The Right People in the Wrong System: Examining the Tension Between Nonprofit Individuals and Organizational Structure

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THE RIGHT PEOPLE IN THE WRONG SYSTEM: EXAMINING THE TENSION BETWEEN
NONPROFIT INDIVIDUALS AND ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

A Thesis
Presented to the Faculty of the School of Education of the
University of San Francisco

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS
in
Organization and Leadership

By
Erin Vong

Spring 2023
This thesis, written by

Erin Vong

University of San Francisco

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under the guidance of the project committee, and approved by all its members, has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS

In

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(Instructor and Faculty Advisor)

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ABSTRACT

Nonprofit organizations pursue missions of social good while still operating within the confines of systems of oppression, creating a tension between organizational values and operational success. Previous research focuses on the micro-level role of individuals and the macro-level role of ideologies that create these tensions for nonprofit workers in these spaces. Through a qualitative case study, this thesis seeks to uncover the meso-level role of organizational structures in the experiences of nonprofit workers. The research questions that guided this case study were (a) How does one organization present equitable working conditions for its staff? (b) How do staff at this organization experience the working conditions? (c) What kinds of external influences support or challenge these working conditions? Six staff members at a small nonprofit dedicated to social justice storytelling were interviewed about their experiences. Using the theoretical framework of racialized organizations, the study found that the values of a nonprofit and how individuals embody them play an integral role in how a culture develops and is experienced at the organization. An organizational structure was found to be reliant on how the individuals understand and believe it is supposed to operate, and these beliefs are rooted in cultural concepts that can both perpetuate and counter Whiteness and its ideals.
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

“They’re trying their best and they keep blaming themselves for mishaps. I try my best to keep reassuring them that it’s not them, it’s the situation.” This quote from a teacher rattles in my brain every time we face a challenge at work. She was referring to our students struggling with distance learning, but it rings true for so much more. We—educators, activists, nonprofit workers, humans just trying to do good—try our best and often feel we have hardly made any improvements in the quality of life for our communities and ourselves. Wealth and capital in the nonprofit industry are still distributed selectively rather than collectively. Goals and standards are set by metrics that work for capitalism. When change fails, we keep blaming ourselves and our leaders. While individual responsibility matters, I wish we could stop, look around and say: it’s not us, it’s the organization.

Statement of the Problem

Existing research focuses on how individual leaders experience and contribute to addressing issues of racial inequity in the nonprofit space (Fulton et al., 2019). While surveys show that many nonprofit employees perceive a disconnect in nonprofit missions and diverse practices within the workplace (Schwartz et al., 2011), research continues to look specifically at how individual managers navigate their personal tensions (Sandberg & Robichau, 2022) instead of how organizational structures create these environments. While some begin to identify how institutional racism can affect employees of color, specifically Black women (Adesaogun et al., 2015), there is still a general focus on macro-level ideologies affecting micro-level individual actions with an implication of a race-neutral organization in the middle.
In order to better understand how to fundamentally improve the nonprofit worker environment, we must reframe the challenges and issues of management from the individual level to the organizational structure. Individual decisions can perpetuate or disrupt the design of the organization, but placing responsibility solely on individual people ignores the power that organizational structures hold over influencing those decisions. By investigating how workers experience challenges and uncovering how they may recognize and acknowledge the organizational structure as its own entity, we can begin to challenge the foundation of Whiteness that the nonprofit industry was built upon.

**Background and Need**

The first foundations were established in the early 1900s, and “these foundations served as tax shelters so corporations could avoid taxes and descendants could receive their inheritance without paying estate taxes” (Smith, 2007/2017). As early as 1914, these first foundations began using money to further their own causes. The Rockefeller Foundation provided and publicized relief work to Colorado mine workers to reframe the push for unionization; instead of supporting or negotiating with a union, they offered an alternative by providing benefits directly to individuals to placate the workers and ultimately benefiting their own stake in the mining company (Smith, 2007/2017). This set the stage for foundations to use their wealth to maintain capitalist structures that weaken collective bargaining power rather than address the root of the problem under the guise of social welfare. Instead of pursuing advocacy, charity became a tool of capitalism to keep power in the hands of few, including foundations. Decades later, the Tax Reform Act of 1969 created new requirements for private foundations that included a minimum distribution amount, but it also cemented the official 501(c)(3) designation for organizations to receive that foundation funding (Arnsberger et al., 2008). This was followed by a neoliberalist
shift to privatize social welfare, including policies starting in the 1980s that “minimize
dependence on the state by placing responsibility for coping with economic risk on individuals
and families” (Kantor & Lowe, 2013). By moving away from direct aid and toward programs
such as the Earned Income Tax Credit, the attitude toward welfare focused on rewarding people
in the labor market rather than supporting those who struggled to enter it (Kantor & Lowe,
2013). Direct aid to those struggling populations was then left to nonprofit organizations. In their
efforts to address the immediate needs of communities, these organizations perpetuate the
nonprofit industrial complex by incorporating themselves into the same system that leaves
individuals without necessary rights and services. Rather than fully fighting a political problem,
nonprofits seek to address technical ones. Now, what began as three family foundations has
resulted in over 1.8 million registered 501(c)(3) organizations, including 126,873 private
foundations as of 2020 (Candid, 2021).

This meteoric rise of nonprofits, aided by neoliberal tactics, is founded upon Whiteness.
Whiteness is not only the literal description of a person’s race, but an institution that perpetuates
White supremacy by applying ideals that match a dominant White culture over others (Heckler,
2019). Whiteness occurs at all levels, from the individual to societal systems (Heckler, 2019). In
professional and especially nonprofit settings, “White interests may be enforced without
explicitly naming Whiteness” (Ray, 2019). The positionality of White saviors to Black,
Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC) communities, funding White leaders over community-led organizations, and valuing credentials over lived experience are common experiences in the
White spaces of nonprofits (Nickels & Leach, 2021). Combined with neoliberal policies, the
foundation of the modern nonprofit industry is at odds with individual missions to provide social
good and improve the lives of those most marginalized. Neoliberalism is a political ideology that
seeks to move capital and resources away from the government and into the private market to promote competition, increase efficiency, and lower costs for services (Dumas, 2015). In practice, neoliberalism perpetuates economic inequality and reserves wealth for the few, while those who already lack resources and access to education are further pushed out of market profits (Dumas, 2015). Beyond policy, neoliberalism also reinforces a belief that the government bears no responsibility for providing direct aid; instead, individuals should be responsible for their own success, and if they need help, they should turn to other sources—such as nonprofit organizations.

This combination of neoliberal tactics to focus on individual failures instead of institutional challenges (Dumas, 2015) and professional standards based on White, masculine values (Heckler, 2019) has created racialized, organizational structures that, wittingly or not, nonprofit workers maintain. Research shows that these structures create a tension for nonprofits when trying to balance their mission goals with professionalization for survival and growth (Bish & Becker, 2016; Bromley & Orchard, 2016; Jeavons, 2016; Sanders & McClellan, 2014). In particular, ethical management requires separating professional practices rooted in Whiteness that are beneficial for business growth from the moral and social good of supporting charity and community work (Jeavons, 2016). However, research also shows that nonprofit organizations are not more likely to have significantly better work-life policies and programs than for-profit companies despite their missions (Pitt-Catsoupes et al., 2004; Tremblay, 2012). While there are non-monetary practices critical for employee satisfaction and positive relationships (Selden & Sowa, 2015), the wage gap between nonprofit and for-profit work continues to increase and may be a factor in employment choices and work satisfaction for future workforces (McGinnis, 2011).
As of 2016, nonprofit workers accounted for 10.2% of the entire U.S. private workforce (Salamon & Newhouse, 2019). There is incentive to keep an industry that employs over 10% of private workers stable and even growing. The nonprofit organization is shaped by institutional pressures rooted in Whiteness that affect high-level economic planning and funding access all the way through to employee expectations and working environments (Heckler, 2019). While these pressures may also be maintained or enforced by individuals within the space, the organization itself is designed to impede individual efforts at change. The nonprofit industry is able to maintain the status quo by setting standards rooted in Whiteness and using neoliberal strategies that center an individual’s actions to avoid looking at how the organizational structure is racialized too. In a system founded by wealthy, White families seeking to protect their wealth rather than radically improve all lives, organizations play a role as much as the individuals in it.

**Purpose of the Study**

The intent of this thesis project is to conduct a case study in order to understand how nonprofit employees in different roles experience and respond to organizational constraints when trying to create equitable conditions for their work. This study takes place at a small nonprofit with a mission toward advancing human rights through storytelling and examines the tensions between mission goals and professional standards, with the goal of understanding how organizational structures can minimize or increase this tension.

**Research Questions**

Three research questions guide this study:

1. How does one organization present equitable working conditions for its staff?
2. How do staff at this organization experience the working conditions?
3. What kinds of external influences support or challenge these working conditions?
Theoretical Framework/Rationale

The theory of racialized organizations is used as a theoretical framework for this thesis. This theory began with scholars attempting to fill the gap where racial inequality was ignored at the organizational level (Wooten & Couloute, 2017). As formalized by Ray (2019), the theory of racialized organizations contains four tenets that describe how meso-level actors perpetuate macro-level ideologies onto micro-level experiences: “racialized organizations expand or inhibit agency, legitimate the unequal distribution of resources, treat Whiteness as a credential, and decouple organizational procedures in ways that typically advantage dominant racial groups.” Nickels and Leach (2021) build upon these tenets by viewing nonprofit structures as foundationally White spaces rather than race-neutral. This theory is used because it identifies organizations as active players in perpetuating racial inequality rather than neutral sites for schemas to develop. This framework creates space to move away from individual responsibility and focus on institutional challenges.

Limitations of the Study

This study has a few limitations including the sample size and positionality of the researcher. The organization at the center of this study has a particularly small full-time staff with a specific focus on human rights advocacy through storytelling, so generalization of the findings may not be as applicable to larger organizations or different missions. The organization has also gone through two rounds of vision planning with consultants dedicated to unraveling institutional issues both externally and internally, so staff reflections may be primed for deeper discussions unlike other organizations that are still surfacing these topics. As an employee who has worked in entry-level through director roles at this organization, I am deeply connected to
the team and must carefully consider how my relationships with all staff members may influence the interviews I conduct in positive and negative ways.

**Significance of the Study**

Nonprofit organizations are continuing to grow and expand alongside crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing wealth disparity, climate change, and more that are affecting the human workers running them, especially those who identify as BIPOC. This study may be of interest to nonprofit leaders seeking to better support their teams in general and particularly in the face of these issues. The findings may help them differentiate the impact of their individual decisions against existing organizational structures and how these structures may exacerbate these crises instead of alleviating them. Nonprofit employees at all levels may also feel empowered by better understanding the role of the organization and avoid taking on responsibilities that are solely in service to maintaining the structure instead of the organizational mission or their own well-being. The findings may also be of interest to researchers in the field of nonprofit administration who still view organizations as race-neutral environments rather than active contributors to racial inequality. This study aims to provide a perspective on the challenge of creating equitable work environments through the lens of racialized organizations that could contribute to more human-centered and compassion-driven practices for nonprofit employees.
CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Founded upon White ideologies and capitalist wealth hoarding, the modern nonprofit industry experiences tension between mission-driven ideals and an organizational structure that is inherently racialized and inequitable. This translates into nonprofit working experiences that can feel at odds with their pursuit of community and common good. As an industry that employs over 10% of the U.S. private workforce, these issues can have real impacts on the population at large (Salamon & Newhouse, 2019). This thesis focuses on the struggle nonprofit leaders face in creating equitable and rewarding work environments under structural constraints, and how this is experienced by workers at all levels.

