activism is the exclusion of the majority of citizens from participation in these organizations. Spade (2015), during his analysis of a phenomenon that he calls “nonprofitization,” highlights the staffing and leadership patterns in nonprofits that perpetuate oppression and ties these trends to funding from foundations. The ability to secure funding successfully is bound up in networks of wealth and privilege, excluding average community members from rising to high power positions within these organizations. The domination of staff over volunteers creates a hierarchy among social movement participants. In this way, foundation patronage can transform social movement activism into an activity that only people with certain skills, qualifications and experience can participate in, creating an in-group and an out-group.
One example of this exclusion appears in Duran’s (2005) exploration of the racism embedded within foundation giving practices. Duran (2005) lists the challenges faced by people-of-color-run organizations that address race relations. Communities of color have historically received a very small percentage of available foundation grants: in the year 1999, for example, organizations that described themselves as belonging to a minority group received less than 8 percent of total foundation founding, despite representing 30 percent of the U.S. population (Duran 2005:213). Duran recounts the Ford Foundation’s defunding and systematic ignorance of radical Chicano movements in the 1960s. These examples highlight the role of structural racism in foundations’ operations. Attempting to account for the overall effect of foundation funding on nonprofits is impossible given that foundations and nonprofits are not monolithic in their programs and strategies. Despite this diversity, the trend discussed here has been persistent and significant enough to be noticeable. Having highlighted the ideological effects of professionalism and how they are shaping the NPS, we now move to activism.

Activism

Advocacy Activities by Nonprofits

Though most activism in the NPS takes the form of advocacy, the role of advocacy in the contemporary NPS is surprisingly hard to pin down. Smith and Pekkanen (2012) describe advocacy as one of the distinguishing features of nonprofits, and suggest that it may be the most important feature of nonprofit organizations today. Advocacy can mean many different things, but here I use the definition provided by Schmid, Bar and Nirel (2008:581), which includes “attempts to change policy or influence the decisions of any institutional elite, government, and state institutions through enhancement of civic participation to promote a collective goal or
Friedman Nonprofit Identity

interest.” Nonprofit advocacy can take several forms. Doing a survey of advocacy tactics, Almog-Bar and Schmid (2014:20) divide the major advocacy activities into two groups:

The first comprises more legislative, aggressive, and confrontational tactics, including lobbying for a bill or policy, testifying in hearings, releasing research reports, and encouraging members to write or call policymakers. The second group comprises administrative—less aggressive tactics, including more cooperative forms of interaction such as meeting with government officials, working in a planning advisory group, responding to requests for information and socializing with government officials. They find a strong tendency among the surveyed nonprofits to rely on administrative advocacy and more cooperative tactics.

Regardless of whether organizations use insider or outsider advocacy tactics, it seems clear that doing advocacy is essential to seeing the “big picture” of nonprofit work. But despite this fact, not all organizations see it as essential. For example, “organizations such as soup kitchens or emergency shelters are likely to eschew advocacy because they are focused on immediate response to need and do not regard public policy as relevant to their direct concerns” (Smith and Pekkanen 2012:40). Although many organizations list advocacy as an important part of their work, very few categorize themselves primarily as advocacy organizations and only a small slice of total sector funding is dedicated toward these activities every year. A report by the National Center for Charitable Statistics “indicated that less than 1% of all registered nonprofits in the United States identified advocacy as their primary purpose” (Almog-Bar and Schmid 2014:16). If advocacy is so central to the NPS, why doesn’t it feature more prominently in the work of organizations? Some studies suggest that nonprofits are hesitant to initiate political activity because they worry that doing so will jeopardize their sources of income, especially if they are funded by the government (Schmid et al. 2008:586). Or, because nonprofits often face funding challenges, organizations are much more likely to dedicate their limited resources to service provision rather than advocacy (Schmid et al. 2008). Another explanation is that the
skills required for advocacy are different than the skills required for service provision, leaving nonprofit professionals unprepared to advocate effectively (Schmid et al. 2008).

Mosley (2012) found that many organizations funded primarily by private sources spent so much time raising money that they did not have enough time or energy left to partake in advocacy. And, because individual nonprofits must usually fund their operations with multiple sources of funding, it can be difficult to coordinate the goals of different funders with the organizations’ missions. The need to satisfy several funders and all of their demands can understandably lead to a decrease in advocacy activities because staff must prioritize attracting resources over most other activities (Silverman and Patterson 2011).

However, the explanation for low levels of advocacy is most compelling in the context of an argument about professionalization is that advocacy is not results-oriented enough to satisfy today’s nonprofit professionals. Almog-Bar and Schmid (2014) suggest that advocacy is difficult to measure because its goals are ambiguous and therefore difficult to track systematically. Mosley (2012:860) suggests that advocacy can become a performance of sorts to attract and impress donors, leading organizations to focus their advocacy on educational activities that donors would take note of. Taking all of this into account, the advocacy agenda of many contemporary nonprofits is fractured and misguided. Reviewing the literature on the current state of nonprofit advocacy reveals that the NPS is experiencing something of a crisis on this front.

Activist Knowledge

The concept of “activist knowledge” is helpful in understanding the orientation that belies activist movements and traditions. One key facet of activist knowledge in this analysis is politicization. Politicization refers to the process of cultivating a critical awareness of social issues, structures and frameworks. Activist knowledge highlights the fact that social movement
participation can transform our knowledge of the social world, and that all people “have the
capacity to be reflective and...redefine what is real and what is possible” (Hosseini 2010:340).
This process of redefinition is captured with what Hosseini calls the ideational landscape of
activist knowledge.

The ideational dimension of a movement consists of the intellectual processes of how
movement actors understand, conceptualize, explain, and analyze social problems and the
events they have experienced, and how they reflect on their own individual and collective
practices. The ideational landscape of a social movement is a space where movement
actors translate their collective experiences of social reality into ideas. Here, I prefer to
label such a critical aspect of social movements “activist knowledge.” (Hosseini
2010:341)

These critical and reflective practices are essential to performing thoughtful and effective
social justice work. In the NPS, honoring the activism impulse requires developing an activist
consciousness. This consciousness enables individuals to deeply understand the social problems
that their organizations address. Angela Davis once said, “Radical simply means grasping things
at the roots.” Activist consciousness enables individuals to look backward and reach down to the
root of the problem rather than simply addressing surface level issues. In later sections, I explore
what is lost when activist knowledge is displaced by standard professional practices that do not
demand the same kind of critical analysis.

Social Service, Social Change

To further explain the nonprofit conception of activism, I rely mostly on “Social Service
and Social Change: A Process Guide” published by the Building Movement Project (BMP) in
2006. The goal of the Building Movement Project is to inspire nonprofit service providers to
leverage their organizations as tools for change. The social service and social change process
guide explains how organization staff can work with the populations they serve to more
effectively pursue their organizations’ missions and create structural change. The guide is
especially helpful for this analysis because it is situated squarely in this project’s window of interest: the gap between professionalism and activism. Implicit within the suggestions provided by the guide are core tenets of activism. Appendix A explains the different types of social change organizations, indicating that some actively strive for individual transformation and collective action while others aim for one or neither of these.

The guide warns of some challenges that organizations tackling social change goals may face, including potential disagreements with funders and the possibility that “some staff members may have to shift their idea of professional training away from a client/provider mentality to a stakeholder/constituent mentality” (BMP 2006:8). This reveals an important guideline—in the activist approach to social change, there are intentional efforts to close the gap between people with resources (organization staff members) and they people that they serve. Professional credentials lose their importance in this scenario. Indeed, the guide implies that certain steps of movement building require unlearning and moving away from professionalism. The guide explains, “Most people in service delivery are taught a professional practice focused on helping individuals and their families. Creating space for change means offering an opportunity to step back from the daily work to think about and discuss societal causes of problems and the impact of these problems on the daily work” (BMP 2006:15). This process of unlearning professionalism prompts staff members to analyze the power dynamics operating within their own organizations. The guide instructs staff to conduct an analysis of internal power dynamics so that power can be redistributed to their constituents. Empowered constituents know that they have the ability to help solve their own problems instead of merely consuming the services that organizations can offer them. Instead of concentrating power at the top,
organizations that subscribe to this philosophy want power to be democratically distributed among all people involved in the organization and its work.

