Volunteering vs. Professionalization –
Exploration from a Multiple Organizational Identities Perspective

Karin Kreutzer/Urs Peter Jäger
(both Center for Social Enterprise at the University of St.Gallen)

“The tensions that can exist between volunteers and employee co-workers remain one of the unpleasant secrets of nonprofit organizations.” (Pearce 1993: 142)

“Our volunteers do very valuable work and I appreciate that very much, but we have to become more professional.” (Chairman of a Swiss Health Care association)

Volunteering is widely regarded as a growing phenomenon (Anheier and Salamon 1999) and the "employment" of volunteers as one of the typical traits of nonprofit organizations. Larger volunteer-involving organizations employ also paid staff and the conflict between volunteers and paid employees has not only a long history (Paulwitz 1988) but is also one of the major reasons for volunteers to abandon the organization (Rosenbladt 2000).

So far, volunteering has mainly been empirically analyzed at an individual level, addressing the questions of who volunteers (demographics) (Gaskin and Smith 1997), why individuals volunteer (motives) (Omoto and Snyder 1995; Clary, Snyder et al. 1996) or how volunteers interact, respond to and cope with the organization (organizational behaviour) (Pearce 1993). Researchers have suggested that tensions between volunteers and paid employees are caused by paid staff feeling threatened by volunteers, especially when the volunteers can perform the same functions as paid staff (Pearce 1993; McCurley and Lynch 1997). Yet, these authors agree that job threat is just one aspect in this very complex relationship which needs further theoretical and empirical examination (Pearce 1993; Macduff 1995). Relying on Kelley et al. (2005) we propose volunteering to be understood as an organizational phenomenon. Howlett and Rochester proposed that this “volunteer's way of doing things” might be characterized by basic-democratic structures and non-managerial logics which are expected to be more important than efficiency (Howlett and Rochester 2007). Our findings suggest that the conflict between volunteers and paid staff is not (only) based on job threat but on conflicting ideas about the identity of the organization.

Due to the high level of ambiguity (Drucker 1990; Pearce 1993; Simsa 2001; Anheier 2005; Beyes and Jäger 2005) nonprofit organizations are often characterized by conflicting multiple organizational identities (Golden-Biddle and Rao 1997; Glynn 2000; Young 2001). Conflicting understandings of members about their organizations identity can have significant negative impacts. Jehn et al. (1999), who examined members’ perceived disagreement about what the groups’ real
mission or goal should be, found that “it is the diversity associated with values […] that causes the biggest problems […] in work group performance and morale” (Jehn, Northcraft et al. 1999: 758).

Volunteering has mainly been studied at an individual level so far and organizational identity (Albert and Whetten 1985) seems to be a promising theoretical construct for understanding the peculiarities of this phenomenon at an organizational level and to identify its consequences for the management of volunteer-involving organizations.

We selected 12 different volunteer-involving patient associations from eight European countries and interviewed the chairman and the CEO of each organization. Only this "couple oriented" selection of the interview partners ensured our focus on the tensions between volunteers and paid staff. We also conducted a single case study in one of these associations, interviewing 15 internal and external stakeholders. We conducted narrative interviews, as narratives have been identified as an important source for studying organizational identity (Czarniawska 1997; Humphreys and Brown 2002). Since we were interested in their perception of their organizations identity, our questions have been open, personal and mostly focused on experiences and examples (Mason 2002).

Our paper is structured as such: First, we give a brief review of the literature on volunteering and multiple organizational identities. Second, we present the methods of data collection and data analysis underpinning our qualitative study. Third, we will reflect upon our findings which suggest that the volunteer dimension of organizational identity might conflict with the growing professionalization efforts many nonprofit organizations make (Hwang and Powell 2007). These findings indicate the specificities of the tensions between volunteers and paid staff and illustrate how they evolve. Fourth, concluding our paper, we discuss theoretical and practical implications and consider the limitations of our study.
REFERENCES: