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Chasing Funding to “Eat Our Own Tail”: The Invisible Emotional Work of Making Social Change

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ABSTRACT

This article presents findings from a multi-site study conducted in Montréal, QC, and Toronto, ON, Canada, on “social innovation” networks, focusing on the forms of emotional and relational work that many participants described. The article explores how these tasks related to how workers in the two nonprofit “backbone” organizations described their contributions to the impacts they hoped to make. The intersections of these forms of work and particular identities are framed within a feminist lens—when and how are these forms of relational work recognized or made invisible? This work is contextualized within neoliberal reforms, the restructuring of the state, and external funding requirements and how these determine what forms of work are deemed “impactful” in making significant social change around broad issues of homelessness and social exclusion.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article présente les résultats d'une étude multi-sites sur les réseaux « d'innovation sociale » menée à Montréal, QC et Toronto, ON, Canada, et met l'accent sur des formes de travail émotionnel et relationnel décrites par de nombreux participants. Les auteurs explorent la relation entre ces tâches et la manière dont les travailleurs de deux organismes à but non lucratif centraux décrivent leurs contributions aux impacts qu'ils espéraient avoir. Les intersections de ces travaux et des identités particulières s'inscrivent dans une perspective féministe—quand et comment les formes de travail relationnelles sont-elles reconnues ou rendues invisible? Cet article s'inscrit dans le cadre des réformes néolibérales, de la restructuration de l'État et des besoins des bailleurs de fonds externes, et comment ceux-ci déterminent quelles formes de travail sont considérées comme ayant un impact « décisif » sur le changement social important autour des grandes questions de l'itinérance et d'exclusion sociale.

Keywords / Mots clés Social innovation; Nonprofit; Canada; Homelessness; Feminist; Neoliberalism / Innovation sociale; Le secteur sans but lucrative; Canada; Itinérance; Féministe; Néolibéralisme

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INTRODUCTION

Today's nonprofit sphere has been powerfully shaped by neoliberal shifts that have been underway since the 1990s (Coté & Simard, 2012; Griffith & Smith, 2014; Hasenfeld & Garrow, 2012). In many ways, nonprofit organizations experience the unique effects of the neoliberal restructuring of social services, including an increasing move to "social entrepreneurship" (Maier, Meyer, & Steinbereithner, 2016; Peris-Ortiz, Teulon, Bonet-Fernandez, 2017). Funding, which is increasingly dependent on the demonstration of particular "impacts" or outcomes, structures the ways that work is organized and valued within nonprofit organizations (Nichols, 2008). This structuring both contradicts and contributes to the social changes that nonprofits are hoping to make. This article explores these contradictions and intersections and the subsequent valuations of different types of work in the context of organizations pursuing "social innovation" and engaged scholarship. Specifically, it highlights the ways in which flexible schedules for workers and the pressure to be adaptive and "nimble" with respect to broader economic and political shifts intersect with gendered notions of care and social justice among people working in nonprofit settings. To produce the analyses, the article draws on data generated through three years of research on the activities of two diverse networks seeking to use social sciences and humanities research knowledge to prevent and end homelessness and to diminish forms of social marginalization. These networks are based in two Canadian cities: Montréal, Québec, and Toronto, Ontario. One network, consisting of two primary organizations and several government, academic, and nonprofit partners, focuses more heavily on policy work and knowledge mobilization in communities, nationally and internationally. The other, made up of a singular organization with multiple levels of programs and approximately a dozen regular government, academic, and nonprofit partners, is highly engaged in front line-oriented interventions. These interventions focus particularly on art and philosophy, though they also seek to make changes to public discourse and government operations. Focusing on two backbone organizations within these networks, this article asks what an increasingly neoliberal landscape means for nonprofit organizations that are working to enact real social change.

This research produced data revealing the importance of the relational and emotional work within the two networks as vital drivers of social and policy change. Emotional and relational work (which is often invisible) is an integral part of operating in the precarious and fast-paced environment in which these networks exist, both for monitoring what the social nonprofit sector describes as the social impacts demanded by funders, and for the well-being of workers (avoiding burn out, navigating personal boundaries, and maintaining important relationships). The pursuit of organizational outcomes (e.g., improving school perseverance, preventing youth homelessness) coincided with a personal, moral responsibility to contribute to social justice and change in ways that structured the work, at times resisting or contributing further to the current trend of nonprofits to adopt entrepreneurial behaviours (Maier, Meyer, & Steinbereithner, 2016), including risk-taking, innovation, and an increasing need to provide measurable outcomes to secure funds. These pressures to achieve particular measurable impacts, at times, sat uncomfortably with the human aspects of working in this sector, which workers described as drawing them to this type of work. In organizations where mandates aim to make significant shifts in response to complex social problems such as homelessness, marginalization, and poverty, relational work played an important role in maintaining hope in the face of overwhelming and, often, seemingly insurmountable human suffering.

THE INVISIBLE WORK OF SOCIAL CHANGE

In this article, invisible work, encompasses a broad understanding of what caring, emotional, and supportive work looks like for people in these organizations (Smith, 2005). Any activity that takes time and energy is conceived of as work; some forms of work are more prominent and visible than others. In describing what this work looks like, the article draws on formal and informal interviews with participants, focusing particularly on how they explained different tasks within the organization relating to "impacts" or social outcomes. The perception of impacts held a complex place within workers'

descriptions of their roles, and participants' descriptions of how their roles are valued in terms of official impacts, or how the networks were outwardly effecting social change, are explored.