We can deduce from the guide that one of the most important parts of a social change orientation is awareness: raising, creating and transforming it. More specifically, creating awareness beyond the organization of the power structures that produce the social ills that these organizations target. The goal of raising awareness in this context is to understand that problems that appear to be individual misfortunes actually have systemic roots. One section of the social service and social change guide includes a series of questions that help readers imagine these roots: “What would our society look like if the root causes of the problems we work on were addressed? What changes would have occurred at the systemic or policy level? How would resources be allocated? Who would make systemic and policy decisions?” (BMP 2006:26) This set of questions transcends organizational politics and challenges participants to imagine a more just world. These questions suggest that it is not enough to excel at service provision or run efficient programs. They prompt staff to think seriously and critically about why problems occur in the first place, and make this process of questioning an essential part of the job. This critical thinking is the crux of activist knowledge.

Section III: The Conflict

Now that professionalism and activism have both been defined, we move to understanding the conflict between them. This conflict is present on many levels: between instrumental and expressive values, different institutional logics, and incompatible approaches to rationality.
Instrumental and Expressive Values

Instrumental and expressive values are at the core of the nonprofit sector. Frumkin (2005) sees these values as contained within different “dimensions” of the sector. The sector is instrumental in the sense that it has the capacity to accomplish important tasks, such as job training or community health services. In this view, the sector is valuable because of what it can accomplish. An increased focus on accomplishments accounts for the prevalence of measurement, analysis and efficiency in the NPS today. Thinking about the expressive dimension, this lends value to the sector because it creates a space for people to give expression to their beliefs and values. By volunteering or participating in voluntary sector activities, people can express their commitments in an embodied and real way. However, expressing values is not something quantifiable that lends itself to measurement in the same way that instrumental functions do. For this reason, “the expressive quality of the sector has led some to conclude that the narrow focus on the financial resources... and on the level of services delivered has detracted from the deeper meaning of nonprofit and voluntary action, which derives from the fellowship and self-actualization of those who give or volunteer” (Frumkin 2005:23). With the increasing presence of rationalization in all parts of the nonprofit sector, it is reasonable to conclude that the instrumental dimension is often prioritized above the expressive dimension.

Institutional Logics

Because the NPS has a hybrid identity, it is accountable to multiple institutional logics that inevitably conflict at times. Thornton and Ocasio (2008:101) define an institutional logic as “the socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize space and time, and provide meaning to their social reality.” Essentially, it is a structuring theory that
guides behavior in an institutional context. Knutsen (2012) argues that nonprofit organizations partake in the logics of capitalism, the logic of the state, and the logic of democracy, among others. Since this discussion is about professionalism and activism, here I focus mainly on the logics that are most relevant to these two categories. Businesses operate primarily under the logic of capitalism. (This is relevant to nonprofits in light of the concern that they are becoming business-like.) This connects to the discussion about the marketization of the NPS: an organization may need to adopt the logic of capitalism if it is providing a service and needs to stay competitive in an economic marketplace.

Thinking about the value-expression component of organizations, this is no place for the logic of capitalism. Creating community, doing advocacy work, and empowering citizens are governed instead by the logic of the family and the logic of democracy. Though these conflict with the logic of capitalism, there is no way of opting out of any of these structuring ideologies. This bind forces organizations to fuse numerous different logics in order to meet their varied needs. Knutsen (2012:1003) calls this process adapting logics and explains, “to fulfill community needs and realize the logic of the family, many NPOs need to adapt to the institutional logic of the state and capitalism to gain resources, maintain legitimacy and retain service users.” In this way, logics can fuse and work together to accomplish organizational goals. Despite this solution, the conflict between the logics structuring professional and activism still exists because adapting the logic allows neither to be fully expressed.

Weber, the Iron Cage and the Increasing Rationalization of Society

In The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, Weber (2003) introduces the stahlharten Gehäuse, the “shell as hard as steel,” famously translated by Talcott Parsons as the “iron cage.” The iron cage refers to the inescapable reach of “purposive or formal rationality. It
involves the instrumental calculation of the most effective means with which to achieve any given end or predetermined outcome” (Maley 2004:72). Weber was deeply disturbed by the increasing rationalization of society and the preponderance of scientific management, namely the rise of bureaucracy. These processes led to disenchantment because all of the world’s magic could be explained with some type of logic or reasoning. Weber warns of a future world with “specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart,” and that despite these deficiencies people would believe that they “have attained a level of civilization never before achieved” (Weber 2003:182). One key facet of rationality is that it has its own forward momentum. Weber even writes that the humans would be imprisoned in the cage of rationality until the last bit of coal was burned, suggesting an inescapable fate. What does this mean in the context of organizations?

For one thing, it suggests increasing homogeny, given that rationalization shapes organizations into similar forms. But this does not simply mean that all nonprofit organizations begin to resemble each other—they also begin to mirror the state. In DiMaggio and Powell’s (1983:150) study of organizational isomorphism, they write that

As rationalized states and larger rational organizations expand their dominance over more arenas of social life, organizational structures increasingly come to reflect rules institutionalized and legitimated by and within the state. As a result, organizations are increasingly homogenous within given domains and increasingly organized around rituals of conformity to wider institutions.

This form of rationality aligns well with the instrumental dimension of the NPS, as it is concerned with accomplishing things efficiently and maximizing outcomes. However, rationality creates problems for the expressive dimension, which no longer appears meaningful using this system of valuation. Also, since the NPS largely encompasses people-focused work by providing crucial services and ensuring the welfare of people in need, there are dangers attached to conceptualizing all problems in terms of goals and strategies. Maley (2004:72) warns, “the effect
of seeing all things as calculable is to see nature and people instrumentally as mere matter. It means that we are all exploitable.” An overly narrow focus on efficiency has the power to reshape social relations, making them transactional and shallow.

**Bureaucracy, Instrumental Rationality, Professionalism**

Though bureaucracy and rationality have been discussed, it is not yet clear how both of these concepts interact with professionalism. The processes of bureaucratization, rationalization and professionalization may seem conceptually distinct, but they are entangled in significant ways. In short, the quintessential rational organization is a bureaucracy.

For Weber, bureaucratic organization threatened to encompass all of the large, institutional structures of modern society. As the quintessentially modern form of administration, bureaucracy exemplifies purposive or instrumental rationality. Weber though that instrumental rationality was overtaking the large, institutional spheres of the modern society from the economy and state to the army and university...He thought that the world was being by this new form of organization that slotted people into a rigidly defined division of labor, thereby turning them into cogs in a giant impersonal mechanism. (Maley 2004:73)

It is important to notice the nature of the metaphors Weber uses. They have momentum and allude to the inevitably of adopting bureaucratic forms (Ashworth et al. 2007:166). The great machines of bureaucracy and rationality propel themselves forward like voracious beasts, eager to devour everything in their paths. This inevitability is troubling for people doing the work of social change, work that often involves dismantling unjust structures. Traditional bureaucratic models erase spaces for deliberative decision-making and questioning, quashing the cultivation of activist knowledge discussed earlier. Just as professionalism is not an ideologically neutral institution, neither is bureaucracy. Chen, Lune and Queen (2013:861) write that

The pursuit of efficiency and lack of consideration for other possible values, social goals or interests imply that the inequalities established by capitalism, bureaucracy and division of labor in industrial society are naturally inevitable. By excluding questions of who or what values are within a system of organization, these social structures obscure how particular interests are invested in maintaining their power.
All of this suggests that prioritizing efficiency is not an apolitical act. Earlier I discussed the concern that nonprofits are becoming businesslike and indeed, bureaucracy is one of the hallmarks of the business identity. It is especially known for its impersonal, faceless nature. For organizations doing the work of social justice, following the guidelines and procedures designated as “standard” by precedent rather than critically evaluating them heightens the possibility of further perpetuating injustice and oppression both within and beyond the organization.

*Professionalization of Social Work: A Case Study*

The nonprofit sector is not the only place where the professionalism/activism conflict has arisen. There has been extensive documentation of the transformation of social work from a radical, individual undertaking into a standardized and streamlined profession, transforming the values of its practitioners in the process (Lubove 1965). Epstein (1970) conducts a study of professional social workers to find out how their commitment to a professional organization interacts with their beliefs about social change. He finds that social workers who displayed a high level of professional commitment were less likely to support radical social change strategies. For this reason, “the professionalization of social work is viewed as resulting in a professional community with a decreasing commitment to the problems of the poor and radical social action on their behalf” (Epstein 1970:68). Ultimately, the study found that “commitment to an ideology of professionalism is negatively associated with endorsement of radical interventions,” perhaps suggesting that professionalism has a disciplining effect (Epstein 1970:76). Speculating beyond the results of the study, Epstein suggests that social workers may cite the ideology of professionalism as justification for not participating in activist methods of social change. The social work literature identifies professionalism and bureaucracy as
“conservatizing forces that change the focus of social work from social activism and service to low income clients to loyalty to the agency and support for goals that will enhance the status of the profession” (Reeser 1992:82). The parallels between the plight of the professionalized social work field and the changing nonprofit sector are clear.