The claim for this literature review is that racialized organizations are structured to prevent individual leaders from building environments that center their mission and values over capitalist gains and inequality. Four sets of evidence demonstrate that (a) nonprofit organizations are centered as White spaces; (b) nonprofits experience tension when combining their mission with a capitalist competition for resources; (c) nonprofits face difficulties compensating their employees fairly; and (d) leaders in nonprofits, especially leaders of color, find it difficult to advance equity and create supportive environments for their teams. Using the theory of racialized organizations to frame this body of research, we are able to see how organizational structure plays a deeper role in these working environments rather than individual leadership alone.

Theoretical Framework

The theory of racialized organizations claims that organizations are racial structures and play a critical role in how race is experienced and perceived. This differs from traditional strategic organization scholarship that views organizations as race-neutral spaces, and race and
ethnicity scholarship that dismisses the influence organizations have on the construction of race. This section covers a brief history of the theory of racialized organizations which includes Wooten and Couloute’s (2017) examination of how organizations produce and experience racial inequality, Ray’s (2019) scholarship developing the racialized organization theory that proposes organizations are foundational racial structures, and Nickels and Leach (2021) arguing for the use of these critical frameworks to examine the White, masculine nonprofit industry. This body of scholarship is important because it demonstrates the impact that organizational structure has on how individuals operate within these systems. This framing makes space to look beyond any individual person acting in bad faith and focuses on how racial inequities are embedded into the fabric of institutions.

Traditional organization theories separate the experience of race from the structure of organizations onto the individuals who inhabit the organizations and how these people experience organizations because of their own race, or the race of others within the space. Wooten and Couloute (2017) started the beginnings of racialized organizations theory by proposing that racial inequality is also produced and experienced at the organizational level. The need for this scholarship arose from the lack of research on the role of organizations in perpetuating racial ideologies. Their proposal responds to an earlier critique from Wooten (2006) that the field of strategic organization restricts its understanding of race to individuals and misses the full impact of race. This argument challenges the idea that only people can be actors in racial inequality and examines how organizational systems and structures advance race-based power and legitimacy. This original scholarship is important because it does not ignore the power that individual people hold when perpetuating racial inequality, but it looks at the organizations that
help maintain that power for people and how organizations can influence each other. This level of inquiry is necessary to address and dismantle racial inequality in comprehensive ways.

Building on this foundation, Ray (2019) developed a theory of racialized organizations that views race as a crucial component of organizations with four key tenets. According to Ray (2019), “racialized organizations expand or inhibit agency, legitimate the unequal distribution of resources, treat Whiteness as a credential, and decouple organizational procedures in ways that typically advantage dominant racial groups” (p. 46). Ray (2019) expands on the arguments of Wooten and Couloute (2017) to create an understanding of how organizations are not separate or race-neutral spaces, but rather part of a meso-level system that interacts with the macro-level racial ideologies and micro-level schemas that individuals experience. In this distinction, Ray (2019) suggests that the institutionalization of race happens at the meso level instead of the macro level because it serves as the connection between schemas and access to resources. This formal theory of racialized organizations adjusts the assumption that racial discrimination and inequities are exceptional and assumes they are built into the foundation of organizations. By recognizing the basis of race in organizations, researchers can better understand how organizations both undermine or support access to resources and equal rights. This understanding provides a useful framework for examining industries made up of these organizations and individuals who operate within them.

Another addition to this field of thought is represented by Nickels and Leach (2021) who argue for the use of critical frameworks to disrupt the nonprofit industry as a White and masculine space. Like Ray (2019), their understanding of the nonprofit industry is dependent on the idea that an organization and an industry can be conceptualized as a White space, driven by race rather than simply a vessel for holding racist schema. While they focus on critical race
theory, feminist theory, and intersectionality as their guiding frameworks, the basis of their argument is rooted in a theory of racialized organizations. They view nonprofit structures as inherently White rather than race-neutral. These “White spaces” look different in individual organizations, but they largely center White people in positions of leadership and saviors of the BIPOC populations they serve, disproportionately award White-led nonprofits in receiving funding for operations and devalue lived experiences over professional credentials (Nickels & Leach, 2021). These spaces are part of the power system that marginalizes BIPOC, women, and other groups. This addition to a theory of racialized organizations is important because it examines not only how race affects individuals within an industry, but how the racial structure is part of that process and exemplifies the four tenets developed by Ray (2019). Nickels and Leach (2021) suggest that despite more BIPOC and women entering the nonprofit leadership space, the racialized structures of nonprofit organizations will continue to impede their power and ability to advance change until their experiences are embedded into the organizational structures.

In summary, the theory of racialized organizations describes the critical meso-level piece of a macro-, meso-, and micro-level system that perpetuates racial inequality. Unpacking this meso-level space, Wooten and Couloute (2017) argued that organizations play an active role in the ways individuals experience racial inequality, Ray (2019) developed a formal theory of racialized organizations that describes how these structures institutionalize race as the agent between ideology and schema, and Nickels and Leach (2021) exemplified the tenets of racialized organizations through their examination of the racialized nonprofit industry. Related to this theoretical literature is a body of research that demonstrates how the nonprofit sector is rooted in Ray’s (2019) four tenets of racialized organizations. The next sections of this review of the literature describe this research in detail and makes the claim that organizations are not only
affected by macro-level ideologies or containers for micro-level schema, but they also serve as actors that advance ideologies and influence schema in ways that prevent individuals from creating institutional change.

**Nonprofits as White Spaces**

The nonprofit industry is rooted in standards and expectations as set by White institutions, evidenced by the history of its foundation and research into overlapping neoliberalism and White supremacy. This section reviews research including an essay covering the foundation of the nonprofit industry (Smith, 2007/2017), a case study examining the neoliberal governmentality used to address racial inequity (Dumas, 2015), and an article using critical race and gender theories to identify the institutional forces of Whiteness and masculinity (Heckler, 2019). This scholarship is important because when taken together, these studies highlight the influences of White institutional ideals within the nonprofit industry, leading to a tension between pursuing capitalistic economic goals and pursuing missions of social good.

In her introduction to *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*, Smith (2007/2017) outlines the beginnings of the nonprofit industry with wealthy White family foundations in the early 1900s, primarily designed to avoid excessive taxation. Smith then uses the Rockefeller Foundation as an example of charitable organizations using their money and power to maintain capitalism and White supremacy under the guise of social good. She describes the way the Rockefeller Foundation responded to the Colorado Fuel and Iron workers’ strike by publicizing the relief they provided to individual workers while attempting to block publications critical of the family, especially following the Ludlow Massacre of 1914. As ordered by Colorado Fuel and Iron, several Colorado miners were murdered in the Ludlow Massacre in order to end the strike (Smith, 2007/2017). At this time, John D.
Rockefeller Jr. held 40 percent of the conglomerate, and the Rockefeller Foundation sprang into action in order to protect the family’s reputation as well as quell union action (Smith, 2007/2017). Smith identifies how the Rockefeller Foundation secretary used communications to redirect attention away from union action and criticism of the family; speakers were invited to deny claims that the massacre had happened at all, media were asked not to publish critiques of Rockefeller, and the Foundation’s direct aid to individuals was repeatedly highlighted in order to turn the narrative toward the charity of the Rockefellers. This attempt to cover up the aftermath of the strike is an example of the early beginnings of charity used to disguise capitalist gains.

Smith names some critics at the time who respond to the Rockefeller Foundation and others by calling for more regulation of private foundations rather than dismantling them. She argues that this negative publicity may have been an inadvertent catalyst of foundations covering up their motives by directing their funds toward intermediaries who will do the work for them. As growing laws and regulations led to the Tax Reform Act of 1969 finally restricting foundation giving, these intermediaries turned into 501(c)3 organizations reliant on foundation support, creating an industry that receives billions in funding each year. Her research shows that modern foundations tend to direct money toward policy reform or education with an expectation of professional standards that is beyond grassroots organizing. By focusing on reform and education, the nonprofit industry can maintain the overarching system that provides charitable support for individuals instead of radical community development. Reform does not necessitate dismantling the system, while centering education spotlights how individuals can improve their status within the system. Nonprofits can now promote the ways they serve individuals and move toward social good without providing a path toward fundamental change. Smith maps out how this origin of family foundations, created to shelter their wealth while creating a charitable image
for their corporations, has turned into an entire industry covering for White supremacy by primarily funding work that avoids structural change. These origins lead to a neoliberal governmentality that Dumas (2015) explores by looking at how the government seeks and supports nonprofit short-term solutions rather than long-term political change for issues of inequity.

Dumas (2015) uses the Obama Administration’s My Brother’s Keeper (MBK) initiative as a case study for the neoliberal approach to avoiding political change in order to advance racial equity. MBK was presented in 2014 as a partnership between the Obama administration, private businesses, and philanthropic organizations that would not be funded by the government. The group agreed to fund $200 million over the course of 5 years to start a range of programs directed at young men of color. In introducing the program, President Obama specifically listed the ways the government could not influence young children’s lives and instead emphasized the impact of parents and individuals. Dumas (2015) used this speech as an example of neoliberal governmentality, defined as a collective understanding that problems can and should be solved outside of politics, using technical answers instead of grassroots organizing or restructuring government to enact change. This framing also connects to the private foundation preference for funding policy reform as noted by Smith (2007/2017). While the MBK initiative has specific goals that could be beneficial to young men of color, the framing suggests that these programs should not be a public good, but private—specifically, nonprofit—offerings that are then reliant on external funding instead of government resources. By shifting the focus off structural change or a collective pursuit, this turns responsibility onto individual organizations and people. Dumas (2015) notes that this implies that poor people of color are suffering from their own failures rather than victims of white supremacy, caused by cultural issues within their communities that
can be fixed by private solutions instead of institutional barriers imposed by racism and capitalism. Here, nonprofits funded by private businesses and foundations will be used to cover up deeper problems by providing temporary solutions. He concludes by calling for more critical engagement with issues of inequity that center politics of redistribution, the structures that cause inequities, and reframing communities of color away from problems to be solved by more capitalist practices. While this is only one specific example of an initiative crafted from neoliberal ideals and rooted in white supremacy, it is representative of the industry as a whole and how the nonprofit industry has become a mask for problems that need to be solved with systemic change. This context is crucial in understanding how Heckler (2019) has identified the institutions of Whiteness and masculinity in the modern nonprofit industry.

Building on the origin of family foundations and the neoliberal approach to nonprofit work, Heckler (2019) uses Critical Whiteness Studies (CWS) and Multiple Masculinities (MM) to define Whiteness and Masculinity as institutions embedded into the development of the nonprofit industry. Like Smith (2007/2017), he cites the Tax Reform Act of 1969 as an “isomorphic institutional pressure” that sets standards of professionalization rooted in ideals of Whiteness and Masculinity due to the need for funding to survive as an organization. While he cites some studies that show professionalization has improved nonprofit access to funding and resources, there is also research that shows this limits the nonprofit’s ability to better impact their beneficiaries, resulting in a tension between nonprofit mission and professionalization. Heckler (2019) uses Whiteness and Masculinity to explain this tension. When funding is held in the hands of White men, they set the professional standards dominated by White, masculine ideals. Heckler identifies how White men are consciously and subconsciously associated with professionalism and expertise in a self-perpetuating cycle of seeing White men in leadership
roles and experiencing economic success. In the workplace, this looks like BIPOC and women fighting stereotype threats while White men receive accolades; what is seen as creative, hardworking, and dedicated in White men becomes disorganized, lazy, or distracted in the other (Heckler, 2019). BIPOC workers are then forced to emulate Whiteness through perfectionism, efficiency, and hiding cultural markers in order to become race-neutral. As organizations find better access to funding by conforming to these ideals, they further embed the institutions of Whiteness and Masculinity into their organizational structure by rewarding and hiring employees who match them. This is also reflected in the expectations of managers who are trained to prioritize the short-term threats of funding loss over the long-term results of race and gender equality in their work, bringing a business-like attitude to the sector for social good. Like the MBK initiative that Dumas (2015) studied, advancing any form of equity turns into a private, nonprofit solution that focuses on funding and organizational survival instead of systemic transformation. Rather than the fault of modern individual leaders, this is the result of creating the nonprofit industry from organizational structures that maintain Whiteness and Masculinity over commitments to radical change. Heckler (2019) concludes that these institutions have formed structural barriers that make it impossible for people of color to fully bring their diverse experiences into the nonprofit space. Instead of focusing on access to an institutionally inequitable space, he suggests that justice requires dismantling the institutions entirely.