When asked how their organizations were contributing to the network's larger social change goals, many workers referenced how their emotional and relational work was often hidden or not seen as directly contributing to the organizational mission, even by their own measure. Supportive and emotional tasks were often viewed as secondary to what people described as their official mandates, or less essential to carrying out the official mission of the organization (e.g., the work of writing late-night emails to stakeholders, ensuring spontaneous deadlines were met, enabling wellness among co-workers). But these activities were viewed as integral to maintaining important partnerships, negotiating funding opportunities, and the general survival of organizations. In fact, participants reported that this emotional and relational work was invaluable to how individuals and organizations were continuing their efforts toward making social change—even as it was described as secondary to a network's mission-related efforts. Particularly in organizations that aim to make shifts around urgent social issues, rethinking how this work is valued and perceived is essential to keeping workers motivated and supported, and avoiding what people described as “burn out.”

APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

The inquiry for this study began with what people do each day in their professional capacities, how they describe their roles, how they link this work to personal cost and emotional labour, and how their own conceptions of their work fit into ideas of how social impact was being achieved. This article connects what participants reported to recent literature on neoliberal shifts in Canada and their effects on the nonprofit sector, while also grounding the analysis in a feminist theorization of work (Bains, 2004; Fraser, 2016; Smith, 2004). Current funding structures and increasingly neoliberal modes of governance have “moved many non-profit service organisations away from their community-oriented focus and towards a ‘business model’” (Evans, Richmond, & Shields, 2005, p. 74), with these organizations facing increasingly competitive environments to survive. Ultimately, the relational and emotional work that is being done within these networks—work that, in the case of these networks, supports people to find new and effective approaches to alleviate human suffering and social inequities—is too integral to achieving real “impacts” for it to continue to be undervalued and hidden, or for organizations to be perpetually chasing funding to “eat their own tails” (Fraser, 2016, n.p.), or contribute to their own demise through unsustainable practices.

AN INSTITUTIONAL ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH AND THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF ADVOCACY WORK

This research has been shaped by an institutional ethnographic (IE) mode of inquiry (Smith, 1999, 2005). Drawing from Dorothy Smith's (1987) approach of tracing out the social relations that organize our experiences, which are based within the actualities of our everyday lives, this research began by getting at the regular things people were doing within these organizations, and how these tasks and activities fit into work being done by colleagues and partners in broader networks of social change advocacy to “move the needle” (field note, 2017) on social issues. It also explored the social conditions (e.g., shifts in government and policy) that were simultaneously shaping the work of these organizations, with the recognition that social change is the outcome of many people and factors, not just a single individual, program, or organization.

The research began with the question of how organizations (and researchers) actually contribute to social change efforts through social innovation and collaborative work, contextualizing people's descriptions of their work as part of larger shifts influencing provincial, territorial, and federal responses to homelessness and poverty. The organizations were not acting independently—both organizations explored here contributed to and participated in networks of varied actors that took on different roles to work on social issues, including service providers, government officials, business and corporate

partners, funders, and users. As such, the importance of networked relationships between different organizations was a factor in driving the impacts they were seeking to make. Data collection was guided by the following questions:

1. What are the specific activities undertaken by engaged scholars to transform research into socially just change?
2. How do social, institutional, political, and economic relations support/inhibit the influence of social science knowledge on processes of social transformation?
3. How do engaged scholars and their collaborators (e.g., practitioners, organizational and community leaders, policymakers, artists, and activists) attribute their collective efforts to the social changes they observe?
4. What methodological and conceptual strategies best enable the effects of engaged scholarship to be captured and conveyed to other key stakeholders?

While these questions initially aimed to explore how research and academic scholarship could contribute to community-based change, this article pays attention to the ways in which workers in these networks understood change-making processes more broadly. In the case of the Montréal network, study questions were adapted to reflect the variety of labour being performed, from working with partners to front-line work and from innovation-oriented research to art-program facilitation. Following Smith's (1990) articulation of institutional ethnography (IE) as a method of inquiry, the context of this research did not aim to impose "concepts or principles" but was shaped by "the actual activities of actual individuals and the material conditions of those activities" (p. 6). Thus, throughout the project, the inquiry was situated in relevant questions (e.g., when interviewing someone working closely with government partners, questions were slightly different than for those working on front-line intervention programs on the street).

WHO IS DOING WHAT WORK?

Participants in Toronto and Montréal

This research draws on 69 face-to-face interviews with participants in the Toronto network and 35 similar interviews in Montréal. Interviews took place with employees and ex-employees who held different roles in each network (CEOs, front-line workers or "mediators," administrators, etc.), as well as government, business, and national/local partners in external organizations. In both cities, we undertook two-day reflective data collection and analysis activities with the core staff members (Toronto) and office staff and project managers (Montréal). In Toronto, data collection included ongoing debriefs about collaborative work with other organizations in the network, engagement with government, and presentations. In Montréal, similar data collection focused on observing presentations and relationships in the network, and also included focus groups with those working "outside the office" and delivering front-line services.