**Section IV: Food Justice**

All of the respondents interviewed for this project are employees at food justice organizations, so understanding the food justice movement is essential here. In this section, I explain the radical potential of the food justice movement and explore the stakes of performing a depoliticized version of food justice. On the surface, food justice may seem more or less apolitical. After all, providing food to families, teaching children about nutrition, and practicing urban gardening do not immediately seem radical or subversive. However, the activist dimension becomes clear once we examine the conditions that have created the needs that these organizations address. The food justice movement stems from the initial judgment that the food system, as it exists today, subjects the planet, farmworkers, animals, communities, and individuals to countless injustices.¹

Though food justice encompasses almost the entire food system, it is important to note that it is separate from the domain of farm-to-table restaurants and organic kale salads. There is a pervasive cultural image of “foodies” who eat at gourmet restaurants and shop at Whole Foods, but the reality of the food justice movement could not be further from this picture of wealth and artisanal preferences. Holt-Gimenez and Wang (2011:88), quoting Oakland food activist Hank Herrera, offer this set of principles for radical food justice:

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¹ The organizations relevant to this project are primarily concerned with marginalized communities and individuals (instead of animals, the environment and farmworkers,) though it is important to acknowledge that the scope of food justice extends far beyond this sphere.
Food justice must address structural inequity, structural violence and structural racism. Food justice work must result in ownership of the means of production and exchange of food by the people who consume the food. Food justice work is the incredibly difficult work of building new local healthy food systems...Food justice cannot reproduce systems of power, privilege and capital that create and maintain food apartheid.

This is perhaps the most radical interpretation of the goals of the food justice movement, and the organizations involved in this project would certainly not describe their work using such insurrectionary language. These radical principles stem from a food activism movement created by the Black Panthers, who created a historic free breakfast program for children (Holt-Giménez and Wang 2011). However, not all food movement participants make economic and social critique a key part of their activism. Holt-Gimenez and Wang (2011) claim that the majority of U.S. food movement groups belong to one of two camps: radical or progressive. Progressive groups work to improve food access in underserved communities and act as practitioners who bring good food and nutrition to groups in need. Radical groups, on the other hand, focus on developing local businesses, removing economic barriers to community flourishing, and transferring organizational leadership to community members. The organizations in my research are aligned with the progressive philosophy than the radical one. Their mission statements provide a clear picture of how organizations use resources and strategies to accomplish the goals of today’s food justice movement.²

This paper makes the claim that it is important to preserve the activist core of the nonprofit sector, but why is this especially important in the context of food justice? In other words, what is at stake in practicing a depoliticized version of food justice? As an example, we turn to the SHARE Food Program. SHARE feeds thousands of people a week throughout the Philadelphia area, providing them with supplementary food assistance. It would be easy to get

² See mission statements in Appendix B.
caught up in the logistics of running the operation: securing grant funding, organizing the
volunteer schedule, and making sure that the facilities are functioning well. But to politicize the
situation and engage in the type of awareness described in the Building Movement guide is to
ask: Why must this work be done the first place? Why do people in Philadelphia not have
enough food? How can community organizing and advocacy address the root causes of these
issues?

One may argue that these activist undertakings, while important, should be separate from
the work of operating a food bank. To some extent, this is understandable; expecting too much of
staff members will inevitably lead to overburdening and distraction. Still, I maintain that even if
employees do not directly engage in activism, maintaining a consciousness of these issues and
their root causes is essential; keeping the “big picture” in mind can transform employees’
orientation toward their work. Carson (2014) claims that current “food bank discourses” obstruct
a political understanding of food insecurity. I argue that growing practices of professionalism
also obstruct a political understand of food justice, as well as social issues more broadly. For
Carson (2014:19), the goal of politicizing food bank discourses is solidifying the fact that “issues
such as racialization and gender inequality, systematic inequality in resources and institutions,
neoliberal ideologies and their reflected political and economic policies cannot be detached from
the discussion of food insecurity.” Ultimately, conceptualizing injustices in the food system
within a larger framework transfers responsibility beyond individuals and organizations to
government authorities and policymakers, who otherwise easily escape responsibility if these
systemic issues are framed as personal failings (Carson 2014).
Section V: Methods

From November 2017 to January 2018, I conducted twelve interviews with representatives from 8 different food-related nonprofit organizations in Philadelphia and New York. In Philadelphia, I interviewed staff at The Food Trust, SHARE Food Program, Food Moxie, Repair the World, Challah for Hunger and the Mitzvah Food Project at the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia. In New York, I interviewed staff at Edible Schoolyard NYC, City Harvest, and East New York Farms. Respondents included staff members occupying a wide range of positions and at all points of their career paths. I spoke with two executive directors, one development director, one assistant director, five program managers, one program associate and two fellows in temporary positions.

Interviewing was the most appropriate method of data collection for this research because it allowed me to gather information about individuals’ experiences as nonprofit employees as well as personal meditations on the work that they do. Though the organizational level of the research question is relevant, organizational identity conflicts in the nonprofit literature are well established. Rather than focus on issues of organizational identity, this paper fills a gap by analyzing and understanding the individual appraisal of these conflicts.

To locate respondents, I first created a list of organizations that would be appropriate for this project by performing an online search for “food justice organizations” in both Philadelphia and New York. Though it is essential that the informants for this project work for social justice oriented organizations, theoretically another movement such as reproductive justice or environmental justice would have yielded results that could be analyzed within a similar framework. I selected food justice primarily because of prior familiarity with the movement and connections with organizations in the area. Once I had created the list of organizations to contact,
I emailed their general email addresses with a description of my project and a request to speak with anyone who was interested in sharing stories about their work experience. For larger organizations, I requested to speak with a member of a specific department so that the request would be forwarded to an individual. Two respondents were people I was previously acquainted with from volunteer and internship experiences, but the rest I had not met prior interviewing them.

Before each interview, I requested permission to record the conversation and received consent in each instance. I found it useful to take additional notes during the conversations. Interviews lasted from 30 minutes to an hour depending on the natural flow of the conversation. Some interviewees offered to give me a tour of their office, introducing me to coworkers while describing each department. Some gave me pamphlets and handouts to peruse, and I held onto all of these as research material. I recorded informal notes about each office environment to provide a more complete picture of the organization.

During each interview, I asked about the respondent’s education, career history, and any formative experiences that led them to pursue a food justice related career. I asked about their responsibilities at work, as well as the most challenging and rewarding parts of their jobs. I paid special attention to details that constructed the story of each respondent’s life as a professional and as an activist. Apart from details about their personal life, I asked questions about how the organization had changed in recent years as well as the organization’s future goals and directions for growth. I took a special interest in stories about strategic planning, impact evaluation, and consulting, often asking more specialized questions when the respondent had a lot of knowledge in these areas.\(^3\) The order in which the questions were presented changed slightly throughout the

\(^3\) I have included an interview questionnaire in Appendix C.
interview process. In my early interviews, I started the interview by asking the respondent to describe their career and education. In later interviews, I asked more directly about the person’s current role and responsibilities, and let the biographical information arise when it became relevant.

For the transcription process, I chose to transcribe the 6 interviews that best captured the professionalization themes present in the nonprofit literature. Then, keeping these themes in mind, I transcribed relevant portions of the remaining interviews. Though respondents’ names and details that would easily identify them have been changed, it is important to leave the names of the organizations unchanged. The organizational mission statements and programs are important data for analysis, and representing them differently would interfere with the project. Furthermore, no respondent expressed a wish for their responses to be kept confidential, and no respondent provided information that would jeopardize their employment status or organizational affiliation. Each organization is aligned with a different aspect of the food justice movement. These pursuits take many forms, including urban gardening, nutrition education, food pantry programs, and advocacy. One common theme uniting the organizations is that despite their 501(c)(3) status, they do not represent themselves as charities. Instead, they seek to empower their participants while transforming the food access landscape rather than simply providing services.