In summary, the modern nonprofit industry is rooted in neoliberalism and white supremacy that influence organizational survival and professional standards. Smith (2007/2017) tracks the foundation of the nonprofit industry to wealthy white families covering their wealth and maintaining capitalism, Dumas (2015) identifies the modern neoliberal framing that allows the nonprofit industry to grow, and Heckler (2019) focuses on the institutions of Whiteness and
Masculinity that form the structures of nonprofit organizations. Taken together, this body of research shows that the professionalization of nonprofits come from neoliberal and White-driven ideals, resulting in organizations that are designed to maintain oppressive structures while keeping communities of color from meaningful change. As most nonprofits pursue missions dedicated to social good and advancing equity for all, they run into a tension between their goals and these professional structures and standards driven by white supremacy.

**Nonprofit Professional and Mission Values**

Research demonstrates that nonprofits experience tension when trying to reconcile their mission with professionalization. The business practices driven by White ideals of efficiency and success are often at odds with the social good that nonprofits are trying to further or uphold. This research includes a study of how professionalization influences codes of conduct in the nonprofit sector (Bromley & Orchard, 2016), a case study that finds nonprofit-specific elements to managerial expectations (Bish & Becker, 2016), an ethnography that examines how nonprofit practitioners reframe business practices to fit into their mission values (Sanders & McClellan, 2014), and a literature review that illustrates what ethical management looks like in ethical organizations (Jeavons, 2016). When taken together, these studies display the fundamental issues that nonprofits face when trying to combine their social values with professional norms in running an organization.

Bromley and Orchard (2016) investigated whether nonprofit codes of conduct or ethical codes are being influenced by external forces rather than solely created for organizational accountability. They were responding to existing research that focused on how these policies can enhance efficiency and address issues of misconduct within organizations. They were also filling in a gap to explore what motivated nonprofit associations to adopt these codes of conduct. They
applied a quantitative analysis of 45 state nonprofit associations from 1994 through 2011, focusing on the 24 that ended up creating or adopting codes of conduct in this time period. Bromley and Orchard noted that the first code of conduct only emerged in 1994, while the percentage of associations adopting similar codes grew rapidly from 16.6% in 2000 to 55.8% in 2011. Using models to test how different factors may be associated with the likelihood of adding a code of conduct, they found that three indicators of professionalization were correlated with an increase in code adoption: the proportion of existing state associations with codes, the number of nonprofit graduate degree programs in the state, and the number of publications devoted to the nonprofit industry, all lending legitimization to the field. Given the timing of increased code adoption against the longer history of misconduct in the nonprofit sector, they suggest these policies are not solely motivated by issues of fraud and misbehavior, or they likely would have appeared much sooner. Bromley and Orchard conclude that the institutional context of nonprofit professionalization and neoliberal values of self-regulation cannot be ignored as a potential correlation. They suggest that focusing on the environments these codes emerge from can help researchers understand how they can best be designed and implemented to ensure adherence and compatibility with the specific issues that nonprofits face—namely, a lack of resources to develop codes internally within organizations, and the diverse missions and values that nonprofits pursue. This challenge nonprofits face relates to the work of Bish and Becker (2016) who examine how nonprofit managers must live up to expectations specific to their industry.

While Bromley and Orchard (2016) focused on high-level code adoption within nonprofit associations, Bish and Becker (2016) looked at managerial capabilities and standards in nonprofit organizations. Though their study used an Australian nonprofit organization, issues of professionalization across the western, settler-colonial world still relate to the United States-
centric issues described in this paper. Bish and Becker wanted to compare the requirements of managers between the nonprofit and for-profit sectors and if they differed given the professionalized expectations of nonprofit organizations. They interviewed 21 managers from the head of department, executive manager, and team leader levels at an Australian nonprofit based in the capital city of one state. This nonprofit was selected based on its size (approximately 250 employees) and increasing confusion around management due to organizational growth. The results of the interviews were examined using a general framework on leadership behavior developed by Yukl (2012) that categorized behaviors into four codes: task-oriented, relations-oriented, change-oriented, and external. As they coded the responses, two new categories specific to nonprofits emerged that did not fit into existing categories: personal knowledge and experience, and nonprofit orientation. They found that the most effective managers in nonprofits were expected to be able to empathize and address the impact of their decisions on others in a way for-profit managers were not, likely related to the social good aspect of nonprofit work. Bish and Becker conclude that while nonprofits share enough professional values with the for-profit industry to be examined using traditional frameworks, there are still aspects of the nonprofit experience that need to be addressed separately. Going deeper, we look at how nonprofit practitioners attempt to combine the business-like and mission-driven aspects of their work in Sanders and McClellan’s study (2016).

From state-level association codes of conduct (Bromley & Orchard, 2016) to managerial expectations in nonprofits (Bish & Becker, 2016), we see that nonprofit policies and expectations are both influenced by professionalization as determined outside of the organization as well as the mission-driven ideals of their work. Sanders and McClellan (2014) address this tension more explicitly in their research on how nonprofits manage business-like expectations with their
mission values. They studied how nonprofit practitioners describe and define practices that are driven by professionalized goals in ways that work for their organizational goals. Sanders and McClellan (2014) conducted an ethnographic study of the National Sports Center for the Disabled (NSCD) that had grown from a one-person project to, at the time of the study, 25 full-time staff members and a budget of $5 million, putting them in a place that was both successful and still in constant need of fundraising to sustain that growth. The findings showed that employees at all levels were quick to describe NSCD as business-like due to the need for funding to keep operations in place, but they were also explicit that they were a business and a social cause at the same time. This was most evident when they reframed the way they spoke about standard business practices: “return on investment” became “impact,” “profit” became “success,” and the “bottom line” was the ability to continue pursuing the mission. Sanders and McClellan (2014) suggest that this rewording of processes may be a way of ignoring the tension between professionalized values and mission values in nonprofit work and re-legitimates this business-centered logic. They believe that interrogating these terms and acknowledging the tension may allow for generative transformations in how nonprofits talk about their work and organize their structures. This potential for change leads us to Jeavons’ work (2016) in defining ethical management in ethical organizations.

Jeavons (2016) conducted a literature review of how ethical management is defined and implemented in the nonprofit sector, focusing on how the industry implies organizations are inherently ethical due to their missions centered on social good. He separates “professional ethics” as a focus on “good for business” from moral traditions that focus on the common good and states that nonprofits are in a position to reflect the moral standard over the professional one, as driven by their believed origin in producing work that leads to social good. Jeavons identifies
five ethical ideals that his research shows are present—or should be present—in the ethical management of ethical organizations: integrity, openness, accountability, service, and charity. In order to translate those ideals into operational values rather than individual ones, he draws on prior organizational culture research. Where some may focus on the conventions and routines, Schein (1985) describes “the substance of culture” that are the values these practices actually represent. Jeavons uses this to summarize how the focus should not solely be on an individual manager’s behavior but rather the way they maintain ethical standards of how the organization operates. This includes building a structure that rewards the five ethical ideals over productivity and profit, creating a space for employees to feel safe sharing the realities and challenges of their work, even when it means admitting that something that may be most useful for the mission may not be the most profitable. Where Bish and Becker (2016) found that employees were rewording business practices to match their mission values and ignoring the tension, Jeavons adds onto their research by suggesting that an ethical organization can only operate if it interrogates that tension and how those business practices fit into ethical ideals.

In summary, nonprofits experience a specific kind of friction between the business practices they need to run efficiently and the ethical standards their missions demand. These practices are tied to the professionalization of an organization for economic sustainability over the more grassroots and radical approaches that nonprofit missions are often founded upon. Bromley and Orchard (2016) show how the tension starts through the way professionalization influences codes of conduct in the nonprofit sector, Bish and Becker (2016) define nonprofit-specific elements to managerial expectations that add to the tension, Sanders and McClellan (2014) identify the way practitioners ignore this tension by reframing business practices to fit into their mission values, and Jeavons (2016) illustrates what ethical practices actually look like
in ethical organizations when confronting this tension. Taken together, this body of research shows how fundamental this friction is to the nonprofit sector, as well as how difficult it can be for organizations to address it. There is still a gap in learning more about how staff at varying levels experience this tension in relation to each other, but identifying this friction is key. Related to this industry-specific tension is research showing nonprofits are not generally better at creating policies and practices that benefit and value their employees due to this tension.

**Nonprofit Practices and Employee Experiences**

While many nonprofits feature a mission centered around supporting individuals or improving a community, research shows that nonprofit organizations are not more likely to create better comprehensive work-life policies and programs than for-profit companies for their employees. This research includes a data analysis of the 1998 Business Work-Life Study that was the first to show the similarities and differences between nonprofit and for-profit benefits (Pitt-Catsouphes et al., 2004), a mixed-methods study that looks at support from different sectors of public service (Tremblay, 2012), a survey that examines the relationship between high performance work practices and nonprofit employee turnover (Selden & Sowa, 2015), and a data analysis of what Generation Y employees value from nonprofit employers (McGinnis, 2011).

This research is important because when taken together, these studies display a disconnect between the community-building aspect of nonprofit missions and their ability to compensate employees competitively and treat them humanely in a capitalist society.

The 1998 Business Work-Life Study was one of the largest studies of how work-life policies and programs are implemented across U.S. organizations. Pitt-Catsouphes et al. (2004) used this study to examine how work-life policies differ between nonprofit and for-profit companies and discover what factors may influence higher likelihoods of adopting these
programs. They selected eight policies and programs to compare the industries: “flexible work arrangements, policies related to leaves of absence, childcare supports, elder care supports, supports for employees with teenagers, Employee Assistance Programs, parenting seminars, and health care insurance” (Pitt-Catsouphes et al., 2004) and found statistically significant differences in most. Of note, nonprofits were more likely to offer gradual returns to work from leave or compressed schedules, but less likely to allow work-from-home opportunities. Nonprofits were more likely to offer extended parental leave options beyond 26 weeks, but less likely to pay for any of those leaves. Nonprofits were more likely to provide on-site or near-site childcare options, but less likely to reimburse for childcare costs incurred from working extra hours. Nonprofits and for-profits had the same likelihood of offering health insurance. Pitt-Catsouphes et al. then looked at variables that may predict the scope of work-life policies and programs and found three statistically significant factors: the larger number of U.S. employees, the percentage of women in executive positions, and higher scores on the Commitment of the Workplace to Workforce Diversity and Work-Life Issues Scale. For-profit or nonprofit status did not have a significant impact. These results demonstrate that while nonprofits and for-profits may differ in the specific ways they offer work-life policies and programs, there was no statistical correlation between nonprofit status and a greater number or quality of programs. While nonprofit organizations often highlight their service toward greater social good, this suggests there is nothing inherent to the nonprofit industry that systematically improves the employee experience. The authors suggest that other factors, particularly women holding executive positions and the organizational commitment to workforce diversity, may have greater impact than profit status. Instead of the organizational structure determining a better work-life balance, it appears that individuals may play a significant role in developing these environments.
This implies that the nonprofit organizational structure may be part of the problem rather than the fundamental solution. These results are confirmed by a Canadian study comparing the social economy sector (defined similarly to nonprofit work in the United States) to three public service industries (Tremblay, 2012).