Within these two networks, this article focuses on the work being done in two organizations, one based in Toronto and the other in Montréal. The Toronto organization describes itself as a "national coalition reimagining solutions to youth homelessness through transformations in policy, planning and practice" through "collective work [that] is evidence-driven and solutions-focused." The Montréal organization "use[s] creativity ... for the social inclusion of people who experience(d) or are at risk of exclusion" and "use[s] both practical approaches ... and systemic approaches inspired from social innovation, as motors of social transformation." These two organizations are focused on because neither is formally connected to a university—universities are not unaffected by neoliberal restructuring, though they may see these effects in different ways (Lund, 2018; Nikunen, 2014; Pain, 2014). Also, neither are solely doing front-line service work—for which there is

also extensive literature (Baines, 2004; Baines, Charlesworth, & Cunningham, 2015; McPhail, 2004)—which plays another, different role in the restructured social service sphere, where the state increasingly relies on front-line organizations for the provision of basic, life-sustaining services. Rather, these two organizations often work as nonprofit “brokers” between different service providers, academics, funders, government entities, and businesses in order to carry out their missions.

The methodology reflected our own roles within each network and in relation to each organization. In the Toronto-based network, each author has been involved in various capacities, as graduate research assistants and post-doctoral fellows. Kaitlin Schwan currently works in the network as a senior researcher, and Naomi Nichols is a research partner. Jayne Malenfant has been working as a graduate research assistant and lived experience scholar within the research and policy network over the last four years. As such, we are not studying these networks from outside of them but are constantly implicated within and contributing to them (Smith, 1987). This has allowed us, in particular, to have a clearer view of the shifts and histories of different organizations, ideas, and individuals throughout the project and the network itself. While we have built ties and relationships with those in the Montréal-based network over the last two years, we do not have the same access, knowledge, and history with it.

NEOLIBERALISM AND THE NONPROFIT SPHERE

Broadly, the neoliberal shifts that shape these nonprofit networks are based in the belief, of neoliberal advocates, that the state encourages the “wrong type of opportunities for individuals, in the shape of extensive redistributive programs, leading them to make wrong choices that create inefficiencies in the market” (Hilgers, 2013, p. 60). While the intention behind the cutting of social welfare programs under neoliberalism is to encourage individuals to thrive and programming to fall more closely in line with the market, the result has largely been to simultaneously defund state-supported social services, while depoliticizing the organizations that step forward to provide them instead (Evans, Richmond, & Shields, 2017). The organizations studied here exist and operate in this nonprofit context, which has been profoundly reorganized by neoliberal structuring, including shifts to privatization, managerialism, and demands for increasingly measurable outcomes (Baines, Charlesworth, & Cunningham, 2015; Hasenfeld & Garrow, 2012; Griffith & Smith, 2014; Maier, Meyer, & Steinbereithner, 2016). This may also include nonprofits becoming increasingly business-like, or taking on entrepreneurial qualities such as “innovation, risk-taking, and pro-activeness” (Maier, Meyer, & Steinbereithner, 2016, p. 71). As nonprofit organizations increasingly engage in corporate partnerships, these new funders “may prefer business-like relationships” and “may require non-profit organizations to implement business-like structures to fulfill accountability needs ... or to discourage them from criticizing structural causes of poverty and inequality” (Maier, Meyer, & Steinbereithner, 2016, p. 74).

These increasing pressures to be business-like are further shaped by nonprofit organizations’ growing partnerships with government. In Québec, this neoliberal restructuring (1980–1990) interacted with a strong popular and activist base of social services developed after the Quiet Revolution (Lamoureux & Lamoureux, 2009) and led to the québécois state regularly downloading responsibility—at times formally through partnerships with particular organizations. As a result, “community groups have ... in some instances, been chosen by the Québec State to formally represent the interests of marginalized populations ... [who] have been invited to participate in regional or provincial, social, or economic forums and processes of ‘concertation’ (dialogue and collaboration)” (Côté & Simard, 2012, p. 109). However, these official government (funding-based) partnerships often threaten organizations’ social change agendas and limited ability to work as advocates or activists (Côté & Simard, 2012) in both provinces. Within our work with the Montréal-based organization, participants regularly described avoiding a reliance on government funding in order to maintain autonomy for activism, advocacy, and political potential. For the nonprofit sphere, neoliberal restructuring to “emphasize results over processes, and privatizing services” (Hasenfeld & Garrow, 2012, p. 302) works to “dampe[n] the sector’s motivation to challenge the state and greatly curtails its historical mission to advocate and mobilize for social rights” (Hasenfeld & Garrow, 2012, p. 295).

Similarly, the funding that organizations are chasing or trying to secure (and particularly government, charity-oriented funding) in an Ontario context can lead workers to explicitly avoid thinking of their work in terms of “activism” or advocacy-motivated, as they may lose their eligibility to be funded (Nichols, 2008).

NEOLIBERALISM AND GENDERED “CARE” WORK

Within nonprofit sector social service work, scholarship on how “care” work fits into neoliberal restructuring suggests that this work is organized along gendered lines (Baines 2004; Lund, 2018). The majority of scholarship focuses on care work within social services, where individual caring is increasingly being “strip[ped] out ... replac[ed] with flexible, routinized, and standardized models of work organization,” with workers adapting and carrying out unpaid or unvalued labour to “fill the ‘caring’ gap” (Baines, 2004, p. 286). Feelings of personal responsibility, altruism, and a “sense of moral obligation” (Baines, 2004, p. 285), as well as the “presumed elasticity of women to undertake care work under any conditions” (Baines, Charlesworth, & Cunningham, 2015, p. 462), leads to the erasure of care and relational work from the “evidence” that an organization is affecting social change.