**Section VI: Data Analysis**

Given the numerous ideological conflicts between activism and professionalism, how is it possible to reconcile the two? In the literature review, I described how conflicting institutional logics and systems of knowledge have given rise to the conflicted identity of the nonprofit sector. Furthermore, I described the threat of the professionalism impulse to overpower the activism
impulse given trends of increasing rationalization in organizations. Because there is a gap in the existing literature when it comes to understanding how conflicts on the organizational level are experienced by individuals, I use this section to identify strategies that individuals use to navigate these conflicts. In other words, I answer this question: When faced with activism/professionalism conflicts, how do individuals respond? In particular, I focus on the actions my respondents take to centralize and honor the activist roots of nonprofits in the face of increasing professionalization and the growing popularity of business-like practices.

Activism and Emotion

It was essential to verify that respondents did, indeed, identify activism as a central part of their identities. For most respondents, simply claiming to be aligned with the mission of their organization is akin with making a claim to activism. Personal investment in the organization’s mission is a hallmark of nonprofit workers—because nonprofits pay notoriously low salaries, employees are usually motivated by something beyond financial gain (Frumkin 2005). From the respondents I spoke with who identified activism as a crucial part of their identity and career, I asked them to describe early experiences that influenced the formation of this identity. Sarah, an executive director, described how her involvement in activism on campus as an undergraduate led to similar patterns in her career:

As an undergrad I was heavily involved in activist stuff on my campus. I was always very involved in the political aspects [of projects], whether it was working on specific legislation or electing candidates. When I was running the café [that I started,] we served fair trade and organic coffee, [and] we sourced all of our food locally. All of that was very political as well; a lot of people maybe don't think of it as such, but I do. And so whether it's advocating for a specific policy and encouraging others to do the same or raising awareness of where food comes from and what fair trade really means, and what it means for farming cooperatives and farming communities to have a fair trade price for their products... I think that that's something that's just in my blood. I wouldn't know how to turn that off even I wanted to.
For Sarah, participation in activism feels more like an obligation than a choice. It pervades every aspect of her life, from the campaigns she is directly involved in to the type of food that she chose to source at the café that she operated before working at her current organization. Her explanation of feeling compelled to participate in activism parallels the traditional definition of a vocation, a task or duty to which one is called. For Sarah, this calling arose from an experience she had early in her childhood of watching farmers lose their land.

When we moved to Central Jersey, to a place that at the time was fairly rural, slowly developing counties, we were surrounded by a lot of farmland. Slowly over the period of time that I lived there, all of that farmland that was in my immediate proximity was sold. We would ride our bikes and bring carrots or apples to feed horses, and a lot of those smaller farms were sold and became big, ugly houses. And I hated that, but I don't think I connected it to the food system until I got a little bit older and was getting ready to open my own café. Then I really started to understand what it meant to buy local, and that perhaps those farmers wouldn't have had to sell their land if there had been more of a movement to support local food. So that just strengthened my commitment to source locally whenever I could. So that local farmers could stay on their land and make a living. I think that from a very young age I started to see the inequities in the food system.

Sarah describes how her personal experience witnessing injustice in her youth led her to develop an activist consciousness, which influenced her involvement in college and eventually resulted in her current job at a nonprofit. Other respondents also described the work that they do as thoroughly intertwined with their identities. Robby expressed similar sentiments when I asked if he was involved in activism outside of the workplace.

Yeah, I mean activist is my identity so it's not even just my job. Twenty-four hours, around the clock...on the weekends I'm at a march or I'm at a rally.

For Robby, the activist self that he brings into the workplace does not differ much from the self that is present at marches and rallies on the weekend. Other respondents echoed this sentiment and described their experiences in the workplace as extending past the office and bleeding out into other parts of their lives. Zack, for instance, works at the Mitzvah Food Project, a food pantry run by the Jewish Federation of Philadelphia. During his workweek, he encounters several
people experiencing food insecurity and helps them access the supplemental food that the pantry provides. He recounted an experience of being deeply immersed in these issues even outside the workplace.

I'll go to a theater on Broad Street to enjoy a performance, look around and say to myself: *I'll bet none of these people go to a food pantry, or have any idea what kind of suffering 25% of Philadelphia's population experiences every day.* 25% of Philadelphia lives under the U.S. federal poverty guidelines. And seeing that, I get angry, and my girlfriend will say: *shhh we're here to enjoy this, you do this every day, you help people every day, enjoy the two hours that you have here.* But it bothers me that a lot of people don't understand that there's a ridiculous number of people in Philadelphia who need help.

Zack’s story makes it obvious that he has an emotional attachment to the work that he does.

Displays of emotion were common throughout the interview process; several respondents expressed anger, sadness, and hopelessness when discussing the issues that their organizations address. When Zack started to talk about veterans in need of food aid, he slowly began to raise his voice, apologized, and said, "Sorry, I get a little passionate about this." But respondents also expressed positive emotions when describing program successes, rejoicing as if successes of the organization were personal victories as well. Zack shared one story that he was especially proud of:

The most rewarding thing is when a client who's been a client with us for several years calls us up and says, “Thank you so much. I found a job, and I don't need your help anymore. I'm going to donate money to you because you helped me.” I'm getting chills right now just thinking about it.

This level of emotion creates something of a conflict with the logic of professionalism. Though emotional entanglement in professional work was present in several of my interviewees’ responses, rationalization suggests that these two things must be kept separate. Of course, professionalism does not mandate complete detachment from one’s work, but too intense of an emotional investment can interfere with rational decision making, a main tenet of professionalism (Martin 2000). However, staff members deal with this conflict by using their
emotions to keep them motivated, providing an example of what Frumkin (2005) described as harnessing the expressive dimension of the NPS to enhance the instrumental dimension. Frumkin acknowledges that the instrumental and expression dimensions of nonprofit work do not always have to be in conflict, and that there is a lot of potential for them to complement and enhance one another. Frumkin (2005) suggests that it is the task of the manager to align these instrumental and expressive dimensions so that the emotional energy generated by passion for the cause can be directed toward meaningful work and serve as a source of motivation to persevere through work-related challenges.

_Metrics and Measurements: Strategic Planning and Evaluation_

Another site that is ripe for potential conflicts is in the field of evaluation. Every organization that I visited engages in some kind of evaluation, though they all use different approaches and strategies. All organizations evaluate their work in one way or another, whether the results are primarily for internal use or will be reported to funders. The outcomes of evaluation often determine which programs will continue to exist and which will fall by the wayside. These stakes became clear to me when I spoke with Sarah about Food Moxie’s strategic planning process. As she explained it to me, when she first arrived at the organization their mission was unfocused. She was at the forefront of the process of narrowing the organization’s programming to create a more forceful and focused operation.

We did a lot of stakeholder surveys and interviews, and then we looked at what we were doing and then ranked those things. There’s a chart-- there’s impact and money.

As part of their strategic planning and evaluation process, they evaluated all of their programs in terms of money and impact. She proceeded to describe what each quadrant of the strategic planning chart looks like and each potential outcome for evaluating the programs:
If you're having a high impact and it's easy to raise money for it, then that's the program you want to keep doing. If you have no impact and can't raise money, then what are you doing? Get rid of it. If you are having a high impact but not raising the money and it's not sustainable, then think about if there is a way to talk about what you're doing to get it up into that area [where you are raising money]. And if there is something that's making a lot of money but not having a lot of impact, is there a way that you can use this money to support a different effort? And so it's really looking at the impact of the program as well as the program cost. We looked at all of our programs at the time and we eliminated one.

What seems important here is understanding how Sarah and the team decided to evaluate impact. Were they using an external valuation strategy developed by a funder, or thinking about what kind of programs the communities served by their organization needed most? The next part of the conversation provided more insight into how impact is determined in this context.

We were having school groups that would do field trips and those ultimately ended falling into this quadrant [of high price and low impact.] We spent one year trying to put a lot of effort into it and see if we could bring in enough money and show that we were having impact. The reality is that it's hard to demonstrate impact when you have kids coming out for 45 minutes to an hour, and it was difficult to raise money for because a lot of grants and foundations want you to demonstrate impact, and it was also really expensive and time-consuming because it required staff to be there. And so even though we put a lot of effort into it and we had more students come out that year than we ever had before, the amount of money that we were spending on it just didn't make sense. So it just didn’t make sense to keep doing field trips. And then we looked at Stenton [homeless shelter], our programs were up here [in the quadrant with bringing in money and having high impact.] People really feel that one; you talk about poor families living in poverty, living in a shelter, that's something that really tugs at the heartstrings and it's easier to raise money for that and support it. And so that's how we looked at all of our programs and kind of honed in on what made the most sense for us to keep doing.