Similar to Pitt-Catsouphes et al. (2004), Tremblay (2012) looked at work-life balances across different sectors in Québec, Canada to find differences and similarities and factors that may drive them. She used surveys to investigate how employees felt about any personal sacrifices they made for work and how supported they felt by supervisors in terms of work-life balance. The study processed data from 164 police employees, 418 social work employees, 144 nursing employees, and 423 employees in the social economy sector. In Québec, the social economy industry is comprised of a combination of cooperatives and nonprofit organizations similar to the nonprofit sector in the United States. The results found that overall, employees feel stronger support for work-life balance from the social economy sector as compared to policing, nursing, and social work. At first glance, this feels contradictory to the study by Pitt-Catsouphes et al. (2004). However, Tremblay (2012) designed responses around employee feelings, such as, “I have the feeling that my superior (manager, coordinator) is supportive in terms of work-family balance,” in contrast to the previous study that looked at specific policies and programs in place. In follow-up comments, some respondents also mentioned that they believed that verbal affirmations and programmatic support were a method to compensate for lower wages, confirming the results of the 1998 Business Work-Life Study. As discussed by Pitt-Catsouphes et al. (2004), nonprofits are more likely to offer certain opportunities for balance or flexibility in time management; however, they are less likely to pay or compensate for them. This could explain the feeling of support that these employees reported without contradicting other study
results. Tremblay (2012) concludes by noting the importance that informal support, the type that comes from feeling supported directly by supervisors and colleagues rather than formal policies, plays in employee perception of work-life balance in the survey results. This may suggest that policies and programs may be better implemented in an environment that is already supportive. This positive view of emotionally supportive workplaces instead of wage and monetary compensation relates to the research of Selden and Sowa (2015) studying voluntary turnover at nonprofits.

Work-life balance can have an effect on voluntary turnover at nonprofits, and Selden and Sowa (2015) examined how high performance work practices (HPWP) may contribute to or prevent this. HPWP come from high performance work systems designed to invest in and enhance human capital to make an organization more competitive, primarily in the for-profit sector. These practices aim to decrease voluntary turnover and increase consistency within an organization. Selden and Sowa (2015) applied these practices to the nonprofit sector by analyzing survey responses from 162 executive directors of human service nonprofits, representing eight states across the West, Midwest, Northeast, and South of the United States. Twelve HPWP measures were used to predict voluntary turnover, and the results mainly showed that HPWP cannot be grouped as a singular category. While some HWHP factors were connected to voluntary turnover, such as hiring based on competencies and the use of performance appraisals, Selden and Sowa (2015) found that four other practices showed a significant association with lower voluntary turnover: onboarding, leadership succession, compensation, and employee relations. Onboarding and leadership succession were specific to staffing practices that allowed for more attention to recruitment and preparing employees; not training them in specific skills but spending time integrating them into their teams. Similarly, the
positive employee relations were due to working environments that were supportive, relating to the feelings of support that Tremblay (2012) noted in her research of positive work-life practices in organizations. Compensation was statistically significant but not as impactful as the other three factors, which could be connected to the previous studies that found nonprofits are more likely to provide nonmonetary support in ways that enhance work-life balance; higher salaries may not be an option and thus a less important factor. The authors conclude that individual high performance work practices should be implemented more carefully and in relationship to each other to ensure that they do not influence higher voluntary turnover at organizations. These results are important to the work of McGinnis (2011) who looks at the values of Generation Y in the nonprofit workforce.

While Selden and Sowa (2015) examined the effects of specific high performance work practices, McGinnis (2011) honed in on how the nonprofit sector compensates Generation Y employees in particular and how it provides or ignores the standards they value. Using the 2001-2006 U.S. Census Bureau’s American Community Survey, she analyzed wage differentials across employees 30 or younger at the time. McGinnis focused on Generation Y as the incoming generation of working employees and potentially shaping the workforce landscape based on their needs and values. Her findings show that a larger percentage of Generation Y nonprofit workers held graduate degrees compared to for-profit staff, were majority female (70% of nonprofit employees compared to 51% of for-profit workers) and earned approximately $6,300 less across median salaries as compared to for-profit workers in similar roles. For-profit employees were compensated better for their advanced degrees than nonprofit employees. She also found that while wage equity is still a problem among female and male nonprofit employees, the differential is smaller than the for-profit industry, but notes that this is likely due to the
significant wage gap that male employees face moving from for-profit to nonprofit work, which is a low-paying industry as a whole. Interestingly, the wage penalty for workers of color compared to their White colleagues is not statistically significant among the nonprofit industry. This suggests that nonprofit organizations have roughly flattened racial inequality for salaries, but it does not address how Whiteness may be valued and compensated in other ways. McGinnis (2011) highlights the need for further research into the values of younger workforces and how compensation primarily focuses on numbers rather than treatment of the whole person. While existing nonprofits emphasize nonmonetary support, attitudes toward compensation may be shifting as the wage gap between industries increases. She references another survey report that showed Generation Y employees considered compensation one of the most important factors for employment, and we can see from previous research that nonprofits are more likely to focus on environmental factors than high salaries.

This research demonstrates that nonprofits are likely to place value on building supportive environments for work-life balance, aligned with the industry’s goal toward social good, but they are unable to compensate as competitively as the for-profit industry. This disconnect in comprehensive benefits that include monetary compensation may be an issue for a growing generation affected by capitalism and the need for money to survive. Pitt-Catsouphes et al. (2004) show no statistical correlation between nonprofit organizations and offering better comprehensive work-life policies, Tremblay (2012) shows that the more supportive nonprofit environment may be due to lack of pay, Selden and Sowa (2015) identify specific high performance work practices—including compensation—that support retention at nonprofits, and McGinnis (2011) demonstrates that the values of younger generations of workers may be changing and nonprofits will need to address the wage gap across their industries. Taken
together, this body of research shows that the nonprofit industry may need to rethink how they create an environment for work-life balance that acknowledges the need for monetary compensation while continuing to support their employees in other ways. Individual organizations and employees may already be working to address these issues, but these attitudes are deeply embedded into the structure of the nonprofit industry. Related to this is research that looks at how individual leaders work to create safe and rewarding working environments for their teams in the face of professionalized norms and expectations.

The Nonprofit Leadership Struggle

Nonprofit managers face a unique challenge supporting meaningful work toward a community good in a world shaped by professional standards embedded in capitalism and White ideals of success. Research exploring this challenge includes exploratory interviews that reveal how marketization impacts the experience of nonprofit managers (Sandberg & Robichau, 2022), a survey that looks into how perceptions of organizational diversity affect employee career decisions (Schwartz et al., 2011), a mixed-methods study that shows how leaders of color guide organizations toward racial equity (Fulton et al., 2019), and an ethnography that examines how Black women strategically navigate the inherent White power structure of nonprofits (Adesaogun et al., 2015). This research is important because when taken together, these studies exemplify how nonprofit managers face an institutional barrier to creating change for themselves and their teams and show how they have learned to adapt to these organizational standards rather than changing the structures affecting them.

Sandberg and Robichau (2022) looked at how nonprofit managers are being pulled between the neoliberal marketized standards of organizational success and their interest in meaningful work. They define meaningful work as a common connection between the
organization’s mission and the employee’s personal values, driven by a desire to serve and achieve a greater good. This relates back to Jeavons’ (2016) work on ethical management and how nonprofits have an implicit ethical nature due to their missions for social good. Sandberg and Robichau (2022) interviewed 28 mid- and executive-level managers at nonprofits across the United States to examine how individual managers are responding to their personal callings against market expectations. The findings showed support for the neoliberal marketization of nonprofit work, but also revealed that organizations appear to be reconciling their values with this culture relatively easily. The most prominent examples of marketization included “business-like” rhetoric, flexibility, and performance regimes. Interviewees described molding these features into their mission-aligned work, such as creating quantifiable measures for programs and more flexible work arrangements for employees. The managers also described their meaningful work in ways that generally mirrored the goal-oriented attitude of “enterprise culture,” a standard where all processes and practices are measured by their profitability. This looks similar to a previous study showing how nonprofit employees adapted professionalized language to their mission (Sanders & McClellan, 2014). That said, managers did seek a balance in their work. When the organizational demands were overwhelming or set too high, Sandberg and Robichau (2022) found reports of manipulation, resentment, and burnout among the staff. The authors conclude that it may be beneficial for organizations to set a limit on how much business-like, enterprise culture is infused into nonprofit work in order to preserve the experience of meaningful work, recognizing that individual managers may not have that ability to change standards. The next studies look at difficulties that leaders face when trying to change these institutional, organizational standards.
Previous research has shown how organizational commitments to diversity may have a greater effect on better work-life policies than nonprofit or for-profit status (Pitt-Catsouphes et al., 2004). We also learned that the wage penalty for workers of color among Generation Y nonprofit employees was not statistically significant (McGinnis, 2011). However, the wage penalty only compared employees in similar roles; it did not identify any imbalance in representation at various levels of employment. Schwartz et al. (2011) looked closer at this issue of representation in nonprofit leadership to identify where organizations may fall short in their commitment to diversity and how employees at all levels are affected by this disconnect. Despite 30% of the U.S. population identifying as people of color, up to 84% of nonprofit organizations are led by White staff. Schwartz et al. (2011) implemented a survey with 1,638 participants representing current and former nonprofit employees across the United States to discover how employees view their organizations’ diversity efforts. The results show that more than 70% of employees believe their organization does not do enough to match their commitment of diversity with actions, and employees of color were more also likely than white employees to report negative perspectives on this issue (25% against 16%). Two of the most common themes from responses were this disconnect between talk and action, and the lack of diverse staff at their organizations. The authors highlighted responses that centered around nonexistent training and structures for managers of color to move up to director roles. These issues had a reverberating impact on employee experiences around recruitment and retention, with a significant number of respondents either leaving organizations due to the lack of diversity or considering it in the near future. More than half of all prospective employees and 71% of employees of color referenced organizational diversity as an important value when seeking a new job. The authors summarize three main negative outcomes when organizations fail to match their actions to their values:
inability to attract employees of color, increased employee dissatisfaction, and inability to retain top talent. Schwartz et al. (2011) conclude with suggestions for nonprofit leadership to prioritize in order to address these issues, with a significant focus on developing policies and practices that can not only recruit diverse employees but advance them to positions of senior leadership. The next study looks at how leaders of color in these roles can help their organizations address racial inequality.