Across a spectrum of gendered work, then, increasingly “start-up” and neoliberal-oriented approaches may reinforce divides between the flexible and adaptive work of the masculine “change manager” (Baines, Charlesworth, & Cunningham, 2015, p. 471) and the flexible and adaptive (but hidden) work of the “self-sacrificing” (Baines, Charlesworth, & Cunningham, 2014, p. 35) feminine. While feminist analyses of invisible work often focus solely on women in the workplace, this study expands these analyses to gender non-binary workers as well. In the accounts of all participants, and particularly with women and non-binary workers, relationships to “outcomes” as well as human care and relational work are complex. These neoliberal restructurings of nonprofit work are clearly at play in how workers were describing their roles, as well as how they conceptualized their own contributions to the impacts their organizations hoped to make.

WHAT WORK CONTRIBUTES TO AN ORGANIZATION’S SOCIAL IMPACTS?

The valuation of different roles in nonprofits and the relationship to funding

Emotional and relational work took place throughout these networks, whether integrated into formal positions, such as “partnership liaison,” or outside of them, when workers were doing tasks such as overtime work “managing relationships,” navigating personal boundaries, as well as applying to and negotiating funding (which often required the above activities as well) (Field Notes, 2017, 2018). Across both networks, for example, research was highly valued, both because it was positioned as necessary to understanding and responding to complex social issues such as homelessness, but also because it was viewed as enabling the efforts by organizations to convey an evidence-based position to the public and funders who wanted “evidence-based everything” (Focus Group, 2018). Within each network, workers in key “backbone organizations” explained that those tasked with research and evidence-generation were considered to be doing work that was integral to the changes the networks hoped to make. Alternatively, the forms of work discussed in this article—the “care” or “maintenance” work of keeping the organizations running—were understood to be less visible within the larger networks themselves and often invisible in outward communications about the efforts of the networks and the organizations. Very often, this care and maintenance work took the form of activities relating to seeking funds or maintaining relationships with funders, partners, or other people in the network. This type of relational, fund-seeking, and partnership-sustaining work was regularly linked to important qualities of being “fluid,” “responsive,” and “adaptable” (i.e., being available to walk partners through a process at any time, meet sudden funding deadlines, and navigate personal/professional relationships). As a characteristic, fluidity was explicitly linked to an organization’s impacts (receiving recognition and grants, partnering with key experts, and shifting public perception). During an interview, Alyssa, a director at the Toronto organization stated that “adaptability, flexibility, and being able to be nimble” is necessary for doing this type of work. However, the actual

tasks and work of being nimble (and, particularly, of being “accommodating” outside official organizational roles) were often less visible to others within the organization and the network and thus less clearly linked to the impacts.

PERCEPTIONS OF IMPACTS WITHIN AND OUTSIDE OF ORGANIZATIONS: CHASING FUNDING

Within the Montréal organization that grounded this exploration, we interviewed Thérèse, who worked for four years in the partnership team but had taken on different roles throughout her time there. While she saw her current work in the research lab as contributing to the changes the organization hoped to make, she did not feel the same when reflecting on her work maintaining partnerships and undertaking fund-seeking activities:

I don't believe the work we do [with partnerships] is really making [sic] impacts. I mean, this is the job where you talk with people [who] are less in contact with [our] wording, expressions, concepts, and values, but it's really not easy, so I think it's easier to say that working on the lab could make impact. It's also easier [in the lab] to explain how what I'm doing is helping a project—so a project has impacts, what I'm doing at the partnership job, it doesn't have any impact directly on [the] organization, except the one that, then it's funded, and then you get to do the stuff people are supposed to do. But it's like, intermediary. It's actually really hard to explain it, even inside [our organization]. Like, you get a lot of criticism. You really get that.

Thérèse went on to describe the work she did seeking funds, along with a fluctuating team of two to four people, who were in charge of “finding subsidies and also money from private funders to keep the organization going.” Through attempting to maintain the piecemeal program funding that is typical of the nonprofit sphere under neoliberal economic and managerial shifts (Evans, Richmond, & Shields, 2005), her work was seen by co-workers as not only failing to contribute to the social impacts the organization was seeking to create but also as “compromising” the mission-focused work. Thérèse's shifting and strategic use of language and frames to describe her colleague's work allowed the organization to apply for different funding opportunities as they came up (and, as a result, ensure there was enough funding coming in to pay employees, run programming, etc.), but according to Thérèse, these efforts were seen as peripheral to the real mission-driven work of the organization.

The disconnect between seeking funds and the “actual” work being carried out is not unique to this organization or network. Nichols' (2008) previous work also demonstrated how “a person's knowledge about her or his work can differ from the institutional accounts of this work that are produced to fund or officially define it” (p. 62). This is clear in the language of partnership, which was used in both networks, and is typical of relationships between nonprofits and funders under neoliberalism. Partnerships serve

to mask a fundamental restructuring of the public sector and of the relationship between the state and civil society. The benign language of “partnership” hides a steeply hierarchical and centralised relationship of power embedded in a contractual arrangement between the state and those agencies increasingly responsible for the delivery of public goods and services ... New partnership relations among for-profits, the state, and nonprofit organizations (NPO's) pushes nonprofits to become more entrepreneurial, to rely on fees for service, and to redefine their missions. (Evans, Richmonds & Shields, 2005, p. 78)

Understanding the daily work of “partnership building” has been key to understanding the broader social and political forces that are shaping how these organizations work and providing important explanations for why this fund-seeking and relational work held an ambivalent connotation for many of those doing it. The framing of the organizations' work may shift depending on the funding or partnership that is being chased, and understanding particular policy priorities or

funding requirements was described as key in achieving successful impacts. Particularly in the Montréal organization, these adaptive shifts in messaging (i.e., framing an organization as providing “charity”) were seen by some as diluting or betraying the mission (field notes, 2018).