The concept of impact becomes difficult for organizations to define independently when it is so bound up with ideas about what funders want. As Sarah stated, she was more inclined to focus on the program at Stenton because it tugged at people’s heartstrings and easily attracted resources. A program that is attractive to funders can easily draw in resources, and these resources further enrich the program, then making it even more high quality and attractive to funders. This relationship creates a feedback loop. Programs that are easier to raise money for may end up being prioritized for this reason. But what about programs for which it is difficult to
demonstrate impact even though they are nonetheless impactful? Thinking about social movements, the real work of social justice realistically may not be results oriented. Returning to the concept of activist knowledge, we should remember that the slow and deliberate work of movement building is not something that can be captured with pre and post program surveys or quantified into indexes of individual participants’ “transformation” after participating in the program.

Metrics have been a contentious subject in discussions about the increasing rationalization of the nonprofit sector. Hwang and Powell (2009:285) note that “many foundations have recently become very strong advocates of systematic analysis in the nonprofit sector and can make formal measurement a condition of funding.” Depending on the mission of the organization, gathering data from participants can feel exploitative. Jessica, who also works at Food Moxie, expressed concerns about exploiting the stories of the vulnerable population (homeless children and adults, as well as students with disabilities) served by her organization:

There’s just something about hearing [their] stories and wanting [them] to be somewhat sacred, and then hearing the development staff come and say “we need you to open up about that and tell us more so we can report to our funders.” I understand how that can be really disruptive. My hope is that it doesn’t have to be, but I don’t think we’re quite there yet.

Jessica’s worries reveals a mismatch between the development staff, who want to use stories to appeal to funders, and Jessica, who wants to protect the privacy of the people served by her organization’s programs. Jessica’s fear is that stories get packaged and marketed to make them satisfactory for fundraisers while program participants become instrumental props in a game of securing resources for the organization. However, at the same time, she frames fundraising as something that has the ability to build community, not just a method for extracting resources from every available source. Jessica demonstrates a critical awareness of the structures that
constrain and limit nonprofit fundraising, and reconceptualizes them in such a way that they are aligned with her vision of activist movement building.

[It’s important to me to] maintain an understanding of the structures we have to raise money within. We can’t do any of this without raising money. People have to have living wages. A lot of systems have not provided what they said they would provide for people. In order to provide for people, we need resources. Until we’re all free, we need resources for that. So that’s been something that’s helped me. The work that I primarily love is seeing fundraising as organizing and seeing grassroots fundraising as the thrust for what we’re doing here. Having more people support us with as much as they are able to give, and dispelling the myth that the people who donate money are the people with money is really important to me.

Jessica uses a strategy that I refer to as “playing the game,” a series of moves that I watched several of my respondents make. “Playing the game” refers to the process of developing a thorough knowledge of what foundations look for and what they value, and then using this knowledge to the organization’s advantage without actually adopting the foundations’ values. Though employees become intimately acquainted with these belief systems, they do not necessarily buy into them or restructure their personal value systems to align with those of their funders. For example, Jessica realizes that development staff members are swayed by stories about vulnerable populations, but she also wants to protect their stories and avoid exploitation. At the same time, she sees the work that she is doing as a necessary step toward larger-scale liberation. Jessica has learned the way that the fundraising world functions, but has also figured out a way to justify it to herself so that she does not treat her programs’ participants as instruments through which the organization garners resources.

Not only does she find a way to share these stories without exploiting her participants, but she also thinks of fundraising as organizing, finding a way to situate her work within the larger movement of food justice. By understanding fundraising as a form of movement building, Jessica is able to express her activist leanings through her professional work. Her statement also
frames fundraising as a kind of necessary evil. Because “systems have not provided what they said they would provide for people”—from context, this means that systems of welfare and sustenance have not provided people with the means they need to sustain themselves—Jessica feels an obligation to find resources to the power the organization, which can then fills in the gaps that these systems have not managed to. For Jessica, service comes from a place of obligation, with liberation as the end goal and a compulsory movement toward that goal until it is achieved.

*Funder-Organization Relationships*

The relationship between organizations and funders, and how these relationships have the ability to simultaneously constrain and enable the work of the organizations, is frequently on the minds of nonprofit executives and development professionals. Sarah discussed the difficulty of trying to anticipate the stories that funders would find most compelling, as well as figuring out how to present the work of the organization in a way that satisfied those demands.

I think that some foundations are known for wanting data, and so some places, like [redacted.,] who has never funded us, generally are not very interested in the warm, fuzzy heartstrings stories. They’re really focused on data. A lot of the foundations that fund us are family foundations or smaller foundations, and those funding decisions are still all made by their boards of directors or trustees. So you might have a board of 12 people, and half of them want to see numbers and data, and half of them find stories more compelling, so it’s about finding a way to write those grant applications that gives enough of each of those things. That’s what fundraising is all about.

Given these conditions, funders’ desires are taken into account throughout the entire programming process. Not only that, but the work of representation becomes another labor that falls on the nonprofit staff. It is not enough to plan effective programs; they also must be represented persuasively.

Scholars of nonprofit organizations often wonder how much the interests of funders end up influencing organizational operations (Silverman and Patterson 2011; Suárez 2010). During
my conversation with Zack, I asked him about the scope of the Mitzvah Food Pantry’s work and how it was determined. He explained that the pantry only supplies supplemental food, unlike other food pantries that serve complete meals. To quote him: "We are a supplemental food pantry. We don't serve full meals. That's not what we want to do, that's not what our funders want to do, and we don't have the capacity to do that." Zack made a simple equation between what the organization wanted and what the funders wanted, as if they are coincidentally aligned. Perhaps they are, but is important to note that previous research on the effects of foundation funding on social movement organizations (Jenkins and Eckert 1986; McCarthy et al. 1991; Rodriguez 2017) has shown how funders’ interests can shape and transform organizational goals.

Though the food pantry is not a social movement organization, it follows that funding sources have the ability to influence organizations’ operations through subtle or explicit methods. Given these circumstances, it becomes almost impossible to untangle the desires of the organization from the demands of funders. Once the relationship between funder and organization is established, they are no longer two independent entities. If grants from a foundation are keeping a nonprofit alive, the organization may genuinely begin to want the same things that their funders do. This confusion of desires can lead to a weakening of organizational mission, as it can interfere with the values upon which the organization was founded.

Respondents discussed how funding restrictions, or the absence of funding restrictions, determine how much they freedom they have with program planning. Robby from City Harvest described his role as a community organizer and youth food justice educator.4 When asked if the community organizing element of City Harvest is unique to their organization, Robby said:

I will say ours is very unique. That's the blessing of being in NYC where you have that kind of flexibility. A lot of food banks rely on government funding, USDA funding,

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4 Robby’s community organizing role is discussed in further detail in a later section.
TEFAP, (The Emergency Food Assistance Program,) but the majority of our money comes from private donors. *So our projects aren't tied to grants, and really we have that flexibility with these unrestricted funds.*

Robby makes an explicit connection between the unique community organizing projects at City Harvest and the fact that the organization does not constantly have to apply for grants and demonstrate the impact of its work. Taking into account the earlier conversation about radical versus progressive food justice organizations, this suggests that organizations with unrestricted funding (who do not constantly have to convince funders of the value of their work) may feel free to take on more radical projects.

Of course, funders are not faceless figures who are indifferent to the missions of nonprofits. They are funding these projects because they believe in the value of the work in the first place. Because funders and organizations have a relationship, there is often a negotiation process that occurs where nonprofit employees can make a case for their way of operating and resist suggested changes. And nonprofit leaders can, and do, fight for their missions even in the face of forces that pull them in other directions. Margaret summed it up nicely in a single statement: “Nonprofits, historically, do one of two things: they follow the mission, or they follow the money.” I asked her if the mission of SHARE had changed at all over the time that she had been there. Her answer was a definitive “no.”

The mission is not going to change as long as I'm drawing breath. A lot of nonprofits will play with their mission to get money. Some nonprofits will stay true to their mission and if the money doesn't fit, they don't take it. They're not willing to change their mission for money. I grew up at a community action agency that was extremely mission and community based. You don’t change your mission for the money. Our mission is very clearly to provide affordable and healthy food to the low-income community in this region. I don't do nutrition education; there are other people who do that. I don't do food rescue; there are other people who do that. I'm good at what I do, and they need to be good at what they do. I'm real clear about what our mission is, and I'm real clear how we do it. I've got lots of partners in all the other arenas, but I don't need to do what they do. I need to do what I do. And they need to do what they do and leave me alone. I'm very mission-driven and every decision that we make, we ask: *Does it fit our mission? Will it*
further our mission? If so, then it's a yes. If it doesn't further our mission, then we don't do it.