While there is significant research on how organizations contribute to social inequality, Fulton et al. (2019) sought to fill a gap and identify how organizations may reduce racial inequality even within predominantly white organizations. They used a quantitative survey analysis to find a connection between leaders of color and whether an organization addressed racial inequality, then an ethnographic case study to review what organizational dynamics contribute to these results. Their sample included 41 community-based organizations that address issues of social and economic inequality. The results showed that there was a significant association between having a paid organizer (leader) of color and an increased likelihood of addressing race-related issues both internally and externally, though in all models, the racial makeup of the board did not indicate any significant relationship. The strongest association came from paid organizers on staff with direct day-to-day access and involvement in the organizational work. Fulton et al. (2019) then looked closer at one predominantly white organization in the Midwest (ELIJAH) to examine the environment that cultivates leaders of color addressing race-related issues. They found a substantial difference in the way ELIJAH’s leaders of color and white leaders perceived their work experience and dealt with issues of race. They demonstrated three main ways leaders of color addressed racial inequality in the internal organization: questioning White-based assumptions, creating and using tools that educate about racial
inequality, and highlighting policies and practices within the organizational culture that may prevent people of color from participating. They also found two main ways leaders of color add external efforts: sharing personal experiences of structural racism with a white audience, and building relationships with other organizations centered in communities of color. However, all of these methods place a heavy burden on people of color creating solutions for their white organizations to enact, rather than white leaders taking up the work themselves. Fulton et al. (2019) conclude that while predominantly white organizations can address racial inequality, they must first create an environment that makes this possible: “a relatively flat hierarchy, a culture of empowering paid organizers, and supportive white leaders” that leads to people of color in higher positions. However, there is still more research needed to understand how these environments are understood by workers of different races, and how flattening a hierarchy and developing a culture of empowerment is experienced by staff at all levels. Fulton et al. (2019) also recommend that predominantly white organizations must acknowledge the burden on leaders of color who do advance in these environments. This burden is examined more closely in a study that focuses on how Black women perceive and navigate the nonprofit industry to achieve upward mobility (Adesaogun et al., 2015).

After looking at how neoliberal marketization more broadly affects managerial experiences (Sandberg & Robichau, 2022) and the importance of diverse staff in nonprofit organizations (Fulton et al., 2019; Schwartz et al., 2011), Adesaogun et al., (2015) look specifically at the experience of Black women in the nonprofit industry and the institutional racism and challenges inherent in their organizations. This ethnographic approach using observation, surveys, and semi-structured interviews took place among 30 Black women across nine nonprofit agencies. A strong majority of participants (93%) considered communications
with other Black women in their field as important to their work, made clearer by interviews
diving into how they communicated with each other. Adesaogun et al. (2015) then observed that
Black women rarely reached out to each other in communal spaces with White peers but
removed themselves to more private settings or used coded language to discuss issues of racism.
This suggests that even in an environment with diverse staff, the structural constraints of the
organization still make it an unsafe place for people of color, specifically Black women, to
openly address racial inequality. Organizations are racially designed to best serve White people
and their perspectives rather than accepting the experiences of people of color. Every study
participant described at least one personal experience or observation of discrimination in their
nonprofit career. Participants also shared, similar to the survey by Schwartz et al. (2011),
feelings of disconnect between their nonprofit missions and the actual impact on community and
internal staff support. There was also a strong perception that organizations believed Black and
other employees of color must be “trained” to become leaders, rather than inherently holding
leadership qualities as part of their skillset. This suggests that the organizational structure is not
designed for people of color to radically lead unless they are willing to conform to the standards
set by the institution. Yet despite all these issues, nearly all participants also identified positive
reasons that kept them in the nonprofit industry, relating back to the study on how managers
view meaningful work in the face of increased nonprofit marketization (Sandberg & Robichau,
2022). The ability to reconcile personal values, capitalist expectations, and racist institutions is
necessary to stay in the field. Adesaogun et al. (2015) conclude with a call for more research to
help address these systemic issues across the nonprofit industry.

In summary, research demonstrates that nonprofit employees, especially managers and
leaders of color, are struggling to bring together their mission and stated values with impactful
actions in the workplace. Sandberg & Robichau (2022) showed the need for balance between nonprofit growth and goals and the meaningful work managers seek in this field, Schwartz et al. (2011) identified the major disconnect between diversity statements and diversity actions in nonprofit organizations, Fulton et al. (2019) highlighted the extreme burdens placed on leaders of color to address racial inequality at their organizations, and Adesaogun et al. (2015) used the experience of Black women in the nonprofit industry to exemplify the institutional struggles that employees and leaders face in trying to advance their individual or community goals. Taken together, this body of research shows that nonprofit employees and leaders have been forced to work around structures designed by White and capitalist ideals to attempt to create environments where staff of color feel safe and supported. Even when there is opportunity for discussion and change, the parameters are still set by institutions rooted in White supremacy and inequity.

Summary

This literature review claims that the nonprofit industry is made up of racialized organizations that are designed to impede individual leaders’ attempts at creating equitable work environments centered on their mission and values. Evidence that supports this claim includes the origin of the nonprofit sector based in White, wealthy family foundations; studies that demonstrate the tension nonprofits face when competing for resources in a capitalist society while pursuing their missions for social good; research that shows how the nonprofit industry struggles to compensate employees comprehensively; and studies that look at how individual leaders bear a difficult burden when trying to advance racial equity and supportive work environments in their organizations. This claim and body of evidence addresses how nonprofit organizations shift the problems of inequitable work practices onto individual leaders instead of confronting the foundational structures of their organizations. With my thesis, I propose to
further examine and understand how this shifting responsibility affects employees at all levels of a nonprofit organization, especially one that aims to advance human rights, to lay the foundation for how structural evolution instead of individual change might happen.
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Restatement of Purpose

The purpose of this study is to understand how nonprofit employees in different roles experience and respond to organizational constraints while maintaining values of equitable conditions for the workplace. This study examined a small nonprofit with an explicit mission and values statements toward equity, social justice, and wholeness through the lens of employee experiences of internal work structures. The methodology used directed interviews with staff members that reflected on their individual experiences within the organization as a case study of the organization itself. The aim of this study is to deepen understanding about the tension between nonprofit values and expectations, how organizational structures can minimize or increase that tension, and the role of individual leaders in these spaces.

Research Setting

This study uses the pseudonym Storytelling for Social Justice (SFSJ) to represent the nonprofit organization. SFSJ has an annual operating budget around $1 million and was founded in 2009. The core values listed at SFSJ include empathy and compassion, equity and dignity, integrity, critical thinking and inquiry, collaboration, literary merit, and wholeness. At the time of the study, SFSJ had one Executive Director, four Program and Department Directors, one Department Manager, two Program Coordinators, and one part-time intern. Six staff members lived in the San Francisco Bay Area, one in the Central Coast of California, and two in New York City. The organization holds a mailing address in San Francisco and provides in-person services in the area as well as some travel around the country, but all operations are fully remote.

Half of the interviews were conducted over Zoom due to distance or weather-related safety measures and half were conducted in person at a private meeting space.
Participants

I interviewed five current employees and one former employee through a purposive sampling process. As described by Bui (2020), “the researcher selects individuals who are considered representative because they meet certain criteria for the study” (p. 145). I chose these six participants using the following criteria: (a) currently employed by or fewer than six months from prior full-time employment at the organization; (b) holds more than three years of employment at the organization; and (c) participated in at least one Vision Plan process with the organization. I selected these criteria to focus on staff who had a substantial amount of experience at the organization, particularly through the last three years of changing circumstances with the pandemic and leadership titles expanding. At the time of the study, Program Directors and Department Directors were also members of the Senior Leadership team that included the Executive Director. However, this was a new development that occurred roughly five months before the study. Prior to this, Senior Leadership was held by only the Program Directors and Executive Director for a full year. The participants also included the co-founder of the nonprofit and a program founder. Table 1 describes the participant demographics:

Table 1
Participant Pseudonyms, Roles, Years of Employment, and Race

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Job Title</th>
<th>Years at SFSJ</th>
<th>Race</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Evelyn</td>
<td>Executive Director</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Asian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oliver</td>
<td>Program Director</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy</td>
<td>Program Director</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Asian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helen</td>
<td>Department Director</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riley</td>
<td>Department Director</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isabelle</td>
<td>Program Coordinator</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Asian</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
All six participants and the rest of staff at SFSJ were aware that I was interested in interviewing employees for a case study for at least six months prior to the interview period. I emailed the six relevant participants with more information about the study, and we set up interviews over a three-week period following that initial email.

**Instrumentation**

This study utilized one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with mostly open-ended questions and follow-up questions asking for more detail. These questions were meant to uncover a narrative that detailed each individual’s feelings about their experience working for the organization, and the structure of a semi-structured interview allows for this in-depth exploration (Adams, 2010; Rubin & Rubin, 2005). The following questions were used:

1. How do you identify yourself (race, gender, culture, orientation, etc.)?

2. What was your journey to SFSJ?

3. What are the values of this organization?
   a. How do these reflect your own values?

4. What policies and processes guide your day-to-day work?

5. How do your project/work expectations align with the organization’s mission and values?

6. How would you describe work expectations in your role?
   a. Do you feel like you have power over your work expectations at the organization?

7. Do you feel like you are able to achieve a work/life balance here?
   a. Are there ways the organization facilitates or challenges that balance and can you share an example?

8. What role do you play in organization-wide decision-making?
a. Was there a time you contributed to a decision, or felt that your contribution was ignored?

b. What were tensions or conflicts that made the decision (or the decision-making process) difficult?

c. Has this changed as your role has grown/developed?

d. What role does your identity play in this feeling?

9. Who are key stakeholders in decision-making at this organization?

10. Do you feel pressure around decision-making?

   a. Can you share an example of what influences or pressures you during the decision-making process?

11. Do you feel pressure around your project/work expectations?

   a. Can you share an example of what influences or pressures you in your day-to-day work?

12. What drives change at this organization?

13. If you could change one aspect of the organization or your work experience here, what would that be?

**Data Collection and Procedure**

Prior to the interview, participants were provided with a written consent form over email and invited to ask questions before signing. Three of the interviews were conducted over Zoom (Evelyn, Nancy, and Riley) while three were conducted in person at a meeting space (Oliver, Helen, Isabelle). Two Zoom interviews were planned to take place in person but moved to the virtual format due to weather-related safety concerns. All interviews were audio recorded for transcription purposes, and all three Zoom participants chose to keep their cameras on for their
interviews. The interviews ranged from 50 to 75 minutes and took place over the first three weeks of March 2023. I used the Trint automated transcription service to transcribe all six interviews, which were then corrected manually.

**Data Analysis**

I categorized each interview into sections related to the research questions, then indexed the transcribed and corrected interviews to pull out key phrases, themes, and patterns from all responses. The answers yielded three main categories linked to the original research questions: *organizational values, work experiences, and pressures and influences*. I categorized the interviews by job title, grouped into the following roles: Coordinator, Department Directors, Program Directors, and Executive Director. I coded the indexed interviews into these categories to track similarities and differences based on roles. While looking for instances of matching words and phrases, more detailed categories emerged that highlighted the connection between organizational values and individual worker experiences. I highlighted quotes from each participant that exemplified the identified themes and grouped those quotes together to build a more narrative-driven document of text that then led to more specific subcategories focusing on common experiences within the workplace and the policies that created them.

**Human Subjects Approval**

The University of San Francisco International Review Board has approved this study for the Protection of Human Subjects under a blanket approval, Protocol #1438 from Dr. Seenae Chong. Every participant was provided a consent form that detailed the purpose of the study, the steps taken for confidentiality, potential risks and discomfort, and the benefits of the study, which was signed and returned before their interview. Participants were given an opportunity to ask questions before and after the interview regarding the study.
Researcher’s Background

My positionality is highly relevant and related to this case study. I am a current Program Director within SFSJ and have worked for the organization for almost seven years. During this time, I have worked with a total of eighteen employees and twelve part-time interns including those currently employed with the organization. My title has changed twice since my first role, and at the time of this study, I am also part of the Senior Leadership team. Due to my current title and seniority at the organization, I tried to be as transparent as possible about my research and the confidentiality of the interviews. While I cannot “un-hear” what participants told me under these research conditions to avoid crossing into how I operate in the workplace, there are no upcoming employee evaluations or decision-making situations that involve job status. There was no obligation to participate, but the executive director did announce her participation in a staff meeting. Despite what I interpreted as honest interest in this case study, the power dynamics within the organization may still have pushed some staff members toward participation.