In contrast to Thérèse, Jeanne, a project coordinator in the same organization, did think she was working on “all the things” that the organization needed to make impacts, however, she saw her role as “working kind of lower down, and making sure that it’s all functional ... the small things.” Jeanne worked with everyone in the organization and had been involved for long enough that she could do the work of educating new staff about the history of the work. In describing her role, Jeanne often spoke of making sure everything was “running smoothly” and ensuring everyone understood one another:

They’ll [project managers] do most of it, of the kind of partner relationships, and I’ll be more aware of when the partner says something what it translates in terms of what we need to do to make sure we get there, [that] kind of thing.

She described her work, often, as “fixing” problems or “stabilizing” to “try to make things smoother and easier for everyone to be able to get to that beautiful thing”—that beautiful thing being the organization’s mission of greater social justice and inclusion. Jeanne also saw a large part of her position as “building community” and providing space for others to think and reflect on their everyday work.

NEGOTIATING PARTNERSHIPS: “INNOVATING” BY SOMEONE ELSE’S RULES

The work of “partnership building” was difficult to define clearly, even by those carrying it out. In both contexts, it often meant seeking funds. For some, drawn-out funding cycles sometimes meant that by the time funding was received (described as anywhere from 6–24 months after the initial application), a program had shifted significantly and needed to be reworked to fit grant requirements. Mindi, in Toronto, described her own efforts to trace out how funding was being allotted in different communities her organization was working with, and how this funding related to her own professional activities and the objectives of the network. Her work included tracing, through partnerships with communities, what funding was available to them, how applications were structured, and, subsequently, returning to communities to share how they could frame their work to secure funding for new projects and programs. Rosie, a program manager in Montréal, described binders of workshops, programs, and evaluation forms that were never used more than once, because in order to secure funding, the organization had to be seen as either continuously “innovating” or shifting to fall in line with what funders were looking for. Thérèse also described the work of playing a funding game where you’re not entirely sure of all of the rules, trying to cast and frame programs in ways that fit the requirements for a given grant or subsidy.

Those working to sustain partnerships and collaborations, essential to the network’s functioning, described much of their labour as navigating relationships, or, at times, “hand-holding”—careful work brokering partnerships with others. This work aimed to ensure not only that they were communicating outside of their organizations but that partners were feeling valued, supported, informed, and acknowledged, that relationships were “solid,” and people were genuinely “on board.” The transformative nature of this work became clear when we spoke with individuals working in partner organizations. April, who managed the charitable foundation affiliated with a large national chain of stores, saw Toronto-based CEO and co-founder Marianne as a key actor in providing a “true understanding” of the issue of homelessness, describing their partnership as “fantastic.” Colleen, a community outreach coordinator at a large provincial service in Québec, saw much of her work as “inspired by” and supported by the Montréal organization. This careful work—including maintaining these relationships—was often related to funding, and required the careful navigation of relationships with funders and other organizations doing similar work and competing for the same pools of funding (not “stepping on someone else’s

turf”). As Marianne and Mindi described in Toronto, receiving funding that another organization did not could strain relationships and disrupt the work of partnership building. This work was part of the job, but also often outside of the time, hours, and tasks that officially fell within their roles in their organizations. This blurring of the boundaries between work and home is increasingly typical for those working in nonprofits (Baines, Charlesworth, & Cunningham, 2012; Hasenfeld & Garrow, 2012).

WORKING ON “ALL THE THINGS”: CARE WORK AND NIMBLENESS

When describing her own position within the Ontario network, Mindi stated that she had a very difficult time explaining what she did to friends and family; that her position had changed and “evolved” many times throughout her work in this network, adapting to different community, policy, and environmental shifts; and that her role changed as the organization changed, particularly as new funders became involved. Her work often played a role in “helping” or, often, “walking alongside” community partners, answering questions and liaising with people who were working on policy. She also described working on many other projects that “weren’t in her mandate.” Her colleague Alyssa described her work as necessarily unpredictable, where she worked to “follow up on contacts” and needed to “just [be] adaptable to whatever kind of comes up during the week.” Jeanne described taking on work in an organization’s research lab, on its communications team, as its partnership liaison, volunteer coordinator, office administrator, and payroll coordinator, as well as answering phones, watering plants, and fixing printers, all within the course of a month as needed. This was not out of the ordinary in terms of how study participants described their roles in their organizations and within the broader networks their organizations participated in.

During the initial shifts of the neoliberal restructuring of the nonprofit sphere, these “innovative, flexible, and non-bureaucratic” (Evans, Richmond & Shields, 2005, p. 75) qualities were seen as key in downloading increasing social responsibility away from the state and onto nonprofit organizations. As Terry, a program director from Toronto, described, even when preparing to take a day off, people are expected to respond to text messages from partners, a key activity that contributed to this necessary “nimbleness,” though this often meant that they were carrying out tasks in the evening or on weekends:

But you want to be responsive, and I feel like we do that during the day, like I do, I don’t know about “we.” But I want to have as much clear time on my calendar for when those things pop up that I can be really responsive, and then, you know, I get home, I have dinner and I’m looking at my to-do list, and I’m like, “Oh, you know, it’s quiet. I can write now. Or I can read that report.”