Margaret demonstrates a serious level of commitment to the mission, one that external threats of withdrawn funding cannot interfere with. One strategy of resistance displayed here is steadfast commitment to the mission. This commitment returns to the very roots of the NPS: the expression of values. By placing values above resource accrual, Margaret protects her organization from a weakening of their mission over time. Another strategy deployed by Margaret and others is taking advantage of relationships with funders.

If you have a relationship with your funders you can say to them, “We need this. This is not what we do. And we need you to fund this.” If you have a relationship with the funders, you can have a conversation. But funders tend to do this thing, which is so bad, and we talk to them about that. They say, “So this year we’re gonna fund food. Next year food's over and we're gonna do health. Next year we're gonna do trucks. Next year we're gonna do trees. Then the next year we're gonna do flowers.” But the challenge with work in the food system is that at no time in the future, as far as I can see, is every person going to be employed and making a living wage and not have to go to a food cupboard. This work is not going to stop next week. So if you give us money for a truck and you think that that truck's not gonna be needed next year, you're wrong. We're gonna need that truck as long as the wheels on it are going round and round. So when funders think that they can give you money for a year and then the problem is solved, no. There is no magic cure here for poor people.

Margaret suggests that, as evidenced by their ever-changing funding patterns, funders fundamentally misunderstand the nature of the social ills that they are trying to address. This is why it becomes important to build a relationship with funders. A relationship creates space for dialogue where organization leaders can explain why quantitative metrics may be useless in the context of their work, or why a single year grant may be senseless, like the case in Margaret’s truck example. Sarah also speaks of the importance of developing a relationship with funders. This insight emerged during a conversation about Food Moxie’s attempts to demonstrate impact to funders, when Sarah was explaining one of their metrics to measure behavior change in their program participants.
We can ask people how many sugar-sweetened beverages they usually drink, and how much water they usually drink, and then a post-test can ask that same question and see if they are drinking fewer sugar-sweetened beverages and more water. That's a behavior change. But it's over a very short period of time, so knowing if that behavior continues is much harder to measure. But a lot of foundations are looking for impact related to behavior change. One of the things I try to talk to foundations about is how unrealistic that is with the type of program that we have and the type of population we're working with. So it's like working with the foundations and seeing them as partners. It's a two-way street, helping them to be in our shoes and actually standing in the shoes of one of our program participants. I do try to challenge some of our foundation people at times to think about what it would be like to go grocery shopping if you have to take a couple different forms of public transport to get there, knowing that you have to carry all of whatever you buy home And to imagine all of those challenges and structural barriers that prevent people from making healthy choices.

Sarah describes the process of trying to explain to funders why their standards and expectations may be unrealistic. This becomes especially obvious in the case of Food Moxie, which works with a transient homeless population. How could the organization be expected to demonstrate behavior change when every few months they are working with an entirely new population? But this inability to demonstrate change does not mean that their work is not real and valuable.

Building a relationship with funders allows the organization to demonstrate their impact even in the absence of convincing statistics. Creating meaningful relationships with funders and communicating with them strategically allows nonprofits to stay true to their missions without succumbing to the overly rationalized evaluation systems that pervade contemporary nonprofit management.

*Consulting and Strategic Planning*

The issues that arise during the use of outside consultants and strategic planning strategies bring into sharp focus how the institutional logics of businesses are incompatible with those of nonprofits. Many respondents had mixed results with using outside consultants, suggesting that the consulting firms operate with different understandings of organizational priorities than their clients. When thinking about the rationalization of the nonprofit sector, one
thing to consider is an increased focus on efficiency. Margaret at SHARE Food Program described the process of undergoing a “warehouse optimization,” process, which rearranged the layout of their food storage warehouse for maximum efficiency.

ABC [consulting firm] did what is called a warehouse optimization. They studied all the operations and the layout of the warehouse. Now we have what’s called “central production.” [They laid out all of the different production areas] and then they came and tested it. The challenge that they had was that they’re used to working with corporations who always have the same people doing the same job, all the time. We have different volunteers doing the same job all the time. And we have autistic volunteers, we have mentally and physically challenged volunteers, so their system that they set up in packing the boxes had to accommodate 5 people or 180 people. It had to accommodate physically and mentally challenged children, youth and adults, and it had to accommodate corporate folks, and they all work differently. So they had to sort of redo their plan to fit the needs of the people who come here and pack food.

What Margaret’s comments imply is that the way that the SHARE warehouse operates is intentionally not the most efficient way. The consulting company approaches the organization assuming that their operations are standardized. However, there are organizational values at SHARE that would make it unacceptable to simply go for the most efficient route. Logically, the “best” approach would be hiring a steady team of staff to complete the same tasks; this would allow them to perform their jobs more quickly and accurately over time. However, efficiency is clearly not the main goal at SHARE. Having a robust rotation of volunteers serves its own purpose, even if it can be highly ineffective depending on the group. This deliberate flouting of efficiency evidences a conflict between the outside consulting company and the core nonprofit value of voluntarism. The use, or intentional abstention from use of volunteers, is an important topic for organizations on the path to assuming a more professional identity. Volunteering is in line with a nonmanagerial logic, which conflicts with the growing professionalism efforts many nonprofit organizations are making, leading Kreutzer and Jäger (2011) to conclude that volunteering and professionalism are often at odds.
Margaret continued to explain her experience with the consulting firm and hinted at the strangeness of corporate language used in this context.

I have a conference call with the consulting team every other Friday. During this call, I say: “we need you to help us do x,” and then they go back to their ABC world and find people at ABC who have that skillset. And then when that gets done they say “What do you need next?” and then they bring people from their “human capital” department. *It’s no longer called HR; it’s called human capital.*

The way Margaret refers to the realm of the consulting firm as “their ABC world” creates a sense of distance, both ideological and emotional, from the operations of the consulting firm. This distance allows her to preserve a distinction between the nonprofit world and the business world despite the fact that they are in fact collaborators. Pointing to “those ABC people,” with their optimization techniques and human capital department, is a way of saying, “We are not like them, and we do not think the way they think.” Creating this sense of distance allows Margaret to preserve the core of the nonprofit identity without letting it be infiltrated by overly rationalized and business-like practices.

But if these two realms of consulting and nonprofits are so different, why would a partnership like this form in the first place? Thinking back to Bromley and Meyer’s (2017) discussion of the blurring of lines between sectors provides insight into why these kinds of partnerships might form. “The growing overlap in substance and form [between organizations in different sectors] facilitates increasing interconnections between once-distinct forms of social structure. It becomes plausible for firms and nonprofits to have partnerships” (Bromley and Meyer 2017:954). Strategic planning and optimization have taken hold as nonprofit organizations continue to adopt more businesslike and managerial practices.
Community Organizing and Advocacy

How can nonprofits bridge the gap between social service and social change? One way that activist knowledge has been incorporated into food justice organizations is by implementing programs that include a community organizing aspect. Edible Schoolyard NYC has youth food justice classes that teach students about different activism strategies for confronting injustice in their communities. These approaches move beyond the surface level problems of food access and address the structural aspects that cause these problems to endure. As Holt-Gimenez and Wang (2011:98) put it, “Engaging with the structural aspects of food justice requires addressing race and class in relation to dispossession and control over land, labor and capital in the food system.” When Robby described his community organizing projects to me, the projects reflected this philosophy. Rather than just dealing with issues of food access, they also address housing and economic issues. Robby gave an example of the situation in the South Bronx:

In the South Bronx, a major pain point is affordable housing. We look for ways to have these housing groups [tenants’ rights groups] pair up with these food justice grassroots groups. It might just be a matter of giving them space to meet inside an urban garden, and that's empowering. Or, when they're talking about anti-gentrification, we also get them to think about local food retailers and the sort of tax provisions and small business protections that need to be in place in order to have local grocers survive during gentrification.

This way of doing food justice reveals the interconnected nature of social problems and advocates a multifaceted approach to addressing them. Many radical food justice activists promote community-based approaches to change that are designed, pioneered and executed by the very people who are affected by the problems. Having community members as leaders contradicts the logic of professionalism, which suggests that highly qualified and trained people should be at the top and managing everyone at the bottom of the pyramid. These community-based approaches value informal knowledge systems and community traditions over
standardized organizational approaches. Broad (2016:61) explains that “by promoting local storytelling about food and justice, articulating how local food system struggles are the product of systematic inequities, [organizations can] build strong foundations through which community-based food justice can be realized.” Storytelling is a very different way of knowing from professional knowledge; it is not the product of formal education, and it cannot be accessed through logical deduction, but its value in these kinds of undertakings is clear from the power of community-based movements.