My personal identity has played a role in my time at the organization and my relationships with the participants; I identify as an Asian American woman and a member of the Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) community, as well as part of the Millennial (Generation Y) age range. Three of the six participants are also from the same generation, and we have developed a connection that extends outside of work; because of my familiarity with these participants, I may have phrased some follow-up questions differently from the others and may have influenced answers due to existing knowledge I gathered about their feelings about the workplace. I also spent most of my career reporting directly to a White man who is included in the participants. At the time of the study, he had left the organization and was no longer my supervisor, but that dynamic is embedded into our relationship and may have affected his candor
with me. A similar dynamic exists between myself and the current Executive Director and may have also influenced how I pursued—or did not pursue—certain follow-up questions, and how she answered the interview questions.

As someone who started in an Associate position and moved up to Program Director over time, I have experienced many highs and lows in different roles over the years. At this point, I carry both a deep admiration for SFSJ as well as many critiques. This case study was never intended to be solely a tribute or takedown of SFSJ; because I have witnessed immense change and growth, and even some contraction, it felt like a rich opportunity to examine how one organization has tried to live up to its values over time.
CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

Findings

The purpose of this study is to understand how different staff members at a single nonprofit experience the tension between organizational values and the work experience. These findings detail the reflections of six employees of SFSJ, a small nonprofit dedicated to human rights storytelling, in varying roles. This data has been categorized into three overarching themes with subcategories within them. The first, Organizational Values, describes the professional values of the organization alongside the personal values of each employee and how these show up in the work culture and the ability to create a work/life balance. The second, Organizational Work Experiences, speaks in more detail to the processes and policies that guide each staff member’s work experience and how these structures are created. The final theme, Pressures and Influences at the Organization, focuses on external pressures, influences, stakeholders, and other factors in decision-making at the organization.

Organizational Values

Due to the mission-driven nature of nonprofit work, each interview spent a substantial amount of time on identifying the values within the organization and how each individual felt drawn to them. The responses overwhelmingly presented an organization that held internal values consistent with its external nonprofit mission and an intimate connection between personal and professional values.

A Mission Based in Wholeness

Participants were asked to identify SFSJ’s organizational values and encouraged to describe them as they were perceived by each individual, not standard public communications. All six participants identified similar organizational values rooted in viewing people as whole
beings with complex narratives. Evelyn, Nancy, Riley, and Isabelle used similar terms such as wholeness, empathy, ethics, and collaboration. Helen and Oliver used more descriptive language to define community-centered practices and seeing people beyond their worst experiences or a singular need. Evelyn and Oliver, the two staff members who were involved in founding the organization and its programming, also noted a form of courage in the values. They described SFSJ as being open and willing to commit to serving communities and creating spaces in order to make stories heard in a way that other organizations were not. In general, the values focused on how SFSJ approaches its work in a collaborative manner that is infused with ethical considerations for the storytellers, empathy for individual and community experiences, and mindfulness toward a person’s whole self.

All participants also connected how these external values and practices were reflected in the way the organization treated internal staff in work policies and encouraged seeing colleagues as the same whole humans with complex narratives. Isabelle, elaborating on this, explained:

Especially in the last few years, we really have been trying, as a collective, to recognize our own wholeness as people and what we need to do the work we do sustainably, how to take care of ourselves, how to take care of each other.

Nancy shared a similar sentiment and also added that part of wholeness “is to see where you need to reserve some space or boundaries.” Riley noted that SFSJ’s approach to staff wellness is “quite unique in the way that it’s actually implemented and practiced at a nonprofit.” Many participants contrasted SFSJ’s values in a positive manner as compared with prior experiences at other organizations, which were further detailed when asked about work/life balance later.

**Personal Values and Organizational Values Feel One and the Same**
Every participant expressed a deep connection between their understanding of the organization’s values and their own personal values. Evelyn described them as “impossible to separate” while Nancy used the phrase “close to my heart,” sharing personal anecdotes from different stages of their lives to exemplify the relationship between these values. Oliver, Riley, and Helen highlighted how these values drew them to the SFSJ in their job hunt. They all described wanting to be part of the mission because of their personal interests in social justice, storytelling from marginalized voices, and nuanced stories; they also specified the ethical methodology as a defining factor. Isabelle went further by describing how her four years at the organization have “had a big influence on my life.” She talked about previous experiences reinforcing the importance of “complicated” narratives about people, and that her nearly five years at SFSJ taught her how to make no assumptions and lead with compassion. Every single participant described how this ethical approach to this work was deeply aligned with their personal values and approaches to life.

Work/Life Balance Reflecting Organizational Values

To examine how organizational values centered on wholeness showed up in the internal work culture, participants were asked about their ability to achieve a work/life balance at the organization. To create a common understanding of work/life balance, I defined this as the ability to take care of personal needs and the time and space to achieve personal goals alongside professional ones. For Evelyn and Oliver, they both responded that this balance changed over time since the founding of the organization. Oliver said, “[The balance] didn’t ebb and flow,” but improved year after year. Even over the pandemic, which brought new and more stress to individuals and the organization, Oliver was able to create a more flexible schedule with remote work that accommodated his preference for early morning starts. Evelyn credited her voluntary
and board-supported decision to move to a four-day workweek in 2017 as the turning point in her own work/life balance. She also discussed the importance of modeling this balance as the Executive Director for the rest of staff:

I'm just being very transparent with the rest of the team about it. I'm modeling it, modeling a culture where people don't talk to each other at weekends or evenings and that for the most part, they use work platforms for communication unless otherwise agreed upon. [...] Just like, deciding what my boundaries are, modeling them and then through that, creating a culture where other people also expect not to be bothered when they're on vacation and outside of work hours.

The rest of the participants were unanimous about their ability to maintain a strong work/life balance. These examples illustrate the wholeness value of SFSJ that makes space for employees to prioritize their personal lives alongside their commitment to the work. Nancy, Helen, Isabelle, and Riley all identified the culture of SFSJ—rooted in its organizational values—as a crucial part of attaining their work/life balance. Nancy talked about prioritizing her family’s schedules and the flexibility over being unavailable after certain hours or coming back to work on something when she needed time off during the day. Isabelle mentioned feeling comfortable taking sick time for herself or setting boundaries when she needed to care for family and knowing that the rest of the staff would want her to do so. Helen and Riley named a lack of pressure around working extra hours, and Riley contrasted this with other organizations that want employees to “do it all, even if there’s no, like, necessary reason. You can’t just pick it up tomorrow or something.” This circled back to how she viewed SFSJ’s values as showing up in a unique way compared to other nonprofits. All participants repeatedly referenced an openly supportive culture
toward work/life balance as well as explicit policies that helped maintain it, as discussed in the following section.

Notably, only one person mentioned salary as part of their work/life balance. Oliver recalled a conversation with Evelyn in his first years at the organization regarding the budget and salaries. In this conversation, he said, “She made it clear that ‘maybe I can’t give you all the money that you would like to be earning, but I can give you the time and flexibility.’” Later, Oliver also mentioned that SFSJ developed transparent salary compensation bands accessible by all staff starting in 2021, which did not exist at the time Evelyn made this comment.

Organizational Work Experiences

In order to better identify how organizational values appeared in employee experiences, participants were asked about the policies and decision-making processes that guided their work and the organization as a whole. The responses painted a nuanced picture of intention against implementation, and some contrast between the highest level of leadership and the rest of staff.

Policies and Processes at Work Centered on Wellbeing

After the unanimous agreement that work/life balance was attainable among all staff, participants were asked about how the organization facilitated these experiences. Everyone was able to point directly to policies and processes that provided ample personal time off work, flexibility and autonomy in work scheduling, explicit guidelines around hours spent working, and a culture centered on empathy and understanding toward colleagues’ workloads. These examples, particularly around the culture of SFSJ, continue to highlight the value of “wholeness” and the organizational commitment to depth instead of breadth in its mission-driven work.

Evelyn, as co-founder of SFSJ, noted that the people most responsible for unrealistic work expectations had left the organization long ago and she felt she had since “unlearned some
behaviors” that led to a difficult work/life balance. Oliver confirmed this by mentioning how when he joined the team, “I believed Evelyn when she said, ‘I want you to take every single one of your vacation days.’ She was like, ‘I mean it,’ and it was like, yeah, I believe it.” He and others described the amount of vacation time as generous for a nonprofit of this size, starting at 16 days for new staff and increasing by a week for each year of employment up to a maximum of six weeks. Some participants also noted that this was separate from sick time, which allows for 14 additional days of paid time off. Most participants further highlighted the “Wellness Days” occurring on the last Monday of each month that provide an extra 12 days of paid time off per year to each employee. This was implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic and has become a permanent policy. Adding in the 12 holidays observed by SFSJ, a new full-time employee receives 54 days of paid time off while senior employees receive 69 days of paid time off. These policies for paid time off are directly related to the organizational value of wholeness that staff identified, creating space for each person to take care of themselves beyond their work identities.

Nancy, Isabelle, Riley, and Helen all cited the flexibility around work schedules for salaried employees and strict limits on 40 hours per week of working time. Nancy contrasted these policies and expectations to a former nonprofit job, where “it was pretty similar, but I feel like SFSJ policies are much more formal and empathetic, supportive structures.” She described the practice of preemptively taking a day off during the week if a weekend event was expected, not taking meetings on Fridays, and holding to a strict end time to her workday despite time zones. She emphasized not feeling guilty about these practices because they have been normalized and modeled by all staff. Riley pointed out that in an organization so small, “we all have to do so much work that it would be really easy to fall into the practice of emphasizing getting things done over taking time off,” but she found this was not the case at SFSJ because of
that normalization and modeling. Isabelle shared similar sentiments, citing how comfortable she felt setting boundaries around her work schedule. She said it was not only the trust that her colleagues knew she would complete her work, but that “I know my coworkers want me to take care of myself.” Continuing this trend, Helen discussed the lack of pressure to work outside of set hours and noted that colleagues had reasonable expectations of each other and were able to identify and acknowledge when people were feeling overwhelmed. All participants had identified empathy and collaboration as core values of the organization, and these values have extended to a culture that allows staff to set boundaries around work hours and utilize the paid time off provided to them. Everyone made a point of citing not only the policies that protected their personal time, but the culture that empowered them to do so.

Helen also brought up an important organizational perspective that added to this work/life balance. “I think one thing that is a real strength of the organization is that we’re not just, grow at any cost, keep producing. That isn’t the point of what we do,” she said. Because organizational growth was not solely focused on numbers, she believed it was crucial to maintaining work/life balance for staff to think beyond constantly producing for the sake of producing. This perspective is another aspect of wholeness showing up as a value within the organization by looking at programs more holistically rather than one quantitative aspect.

While participants were generally enthusiastic about the policies and processes that enabled their work/life balance, two staff members did mention occasional difficulties keeping boundaries in both directions. Helen said, “I think our work doesn’t go into the life, but there’s an expectation of bringing your life into work, which isn’t always comfortable.” Nancy brought up something similar and said, “The idea that a job should compel you to bring your whole self, it’s like, well, sometimes I want to keep parts of myself separate.” Helen did clarify that she did
not view this as an organizational issue but a pressure exerted by some members of staff, and Nancy further defined her understanding of SFSJ’s “wholeness” as being accepting that people will have reservations and boundaries. Overall, it seems like the organizational policies create ample space for staff to care for themselves and prioritize their own needs, but also have the potential for some people to overstep in the details they ask of each other.