Workers described having to be almost constantly available to do this hand-holding, brokering, responding, and relationship building. While these relationships are often described in genuinely positive terms—as important both inside and outside of official organization business—they hold an ambivalent place in neoliberal measurement structures and in the more entrepreneurial structuring of nonprofit work. Indeed, the work of sustaining relationships is integral to ensuring these organizations survive—financially and also within the network of actors collectively working toward achieving similar social changes. While these neoliberal shifts may seem to compromise the value of these forms of nimble work, the fluidity and responsiveness that workers describe as “key” to the success of their organizations can be linked to the increasing neoliberal application of market-based models to nonprofit services and increasing competition as funding is harder to secure. These characteristics are typical of nonprofits becoming more “business-like” (Maier, Meyer, & Steinbereithner, 2016, p. 65).

GENDERED ROLES AND WORK

The data also suggest a link between gendered identities and this emotional labour, where women and gender non-

binary workers described taking on much of this emotional, supportive, and responsive work. While it is not simply women and non-binary workers doing the work of enabling organizational “nimbleness,” “community building,” or relational/care work, men used different discursive frames to talk about their own professional work and responsibilities. In both networks broadly, men more frequently highlighted “research” or work relating to “evidence,” “experimentation,” or “science”—which, due to the objectives or impacts organizations were trying to make (and their efforts to conclusively demonstrate progress toward these change goals [Hasenfeld & Garrow, 2012]) were important roles. If men were undertaking this type of supporting work, they often framed it as strategic and rarely spoke of the emotional aspect of relational tasks.

When men were occupying roles that required more supportive or sustaining work, they were more likely to be hired temporarily or were interns. Women who were heads of their departments and were engaged in managing front-line projects or doing “innovative” aspects of research were also willing and expected to tend to relationships with various partners (or hand-holding)—all while they were carrying out tasks in their higher-level positions. Some men did discuss the personal toll that highly competitive funding structures and emotional work could take, though they were less likely to create structures of support or debrief with co-workers with respect to the emotional toll of the work.

Within these organizations, the same neoliberal forces and social institutions that organize the work of women and non-binary workers organize that of men, though they may experience them differently. All workers are implicated in gendered work, which is “socially constructed in relation to other identities” including race, sexuality, and able bodied-ness (Baines, Charlesworth, Cunningham, & Dassinger, 2012). Gendered work is also more often linked to a feeling of social responsibility or “self-sacrificing” (Baines, Charlesworth, & Cunningham, 2014, p. 34) ethical stances and may lead to workers feeling an ethical obligation to work overtime and participate in relationship building outside of work hours as a resistance to the standardization and measurement of work, including “community-building” (Baines, Charlesworth, & Cunningham 2015). Traditionally the notion of invisible work in feminist theory focused on “domestic” and gendered work in the home, such as “birthing and raising children” (Fraser, 2016). Invisible, gendered, and undervalued work historically (and often still) involves “maintaining households, building communities, and sustaining the shared meanings, affective dispositions and horizons of value that underpin social cooperation” (Fraser, 2016).

EATING OUR OWN TAIL: HIERARCHIES AND CARE WITHIN THE CAPITALIST CONTRADICTION

Within the organizations studied here, the “scientific” activities associated with research are framed as integral to the mission-driven work of the organizations in question, and other forms of work connected to maintenance, community-building, and sustenance roles are more likely to be erased within dominant workplace narratives and structures. Smith (1987) has observed that moves toward “professionalization” restructured the sustaining and relational work historically undertaken by women into “hierarchical strata, detaching them from the movements they originate in and connecting them to the relations of ruling” (p. 216). Similarly Nancy Fraser’s (2016) notion of a “crisis of care” outlines a “capitalist contradiction” of care that devalues this invisible or relational work and depends on it to perpetuate and reproduce capitalist social norms. Often reluctantly, to stay afloat economically nonprofit organizations must “mimic the practices and culture of their institutional counterparts” (Côté & Simard, 2012, p. 109) which leads to these negative or ambivalent feelings about “compromising” the mandate of the work.

Similarly, in these organizations—as in universities, homes, and all of our environments under capitalism (Fraser, 2016)—this work helps to actually support the erasure of itself by painting the “impacts” that matter most as detached from the huge amount of relational and emotional work that supports them. This is the “capitalist contradiction” (Fraser, 2016) of care that comes out of the unequal valuing of different forms of (often gendered) work across a range of domains. Capitalism contributes directly to its own demise by diminishing or erasing the importance of care work that allows for its

core values to be reproduced, perpetuating a cycle wherein it “eats its own tail” (Fraser, 2016). Similarly, the neoliberal imposition of funding requirements causes nonprofits to work—and work overtime—to eat their own tails. In practice, this imperative drives organizations to continuously undertake new types of work to chase funding and meet funders’ demands. These shifts in people’s work and the frames through which the work is understood takes results in the redirection of time and resources away from activities that are seen as explicitly driving the impacts an organization actually hopes to make. In this process, emotional and relational work that people are undertaking—particularly in relation to partnerships and seeking funds—is difficult to quantify and may actually be seen as detracting from an organization’s “performance-enhancing measures” (Côté & Simard, 2012, p. 115).