Advocacy projects also require that their participants engage in the same “big picture” thinking that community organizing demands. Because Sarah engages in both for her job, she explained what it feels like to move back and forth between small administrative tasks and macro-level approaches to food justice.

I try to remind myself that while the food system that we're working in is far from ideal, the work that we're doing on a day-to-day basis will slowly but surely lead to a just and equitable food system. Sometimes my day feels disjointed because it goes from shifting my brain from fundraising and grantwriting to policy and advocacy.

Even though it can feel to Sarah like there is a disconnect between the different parts of her work, she sees them both as essential and demands that all staff on the team have the ability to think about bigger picture issues.

We're in the process of interviewing new candidates and writing new questions to ask them. The question that I just wrote was: “While this position is focused on direct service and program work, how do you see it fitting into larger macro level food system work and food justice work?” For me, it's really important to feel like the small work that we're doing day by day is contributing to creating a larger change in the world. And social change and social justice is a slow process.

This recognition of the slowness of social change harkens back to the discussion about the inadequacy of quantitative metrics. How can survey data from program evaluations capture something as complex as food systems change? Because the program work that most of these
organizations do not have immediate effects, they must contextualize their work on a larger scale. Even if the connections between organizational programming and systemic change are not immediately clear, highlighting the possibility for these connections and keeping them in mind is understandably important to many of the organizations’ leaders. Robby defined what advocacy looks like for his organization, and how it differs from the community organizing described earlier.

In addition to community organizing, we’re very much involved in advocacy. We’re part of national coalitions around the farm bill, entitlement programs and even tax reform. I’m part of this national advocacy academy through Feeding America with other food bank representatives where we lobby or meet up with congressmen or state legislators to talk about what’s going in our neighborhoods.

Advocacy for Margaret at SHARE looks somewhat similar, involving conversations with policy makers and government officials, but also goes beyond that and manifests in smaller and more subtle interactions with the organization’s constituents.

There are so many different ways to do the advocacy piece. Most people see advocacy as calling and meeting with legislators, and I do a lot of that. I’m also chair of the Anti-Hunger Committee for FPAC [Food Policy Advisory Council], and we do a lot of training for food cupboards, teaching folks how to be advocates. But part of advocacy also is being able to talk to your board members about why it’s important that they serve on boards. *Advocacy is not just about being out in the political arena. It’s also about helping people understand why this work is important,* and helping them understand how many people in our city don’t have enough food to eat. So advocating is something I feel like I do like probably 24/7, not just when I’m going to Harrisburg or going to DC.

For Margaret, effective advocacy requires creative thinking and involves a wide range of people, not just those with the potential to create policy. To summarize what earlier respondents said, both advocacy and community organizing require big picture thinking that isn’t results oriented, uses innovative approaches and values community-based knowledge.

Although several of my respondents engage in advocacy because they find it personally valuable, many organizations do not. Waging a strong advocacy campaign can feel like fighting
an uphill battle in today’s NPS. Many nonprofits do not engage in advocacy because they do not have enough resources, do not have enough training, or do not want to jeopardize relationships with funders (Almog-Bar and Schmid 2014; Schmid et al. 2008; Silverman and Patterson 2011; Smith and Pekkanen 2012). However, I also want to suggest that many organizations do not engage in advocacy because it is difficult to demonstrate impact.

Advocacy is not always about achieving results in a traditional, measurable sense. Almog-Bar and Schmid (2014:25) point to the “lack of systematic, rational evaluation and measurement of the effectiveness of advocacy.” As organizations become more professionalized and rationalized, they may begin to move away from advocacy, seeing it as less essential than other parts of their organizations’ missions, or too abstract to invest resources in because there is no direct return and impact is difficult to demonstrate. And as established before, the organizational field highly values systematic and rational procedures. As the interview data demonstrate, several nonprofit professionals deeply value community organizing and advocacy and want to make these activities a central part of their personal and professional undertakings. But personal choice can only accomplish so much—many barriers to engaging in advocacy cannot be overcome by a strong will or value commitments. Silverman and Patterson (2011:449) suggest that “public, private and nonprofit sector funders need to nurture a culture of advocacy by integrating advocacy activities and into the programs they currently fund.” By resisting the rationalized logic that suggests that advocacy is not a worthwhile use of time and resources, nonprofit workers honor and express the activist core of the NPS.

Conclusion

At the center of this investigation is a conflict. It is a conflict between the activist principles that social justice organizations are founded upon and the rapid professionalization of
the organizational field that threatens to corrode this activist core. Through my interviews, I
learned that nonprofit professionals resist the steady march of professionalization by 1) using
personal activist commitments to motivate and fuel their professional work (even though
professionalism demands distance from personal values,) 2) approaching optimization and
efficiency with skepticism when so-called “best practices” would degrade the integrity of the
organization’s mission, 3) centralizing community organizing and advocacy in their work over
more results-oriented projects, and 4) taking advantage of relationships with funders to
circumvent funding restrictions/requirements that would interfere with desired programming.

In this paper I have presented theoretical foundations for the conflict between activism
and professionalism, made a case for the likelihood of the professionalism impulse to overpower
the other forces at play, and evidenced both the conflict and the methods that people use to
preserve the activist components of their work. Now, it is time to contemplate what the
increasing rationalization of society means for social change work more broadly. At this
juncture, I want to revisit the stakes of the professionalism impulse quashing the activism
impulse. In the context of a single organization, it may not seem significant. Who cares if an
organization relies solely on managerial tactics to organize its staff, stops depending on
volunteers, or does not solicit input from the community during their program planning process?
But the stakes become clearer when we consider the broader context of social movements. Now
that social movements are housed within organizational structures with increasing regularity,
these forms are subject to scrutiny. The nonprofit structure is not simply a neutral form, but a
structuring force with the power to define our understanding of what social change looks like and
who has the ability to effect it.
Beyond the Nonprofit Industrial Complex?

When the INCITE! Women of Color Collective published their anthology *The Revolution Will Not be Funded: Beyond the Nonprofit Industrial Complex* in 2007, they called into question the role of the nonprofit organization in the broader landscape of social change. By introducing term “nonprofit industrial complex,” they exposed the way that political and financial technologies combine to surveil progressive social movements, and how this can make it difficult, or perhaps even impossible for social change activists to accomplish their goals (Rodriguez 2017).

Marcuse’s (1964) seminal work *One Dimensional Man* describes the peaceful, persistent, “unfreedom” that prevails in advanced industrialized societies. This mechanism is essentially a systematic quieting of dissent, a flattening of oppositional thought to the point that the illusion of consensus is present in all arenas of discourse. In the one-dimensional society, there is no way to truly stand outside the system—all oppositional thought is framed in such a way that it essentially loses its radical power. Though the INCITE! women make no reference to Marcuse, both texts highlight similar phenomena. We can understand the contemporary nonprofit organization as a byproduct of the one dimensional society, in that even organizations that are meant to position a forceful critique end up playing by the rules of the organizational field and therefore are limited in the scope of their possible actions. Organizational isomorphism, the tendency of organizations within the same field to begin to resemble each other, threatens the diversity of opinion that provides fertile breeding ground for dissent. Schmid et. al (2008:584) describe how “adopting conformist behavior may result in the loss of organizational identity and erosion of ideology and values. Such behavior may also inhibit the organization’s capacity to protest as well as its capacity for creativity and innovation.” Is radical social change possible in a
world of organizations funded by wealthy donors who are interested in preserving the status quo? As discussed earlier, nonprofits often adopt more professional practices to achieve legitimacy. But is conformity the price of legitimation? These questions are not just abstract; they appear throughout the conversations conducted for this research project.

Simmel’s (1971) essay “The Conflict in Modern Culture,” described how certain forms originate from social life, and that as individuals and groups we struggle indefinitely against these forms despite the fact that we are their creators. In a way, the form of the social justice nonprofit encapsulates well the conflict in modern culture: that the organizational forms we have created to pursue social change are insufficient, but we implement them anyway and are always engaged in a process of transforming them. Social life is propelled forward by this struggle, just as social movements are propelled forward by an ongoing struggle for between justice and injustice.