**Self-Driven Individual Work Expectations**

An interesting contrast emerged when participants were asked about individual work expectations. This centered on their departments, programs, and project goals and expectations rather than the general act of working. While staff were quick to point to specific policies and processes regarding work/life balance and a culture of caring, almost all participants struggled to identify similar specifics for their individual work. Most staff members came into new roles developed for them or existing roles that evolved quickly over time, so they inherited little to no policies and processes from predecessors. The autonomy that staff experienced around setting work boundaries also showed up in work and project expectations, but with different outcomes.

Nancy, who has spent most of her years as a single-person program or with one additional part-time employee, said most of her expectations came down to her own decisions for what she believed would work best for each project. She appreciated the flexibility and described it as fairly “freeform.” She said her experience at SFSJ felt like it was an environment for the self-initiated and self-starters who could shape their own programs and departments. Isabelle, who developed a new department when she joined that sits between the two main programs, described her role as “amorphous” and difficult to set metrics to work under. Because of the newness of her position, she said she was still trying to learn how to balance being open-ended and creative in her initiatives with wanting to create concrete programming and standards. She
felt a lot of her work was reliant on the needs of external partners and not always knowing what she could and could not offer them. Helen said expectations were unclear when she began her role, and like Isabelle, felt that there could be more uniformity in knowing what internal guidelines and procedures to use when dealing with external organizations. She noted that because SFSJ is so small, most operations happen in a more organic manner led by individuals and their departments, which has hindered the development of more structured policies and processes that all staff need to follow.

Riley described her work expectations as “the Wild West” due to its lack of structure. She used the terms, “self-directed and self-imposed,” detailing the ways that her position covers many different aspects that she must prioritize and reprioritize based on changing information day-to-day. This was a point of frustration and exhaustion for her and led her to feeling like she could only produce 5-10% of what she would like to do for the organization at any given moment. She did say that the hands-off and independent approach came from the Executive Director trusting her to lead her department, and it gave her space to set her own metrics and think big picture about how to develop her work, but she worried the lack of feedback protocols and standardization could lead to burnout in the long term in a way that conflicted with organizational values.

Oliver, who founded his program when he joined the staff, echoed the sentiments of other staff. He described the situation as, “It’s like, I need you to do this. I need you to take care of this. You let me know that you got this, and you let me know when you’re stuck.” In his reflection, he believed he would have benefitted from more expectation-setting organizationally rather than creating all the structures by himself. But he also emphasized that he believed these expectations came from a place of trust, and like others said, the autonomy could be freeing at
times. He believed that the level of responsibilities came from a mutual understanding that the organization could trust him to do his work, and the external partners relying on him could also trust him to show up in the ways they needed. These comments about trust from both Riley and Oliver draw similarities with Isabelle’s comments about colleagues trusting her to do her work and take care of herself at the same time; the organizational values that enabled staff to develop a strong work/life balance have shown up in a more disruptive way for work expectations.

Evelyn was the only participant who did not mention any missing policies or structures around her work expectations. As Executive Director, she focused on the shared leadership structure she had developed that, in her opinion, redistributed power and expectations to department and program leaders. She also highlighted some matrices, guidelines, and policies that she and other staff members had created collaboratively to help guide more administrative processes. While her response was different from the rest of participants, it also confirmed the other responses; she trusted them to make their own decisions about their work, their programs, and their departments.

**Collaboration and (Lack of) Clarity in Decision-Making**

To dive deeper into this concept of trust and autonomy, participants were asked about decision-making both within the organization and their specific programs, and specifically asked about the roles they each felt they played in the process. As they did when asked about organizational values, “collaborative” came up across all responses when they described the actual process of discussing a decision. However, this was also followed by consistent comments around “lack of clarity” in the final decision-making step.

Oliver, reflecting on his early years at SFSJ, referred to organizational decision-making as a “consultative democracy” where Evelyn, as Executive Director, would solicit perspectives
and opinions before making a final decision for the whole organization. By the time of his departure, he felt this had morphed into a more shared leadership structure where senior leaders could bring up issues and concerns instead of waiting to be asked by Evelyn, and that this development felt like a response to those early days. Within his own program, he defined it as an autonomous structure where he felt comfortable making decisions. However, he also observed challenges, disappointment, and even anger among other staff over the years because of this autonomy. He noted, “I think some of the anger that people felt was like, do you trust me or not to make this decision? And which ones do you trust me with?” Where he felt comfortable predicting the Evelyn’s opinions on his choices due to their working relationship, he noticed a lack of clarity among other staff.

Helen, Riley, and Isabelle mentioned this lack of clarity in their own responses while Nancy noted a slight sense of “disconnect” between what leadership expected and what other staff may be feeling. They also all began by describing decision-making as a collaborative process. Helen said, “We’re good at the information collecting, we’re good at having everybody talk about things.” The others confirmed this; Riley felt like she was in the room for most conversations around big decisions for the organization, Isabelle described senior leaders making space for her to talk through her ideas, and Nancy said she always felt comfortable offering feedback and feeling like an important part of discussions. At the information and discussion stage, everyone agreed that they felt their voices were being heard. Yet when it came to actually making the decision, most staff members felt confused about who held that ultimate power. Riley said, “I don’t necessarily feel like I am the one with decision-making power,” and Isabelle said, “I think I might be seeking more clear leadership in terms of how to make decisions.” Helen felt like Evelyn may have believed she was passing authority over to other people, but it did not
always work out in practice. As an example, she shared that Evelyn would tell her to schedule the meetings she believed she needed to do her work, but Helen felt there was not always buy-in from the staff members she needed to meet with because she did not carry the same authority as Evelyn’s role. Similarly, Riley brought up an example from Evelyn’s sabbatical; while she was out of office for an extended period, the rest of staff struggled to determine how to end a consultancy that was not working as planned. While Evelyn felt she had ceded all leadership and decision-making power to the remaining staff in that time, Riley said there was still the lingering question of, “Do we have the ability to break [this contract] off? Like, is that even possible?”

About this entire process, Riley wondered, “Maybe it relates to how SFSJ is this non-hierarchical system but then there’s very little attention to actual power dynamics here.” Because of the organization’s size, most departments and programs are run by single staff members or at most, two employees. With five of seven employees holding “director” in the title, most staff considered the hierarchy flattened, but still felt that final decisions needed to be signed off by the Executive Director above all, even in an informal manner. Helen said, “Sometimes the leader has to be the leader, you know?” Despite all the efforts of a shared leadership structure trying to redistribute power across many individuals instead of one, most staff were still looking to one person to push forward the final decision, and this sits in stark contrast to the reflections on work/life balance from all participants. The underlying value of trust in both scenarios looks the same: staff are trusted to make their own decisions, set their own boundaries, and trust each other to take care of themselves. Yet when it comes to making organization-wide decisions, the trust that Evelyn holds in staff is not being understood in the same way; most participants still struggle with knowing whether their decision is correct or whether they have the authority to finalize it, and they seem to be looking for a traditional leadership structure for direction.
Pressures and Influences at the Organization

In examining the data, personal and professional values were clearly a crucial and critical part of the organization’s operations. However, these experiences and decisions do not exist in a vacuum, and participants reflected on other factors that affected their work experience.

Pressures and Stakeholders in Decision-Making

To look beyond staff participation in decision-making, participants were also asked about who and what they considered pressures and stakeholders when considering a decision. Here, the values of wholeness, empathy, and collaboration returned: every participant mentioned the importance of community partners and the needs of the populations the organization serves, as well as other staff’s needs and their capacities. Oliver said he constantly tried to think about his colleagues before making a decision because “this impacts how people show up, what they do, how they do it.” Nancy was mindful of asking people to take on extra responsibilities and the burden of making decisions, and Isabelle said she would always ask, “Is this going to add something to my colleague’s plate as well as my own plate?” Evelyn said her essential questions were, “Who needs this? Who benefits from it? Who’s burdened by it? Who will support it?”

While budgets and funding came up sporadically in other areas, here the issue of funding was a significant factor in most decisions. Oliver, Riley, Isabelle, Evelyn, and Helen all mentioned funding and funders as important influences and stakeholders in the way decisions are made. Though it was not the only factor, it was something that weighed heavily on their minds. Isabelle said, “A lot of what we’re thinking about is, can we fund this? Who is going to fund this?” Helen said she continued to emphasize the community-centric nature of the work while also taking into consideration donor reactions and opinions. For her, “it doesn’t necessarily mean that we have to change what we’re doing, but we do have to think about how we describe it, who
we tell, when we tell them,” and this played a role in her decisions. This also tied back to Helen’s previous point about SFSJ’s values on growth as an organization; wholeness is more important than constant growth for the sake of growth, but funding and producing programs that are fundable is still a consideration for most staff in their larger decision-making processes.

When asked about how their individual identities played a role in empowerment and decision-making, most staff did not view their self-identifying race and gender markers as particularly notable factors in how they personally contributed to decisions. Among the three AAPI women, Isabelle and Nancy did not feel their identities impacted their ability to speak up, contribute, or make decisions. Evelyn did wonder whether being an Asian woman contributed to an expectation of hyper-competence and resilience, but she also attributed this to the role of Executive Director as an isolating job on its own. Among the three White staff members, Oliver and Riley discussed how White supremacist ideals and White privilege may have showed up more broadly. Oliver mentioned being self-aware of his privileges in being taken seriously, trusted, and listened to consistently, but he also felt the organization consciously made space for BIPOC staff members to speak about these issues. Riley talked about unlearning her relationship with how White supremacy culture dictates a level of perfectionism, and she also identified a tension within the organization between wanting to produce high-quality materials without focusing on that perfectionism. This tension ties back to the value of wholeness at SFSJ and wanting to produce complicated, nuanced narratives that capture a whole person, but that kind of complexity can be at odds with the perfectionism expected of professional working cultures.

Driving Factors of Organizational Change

With all participants having spent significant time at the organization—a minimum of four years and a maximum of 14 years—each participant had experienced several forms of
organizational changes over their careers at SFSJ. To further examine the many components of decision-making, participants were asked about what they considered important driving factors of organizational change. Here, there was consensus among all answers: the staff collectively often drive change. Riley, Oliver, Isabelle, and Evelyn all mentioned staff collaboratively sharing their perspectives, needs, and questions and the organization responding to those concerns by creating change. On the individual side, Nancy mentioned that Evelyn often drove change in her role as leader, while Helen also pointed out other staff members and their programs driving change by responding to the needs of the communities they serve and adding initiatives or redesigning projects accordingly. Isabelle, Nancy, and Oliver mentioned global and societal issues as major factors with the COVID-19 pandemic and anti-AAPI violence as key examples. Oliver detailed how the organization responded to the intensely personal aspect of anti-AAPI violence by developing the BIPOC Care and Crisis Protocol, a document that outlines organization-wide procedures for responding to traumatic events that may affect the communities of staff members. Nancy felt the pandemic made the needs of staff more obvious, while Isabelle said it gave the organization more time and urgency to consider employee wholeness, deepening the connection between internal and external values.