DOING EMOTIONAL WORK AND WORK WITH EMOTIONS

Within these two organizations, much of the emotional and caring work people talked about and we observed—for example, hosting craft nights with co-workers, going out for drinks with partners, and supportive tasks such as sending emails to encourage people their work was making a difference—is neither an official nor an unofficial part of the job. This ongoing work was linked to, but officially separate from, the relationship building that was “in the mandate” for certain workers. While building personal relationships was part of the job, key in building important solidarity networks, and understood as important to avoid “burn out” (in that it provided personal supports), it could also blur boundaries and require additional efforts to navigate work/social relationships and obligations. This work was, again, linked to emotional depletion and the navigation of personal boundaries from working in a field where people were attempting to alleviate or impact large social problems such as homelessness. As Terry describes:

Terry (T): I think that happens a lot, but I think the personal relationships are there when there are those hard conversations, you’re able to go for a coffee or a beer and say, listen, it’s not personal.

Interviewer (I): Yes. Tell me about that. How do you negotiate between what can be very heated professional conversations and the work that you guys do? Because you also do work socially together.

T: Where was it? I think it was at a conference in Montréal, or it could’ve been—it was somewhere in—it might have been Ottawa. I forget what the gathering was, but like I had this conversation with one of our partners and it was like, what that fuck is going on?

I: Yeah.

T: This is already hard work, why are we making this harder? Like, what’s going on with you, why you’re reacting to things the way you are? I think it got to a point where we had a few beers, we both cried, and I’m like—and we’re like, okay.

I: Because there was a piece that you didn’t see that was going on for that person?

T: Yeah.

A significant amount of work goes into navigating these boundaries—working with other people (and “supporting people we care about” (Interview, 2018) who also wanted to “move the needle” (Interview, 2018) on urgent issues pertaining to social inclusion, marginalization, and homelessness—when personal and professional approaches or goals conflicted.

This ongoing emotional work—which often spilled outside of the frame of the official work day—was directly related to increasing pressure on nonprofits to follow an “entrepreneurial” business model, blurring the boundaries between working for social change and engaging in social entrepreneurship (Peris-Ortiz, Teulon, & Bonet-Fernandez, 2017). This work also took such an emotional and personal toll because these organizations were working to make significant shifts around

issues such as homelessness and poverty and in the lives of people. A similar task, as described by Mindi, was navigating the blurring of boundaries between work investment and personal investment. She described frustration, despite seeing that she and others in her organizations were adapting and working in new ways around homelessness that they felt were “making a difference”—and then leaving work and seeing members of her community that were still on the street:

I struggle with that. I don't know if there's an answer to that. I honestly don't ... I still feel like that. I have to constantly deal with that feeling. When I go to the liquor store, for example there's always someone there, and it's often a young person. I feel my fear and anxiety come up, and ... then I realize it's the guilt that I'm experiencing because I'm not able to help them. Even at that level, whether you hand out or say hello or don't, all that stuff just comes up, bubbles up constantly.

These sentiments were pronounced for workers in Montréal as well. The one fear, as Rosie said, “is not doing enough” to make sufficient headway toward your organization's social change goals. “Feel[ing] like you can do more” was a constant point of reflection for workers in both provinces. In Montréal, participants expressed frustration that they could see positive social changes one day, only for them to disappear from view the next. Helena also saw a conflict between the emotional “moments with people” she found impactful and a (funding-related) “addiction to ... innovation.” Furthermore, in contexts where minor gains are overshadowed by the presence of ongoing human suffering and exclusion, there is an ongoing need to care not only for others but also for oneself. This additional self-care work is essential in order to suppress the pervasive sense of obligation and urgency that drives people to work continuously and relentlessly until they burn out.

CULTIVATING AND QUANTIFYING NIMBLENESS

Linked to the “start-up” mentality of intense, competitive, and constantly innovating work, a feeling of responsibility was also linked to the social justice mandates each organization maintained. Mindi described the interconnectedness of issues of homelessness and broader global issues facing youth, including sexual violence, religious and national fundamentalism, and police violence, as well as the inability of the organization she worked for to do all things for all young people. Thérèse shared feelings that these issues could seem insurmountable to a singular organization, network, or individual, and it was difficult for many workers to see where their own individual daily tasks could contribute to these vast global structures of social inequality. This sense of personal responsibility, as well as the responsibility to care for others in an organization or network, carried into fund-seeking activities as well. When failing to receive funding or broker a partnership, extra work also had to be done to separate it from a personal sense of urgency and responsibility. In Toronto, Marianne described this as a need to try to mitigate her feelings of being “personally invested” in the success or failure of funding applications or outcomes in a particular program:

The thing is I found, of late, I was feeling very personally invested. Like so personally invested, then I was like, oh wait a second, yes, this is very important work, but it's also just a job. To just step back a little bit and be like, what's innovative about this has to be our willingness to be wrong and to try other things.