The tension between social change and social service can seem unresolvable. On the one hand, we live in a deeply unjust society where many people are subject to structural violence, leaving them in need of necessities like food and shelter. An argument exists that food banks and other emergency assistance agencies actually perpetuate hunger and inequality by alleviating suffering just enough that it will never reach a boiling point (Carson 2014). Roelofs (1995) refers to the third sector as “a protective layer for capitalism” for this very reason. In a way, this phenomenon might perfectly embody Marcuse’s claim: groups trying to oppose social inequality end up inadvertently furthering it and making it easier for this inequality to thrive. Despite this, it would be cruel and inhumane to discontinue food assistance and other service provision on these grounds. Surely, some will maintain that social change has never been paid work, and that any oppositional movements that are situated within a career framework are destined to fail. At the
same time, it is indisputable that these organizations enrich their communities and create real change in the lives of the people whom they serve. Perhaps the work of social change and social service are by their very nature dialectical, propelling each other forward even if in a constant state of critique.

Moving Forward

Much of this investigation is about actions taken by individuals that attempt to restore and honor activism within the nonprofit organizations where they work. And indeed, individual choice is powerful. People can choose not to work with a certain consultant if they feel like their values are not being recognized. They can choose to direct resources toward an advocacy campaign instead of other programs. They can attempt to minimize the distance between their professional staff and the communities they serve by supporting community organizing efforts. But matters of individual agency can only accomplish so much. Larger, structural change requires action on the part of funders, both private and public, who provide resources to these organizations. These changes would require establishing open lines of communication with grantees and honoring their priorities. Once resources can be freely allocated where leaders want them to go, there will be greater freedom to engage in more advocacy activities. Change on this level cannot be a matter of individual action alone.

Another necessary change would involve rethinking what evaluation looks like in the nonprofit context. If organizations are always feeling pressure to produce results for grantmakers, they are much more likely to only focus on short-term undertakings instead of more long-term goals. There is a grievous mismatch here: the forces of professionalization encourage nonprofits to be shortsighted, while the work of social change follows a much longer timeline. In the absence of rigorous short-term evaluation there is reason to be concerned about nonprofit
accountability and effectiveness, but not all of the value that the sector has to offer can be understood in these terms. This comes back to valuing the expressive dimension of the NPS instead of just the instrumental dimension. If nonprofits are only valued for what they can accomplish instead of what they *represent*, then this greatly limits the scope of possible programming. If nonprofits are always operating according to the timelines of external funders instead of calibrating themselves to grander scale wavelengths of social movements, they are condemned indefinitely to address the short term while never focusing on the long term, effectively rendering them powerless.

What else is at stake if the nonprofit sector is completely subsumed and structured by professionalization? For one thing, the elimination of grassroots projects, making nonprofits into places that do not represent the interests of communities and cannot be influenced and transformed by the people that they supposedly are representing. Silverman and Patterson (2011:448) agree that “the presence of a grassroots resource base is a critical ingredient to offset the most detrimental influences of the nonprofit industrial complex.” Grassroots movements represent some of the most key contributions of nonprofits to civil society. They are laboratories for people become better citizens, “fostering more democratic participation and representing citizens and communities in the policy process” (Smith and Pekkanen 2012:43). Professionalization can negatively impact the way that nonprofits interact with communities, resulting in less community representation on nonprofit boards that organizations that are more volunteer-driven (Suárez 2010). This suggests that the price of professionalization is decreased quality of civic engagement through nonprofits.

I hope that I have made a convincing case for why nonprofits should prioritize advocacy and organizing, not just service provision programs. Community organizing is essential because
it engages the activist consciousness described earlier and reveals the root causes of social
problems. Without investigating these root causes, there is no hope of eliminating these
problems, just addressing their side effects indefinitely. As Holt-Gimenez and Wang (2011:98)
put it, “no amount of fresh produce will solve the underlying socioeconomic problems of chronic
unemployment, labor exploitation, crumbling public education, land and real estate
speculation...” This leaves us wondering how nonprofits, with their many flaws, can continue to
do the work of radical social justice. With all of the evidence presented, it may seem as if formal
organizations are necessarily at odds with grassroots practices and there is no hope of combining
the two. Yet, the people I spoke with seemed to find create ways to resolve this contradiction. As
Robby described it, doing advocacy while within the nonprofit structure is “a delicate dance.”

Some other people in my position would disagree with me profusely and say that
grassroots is totally different from nonprofit work, and that you have to intentionally
separate pieces of our work in the community from our work in the office. But to me I
don't think it's an apples and oranges situation. They're very much intertwined. I think it's
a delicate dance, but if you’ve got the moves you know what you're doing.

In *Economy and Society*, Weber (1978) charts the “irresistible march of bureaucracy”
through its development. It would be logical to use this same framework to understand “the
irresistible march of professionalism,” as professional practices become more highly
incentivized, looked upon more favorably by funders and bestowed more legitimacy by the
general public. Given the tantalizing pull of professionalism, it is reassuring to know from
talking with my respondents how many people are actively fighting for the activism impulse,
resisting the forces of professional detachment and ever-increasing efficiency at the expense of
compromised values and missions. Right now, in the field it appears that “human service
providers may be supporting current political and institutional arrangements more than calling
for fundamental change. This points to an increasingly important role for coalitions and other
infrastructure organizations that are positioned to see the field in its totality” (Mosley 2012:863).

The path forward involves nonprofit staff and community members questioning the structures in place, imagining the world they want, and spending a lifetime building it together.
Appendix A:

Figure 1: Different Types of Social Change Organizations

- Organizing vs. Advocacy
- Individual Transformation vs. No Individual Transformation
- Collective Action vs. No Collective Action
- Learning & Awareness
- Social Service
- Legal Service
- Without Social Change
- Service
## Appendix B: Organizational Mission Statements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Mission Statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Food Trust</td>
<td>The Food Trust's mission is to ensure that everyone has access to affordable, nutritious food and information to make healthy decisions. Working with neighborhoods, schools, grocers, farmers and policymakers, we've developed a comprehensive approach to improved food access that combines nutrition education and greater availability of affordable, healthy food.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food Moxie</td>
<td>From seed to supper, Food Moxie educates and inspires people to grow, prepare, and eat healthy food.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHARE Food Program</td>
<td>The SHARE Food Program is a nonprofit organization serving a regional network of community organizations engaged in food distribution, education, and advocacy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challah For Hunger</td>
<td>We build communities inspired and equipped to take action against hunger. Through our work, every one of us will discover our own power to spark positive change and work collectively to solve urgent social challenges.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repair the World</td>
<td>Repair the World was founded in 2009 to make meaningful service a defining element of American Jewish life. Repair mobilizes tens of thousands of young Jews to volunteer in tackling pressing local needs each year, and Repair equips communities and partners to do the same. These volunteers help transform neighborhoods, cities, and lives through meaningful service experiences rooted in Jewish values, learning, and history.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitzvah Food Program</td>
<td>The Mitzvah Food Program was piloted in 1996 to alleviate hunger and malnutrition among at-risk families in the Greater Philadelphia region.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edible Schoolyard</td>
<td>Edible Schoolyard NYC partners with public schools to transform the hearts, minds, and eating habits of young New Yorkers through garden and kitchen classes integrated into the school day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City Harvest</td>
<td>City Harvest exists to end hunger in communities throughout New York City. We do this through food rescue and distribution, education, and other practical, innovative solutions.</td>
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<tr>
<td>East New York Farms</td>
<td>The mission of East New York Farms is to organize youth and adults to address food justice in our community by promoting local sustainable agriculture and community-led economic development. East New York Farms! is a project of the United Community Centers in partnership with local residents</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C: Interview Questions

- Educational history
- Career history
- Job title and responsibilities at work
- Why did you want to work for this organization?
- When did you first become interested in the issues that your organization addresses?
- Do you engage with these issues outside of your job or participate in activism?
- Does your organization do advocacy work?
- Does your organization do strategic planning?
- What do you find most rewarding and most challenging about your job?
- Do you plan to work for similar organizations in the future?
- Is it important to you to work for a nonprofit?
- What is your work environment and collaboration with coworkers like?
- What skills are most important for doing your job?
- How has your organization changed in recent years?
- What plans does your organization have in store for the coming years?
- If you could change something about your organization, what would it be?
- How do you measure that impact that you’re having?
- Does your organization do any kind of professional development?
References


Marcuse, Herbert. 1964. *One Dimensional Man*. Beacon Press.,