For her, this “willingness to be wrong” was necessary to continue to be nimble and adaptive, but also required the recognition that this was “just a job” and not a personal failure if things were not going well, or if organizations were seeing rapid social change. In fact, she saw this risk-taking as key to her organization's success in making “impacts.” In Montréal, Philippe echoed how hard it was to not take a failure to receive a grant or funding for an especially exciting or innovative program extremely personally, and as a reflection that he had not been working hard enough. When a funding opportunity did not pan out, he said it was easy for him and other workers to “get mad ... there is [sic] a lot of emotional links to what we do.”

Finally, this emotional work, within a neoliberal nonprofit sphere, may lead organizations to request the help of outsiders (who may offer an objective perspective, often for a fee) who can work to quantify the impacts or outcomes the organization is producing. A common player in the neoliberal restructuring of nonprofit organizations (Côté & Simard, 2012), consultants are often hired to communicate with boards of directors, funders, and other stakeholders, particularly those who may not be familiar with the work itself. These outsiders highlight the organization's key objectives and work to achieve them, but often in abstract generalizable terms that funders and people outside of the organization can easily understand (field notes, 2017, 2018). This translation work on the part of consultants (and sometimes on the part of an organization's actual staff) functions to erase or smooth over much of the difficult work that people describe as essential to the change-making processes they are participating in. Indeed, over time, the consultants themselves may shift or change the way that organizations think and talk about their work, emphasizing ways to increase productivity, efficiency, and public interest, which may be at odds with the organization's culture (Côté & Simard, 2012). While some people saw hired consultants as having some potential utility in terms of better understanding their organization's contributions to larger social change goals, people also felt the consultants' generalized reports failed to capture necessary pieces of what made an organization special, impactful, or effective.

CONCLUSION: RE-INSPIRATION AND RESTRUCTURING VALUE

While this may paint a bleak picture of the neoliberal pressures that face many nonprofit organizations hoping to make important social shifts today, it is not occurring without resistance. There is an effort and awareness from participants in this study that aims to resist values that are placed on (and displace) certain forms of labour in ways that instead choose to highlight care, support, and emotion within these spaces. In Toronto, this was framed as valuing the work that gives hope, inspires (or "re-inspires"), or builds up solidarity with others. Sometimes this does take the form of hand-holding, or "walking alongside" someone (for example, sending an email to someone who is struggling, encouraging someone to take a day off), though the day-to-day reality of this work is not always in line with official organizational definitions of "partnership building." It was presented as highlighting "human" or authentic work, rather than simply bringing someone on board to your message or mission as an organization (though there may be intersections with this branding and messaging work). It was "supporting the people that we care about, because we care about them as people." Some people were also actively seeking to acknowledge and value this work before individuals burned out and were unable to continue their work. As Marianne conveyed to staff during a focus group discussion, "I just want you to know, I appreciate the work you do every day."

In a focus group at the Toronto organization, several participants articulated that while the work of "re-inspiration" was not an official goal (as communicated in their organizational mandate), they wanted to make it their number one "stated goal." They understood much of the work they did as re-inspiring, helping, and supporting those who may have once wanted to really make social change happen but had lost their ability, desire, or drive to continue working in these kinds of conditions. Workers described trying to bring re-inspiring work back into their own communities in their day-to-day roles. Marianne was described as doing this work often, particularly with government partners who may feel they cannot push back against restrictive policies. It encompasses fostering hope and making "authentic connections" with others trying to make the same shifts around social issues, to "pull people back so they can see the big picture," (Interview, 2017) to "shine the spotlight" or showcase work that is currently being undervalued, and to say, "you're doing good work, here's some recognition of it, and thank you for your time" (Group Interview, 2018). This was the work done to "inspire people to not only care about the issue but to think and act differently," (Group Interview, 2018) and it was important, particularly with funders, to "find the time and space to re-inspire." Within their own organizations, participants saw their mutual supports as better positioning them to provide the same for others, and that this environment "translates out—when we're able to support each other, then we can better support others." (Group Interview, 2018).

In Montréal, as well, there was a widespread recognition of the value of reflecting on and shifting how work was being understood within the organization. In a mapping exercise, workers described pushing back against what Helena called the “addiction to innovation,” and recognized that reciprocal relationships with different partners and communities meant impacts happen multi-directionally—and organizational strategies must shift to accommodate new knowledge and feedback, including a willingness to be wrong. Similar to Marianne’s “willingness to fail,” workers found vying for particular, measurable outcomes to be limiting; they saw huge possibility in deep reflection and room for seeing human relationships and transformations as “impacts” in and of themselves. While admitting that too much reflection can lead to an organization getting a “little stuck,” they saw it as integral to achieving “real social change” instead of acting as “saviours” or “carrying out charity.” They hoped to make “deep and systemic social transformations” (Field Notes, 2017).

This is a radical re-imagining of what kind of work is necessary to contribute to social change within organizations that may be increasingly pressured to produce evidence and to “emphasize results over processes” (Hasenfeld & Garrow, 2012, p. 302). (It may also revisit strategies that were previously more common in nonprofit organizations.) This shift seems an important one if organizations such as these are to be equipped to actually push for socially just change. Without this shift, organizations will constantly be playing catch-up, both with funders and by “eating their own tails” trying to see concrete social impacts. This invisible, emotional, and supportive labour is clearly necessary for individual workers, organizations, and the achievements of social impacts more broadly. It is the valuation of the work within organizations that contributes to shifts in social policies, practices, and people’s experience and pushing back against the erasure of connections between the daily work of people—the work that goes into maintaining all the moving pieces of an organization—that should be recognized as a key part in the process of contributing to social change.

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