There was an outlier in the responses: Helen admitted, “Sometimes, I don’t know what drives change.” She used an example of hiring a consultant for an organization-wide project in 2021; while there was an invitation to provide feedback on the single consultant presented, consistent with the general information-gathering and discussion-centered decision-making process, she also noticed there were no other options provided, which made it difficult for her to understand how this choice was selected, how this project direction was decided, and why that organizational change was needed. In another part of her interview, Riley had brought up this
same example and shared similar sentiments more generally. Despite the values-alignment of the consultant, she also felt that there was a lack of clarity around why this big decision was made, where it was coming from, and how she could provide feedback when there were no other options to look at. Finally, Evelyn had also identified this situation in her interview, but she used it as an example of how decision-making was a shared process. She said she did not sign a contract with the consultant until staff had been invited to provide input and ask questions, and she moved forward when there were no objections. Related to what came up for staff regarding work expectations and general authority, here there is another disconnect between the intention of a collaborative process and how it was actually experienced among staff.

**Hopes and Dreams Reflecting Organizational Values**

All interviews ended by asking participants about what kind of change they wanted to see at the organization; this was also explained as the “beauty pageant” question for participants to dream big. Every participant responded with a type of wish that either reinforced organizational values or would bring their experience closer to the stated values. No one answered with an idea that would have caused fundamental change to the organization; rather, everyone wanted to dream about how they could better access and amplify organizational values.

Nancy, Isabelle, Riley, and Evelyn all focused on funding—specifically, how more funding could enable them to build up capacity for more and deeper projects without worrying about the sustainability of the organization. Nancy believed, “I think it could be amazing, like, look at what we do with such a small team. If we were twice as big, how would that be different?” Riley also pointed out how funding would allow them to further pursue organizational goals related to mission values, such as more diverse representation among the team. She said, “[Staff diversity] is hard when we don’t hire very much, like hiring in narrator
communities. That would be my greatest wish for the organization: more money to hire people, great people.”

Oliver said he would have liked to see the external values show up internally within the organization sooner; because he was a founding program director, he described his earlier years as more typical nonprofit work: “ready, fire, aim.” But he believed the projects and people he worked with could have been changed by turning the external values inward a few years sooner. He specified that this was not a regret, and he was proud of how SFSJ currently centered those values in its internal processes, but he did wonder about what kind of impact it would have made to start sooner. Helen provided a particularly personal answer and said that she would like to feel more heard by her supervisors. She noted that this experience was something that felt “at odds with the organization” and not something she observed in other staff member experiences, but it was a more personal issue due to the design of her role when she began and the supervisory relationships she had at the time.
CHAPTER V: DISCUSSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary

As an industry, the nonprofit system has a wide reach with over 1.8 million registered 501(c)(3) organizations and a workforce that represents over 10% of private employees (Candid, 2021; Salamon & Newhouse, 2019). While there is an assumption that nonprofits are inherently ethical due to their missions and organizational values, there is a difference between professional ethics centered on business practices and moral good centered on human practices (Jeavons, 2016). In the nonprofit worker experience, this difference can appear as a tension between mission values and business-like practices (Sanders & McClellan, 2014). The Whiteness of nonprofit spaces contributes to this tension, as developed by their origins rooted in wealthy, White family foundations and institutional pressures that set Whiteness as a professional standard leading to access to funding and growth (Heckler, 2019; Smith, 2007/2017).

Existing literature focuses on specific aspects of the nonprofit worker experience: the policies and processes regarding work/life balances or the individual leader experiences in creating change for themselves and their teams. In order to reconcile the nonprofit mission and values with the work expectations of individual employees, it is important to understand not only what these policies and processes are, but also how they are created and the culture that either reinforces or negates them. It is also important to understand the role of the organizational structure; not just the role of the individual leader, but the pressures that guide and influence their decisions. The purpose of this case study was to create a more comprehensive view of how the policies and processes in a single nonprofit space are intended to operate and how they are realistically experienced by staff, and how the organizational culture facilitates these experiences. By hearing from a variety of SFSJ staff directly, this study was able to look at how
organizational values can be deeply felt and embodied by team members of a nonprofit while still facing structural challenges in executing those values through every aspect of their work.

**Discussion**

**Organizational Values**

Across the board, there was a cohesive and collective understanding of the organizational values at SFSJ, as well as a deeply personal connection to these values that played an important factor in participants’ experiences at the organization. Each staff member’s commitment to the organizational values was reflected in the ways they talked about the culture of the organization and the passion they felt for this specific work, exemplifying the ideals of ethical management and meaningful work in the nonprofit space. In particular, Evelyn’s personal values as an AAPI woman informing her leadership at the organization have led to a work environment that is more centered in community than Whiteness. These values also mark the introduction of an intentional structural shift—a development of a new racialized schema—in creating a culture at SFSJ that embodies care and compassion over efficiency and productivity.

**A Mission Based in Wholeness**

All six participants centered their understanding of SFSJ’s values in wholeness, empathy, ethics, and collaboration; significant time was spent discussing how these values led to complex and nuanced understandings of people as whole human beings with a wealth of experiences. Beyond these specific values, two participants also discussed the importance of courage in the organization pursuing and doing this work in a particular way that centered ethical considerations for the communities it serves. There was a consistent narrative from all staff members that the organization approached its external services and internal practices with the same values and that staff members are included in those communities. Participants also shared
that the way these values presented themselves were unique to SFSJ as compared to their experiences at other nonprofit organizations.

These findings connect to how ethical standards show up in the nonprofit sector. Jeavons (2016) identified five ethical ideals that should be present in the ethical management of ethical organizations: integrity, openness, accountability, service, and charity. Service and charity are exemplified in participants’ description of how SFSJ approaches its work with the communities it serves. Integrity, openness, and accountability are reflected in the way SFSJ staff discuss the strong relationship between external and internal values. The concept of wholeness, the willingness to hear complex stories, and being empathetic and open to people’s experiences both in the community and within the workplace are examples of how an organization can lead with ethics first and operate under these ideals.

The way participants talked about the embodiment of these values within the nonprofit also suggests that the organization itself plays an important role. Wooten and Couloute (2017) argued that organizations often perpetuate racial inequality alongside individuals by privileging Whiteness, and that the overarching system rewards organizations with these practices by providing them access to resources, legitimacy, and power. Individuals make up an organization, but those people make specific choices in order to pursue success and sustainability for the organization, thus centering the values of Whiteness that will create these results (Wooten & Couloute, 2017). Evelyn and Oliver spoke about the courage of SFSJ and its staff in creating spaces for publishing and teaching stories that other nonprofits may not touch, which suggests the reverse: organizations can also be actors in dismantling racial inequality if the people within them are willing to take the right risks that center their own values instead of Whiteness. This intentional focus on stories left out of the mainstream, especially BIPOC voices that go beyond
stereotypes, leads to projects that push back on the Whiteness that is typically embedded into a nonprofit institution and better represent the organizational values (Heckler, 2019). While this does not automatically restructure the organization itself, it is a step closer toward decentering Whiteness within the institution.

**Personal Values and Organizational Values Feel One and the Same**

When asked about personal values, all participants held an unwavering and deep connection between their personal values and the organizational values they identified. Jeavons (2016) separated professional ethics from moral traditions to argue that nonprofits are in a better position to focus on moral good over business, and these responses may indicate that SFSJ has already combined its professional ethics and moral calling into one collective goal that resonates with individuals on an intimate level. Other research has also shown the importance of meaningful work to nonprofit employees, defined as a common connection between the organizational mission and a worker’s personal values (Adesaogun et al., 2015; Sandberg & Robichau, 2022). The details that several participants shared regarding personal values drawing them to the organization, along with the implementation of “wholeness” as a value both externally and internally, further confirms that meaningful work is a key aspect of attracting nonprofit employees and retaining them.

Evelyn’s description of the organizational values and her personal values as “impossible to separate” signals something deeper than basic alignment. In researching racialized organizations, Wooten and Couloute (2016) looked at how Black-led groups like the Black Panther Party infused their personal perspectives into the fabric of their organization, allowing them to operate from a racialized worldview instead of a race-neutral one and push back against issues such as medical racism, housing inequities, and more. Evelyn, consciously or not, appears
to have similarly embedded her experiences and perspectives as an AAPI woman into the organizational values in a way that allow SFSJ to address the Whiteness-influenced practices that center efficiency and growth common at nonprofit institutions (Heckler, 2019). Her community-driven approach to her own life, influenced by her cultural norms, has been a foundational part of her organizational leadership and given SFSJ an opportunity to operate from a more racialized perspective.

**Work/Life Balance Reflecting Organizational Values**

Consistently and emphatically, all participants stated they could easily achieve a work/life balance while working at SFSJ. They viewed this as a direct result of organizational values, especially wholeness. As founding staff members, Evelyn and Oliver talked about how their work/life balances changed over time for the better. Evelyn also highlighted the importance of modeling this for the rest of the team in her role as Executive Director and making a conscious effort to create expectations around protecting personal time. Nancy and Isabelle provided examples of being able to put their families first and without question. Helen and Riley discussed feeling zero pressure to work extra hours, and specifically, how SFSJ did not encourage employees to do work at any cost. There seems to be a cultural acknowledgement that work inherently comes at a cost to personal needs, but it does not have to overtake those priorities.

These all illustrate a culture of support at SFSJ that existing research suggests is more prevalent at nonprofit, social good-oriented organizations than for-profit businesses (Tremblay, 2012). In this part of their interviews, participants focused on how organizational values affected their work/life balance rather than formal policies. Their examples highlighted a mutual understanding among colleagues, modeled by leaders, that encourage being mindful of each other’s personal lives, being conscientious of workloads and requests, and taking care of
themselves before taking care of the work. As Tremblay (2012) found, this environment based in feelings of support from supervisors and colleagues can be just as important in how employees experience work/life balance as the formal policies that guide and compensate them. These responses also set the stage for what Ray (2019) defines as schema, “…a kind of unwritten rulebook explaining how to write rules” that is rooted in racialized worldviews. Many organizations are built upon schemas that center Whiteness, such as viewing leadership as a White trait and tying other races to specific types of work (Ray, 2019). Coupled with Heckler’s (2019) examples of Whiteness prioritizing productivity and efficiency in the workplace, this leads to schemas that expect employees, especially BIPOC employees, to work harder and sacrifice more than their White counterparts. But at SFSJ, the staff have developed a culture where care, concern, and support are central to how people collaborate with each other. This leads to a different perspective on how people approach their work and create policies that guide them with these values in mind. While it may not be made explicit, this appears to be developing into its own racialized schema that counters the expectations of Whiteness. In the next section, looking at the formal policies and processes that enable a work/life balance, this culture of support can be considered part of the schema that leads to the development of an organizational structure by connecting the unwritten rules to resources.

Interestingly, at SFSJ, compensation and salary were only mentioned once as part of someone’s work/life balance. None of the three Millennials (Generation Y) mentioned it, which contrasts with an existing study that suggests Millennials value compensation as one of the most important factors in employment (McGinnis, 2011). Because this sample size is so small, it is difficult to extrapolate more from this lack of mention, but it does suggest that non-monetary forms of compensation are still valued among those entering the nonprofit system. This relates
back to other research that focuses on meaningful work being a crucial part of nonprofit employee retention (Adesaogun et al., 2015; Sandberg & Robichau, 2022).

Organizational Work Experiences

While organizational and personal values came up with extremely similar and cohesive answers from all participants, asking deeper questions about individual work experiences yielded a notable contrast in two areas: the clarity around work/life balance and lack of clarity around work and project expectations, and the highest level of leadership’s experience against the rest of the staff. Here we begin to see the limits of individual leadership in changing the nonprofit work environment and how the organizational structure may impede those changes. A cultural schema has developed at the organization to reinforce an environment that counters the growth and productivity mindset of Whiteness and prioritizes work/life balance, but that same schema is not as easily applied in work expectations and decision-making. Despite the overall embodiment of collaborative values, many staff members are still looking for a more straightforward answer to power and decision-making in their day-to-day and organization-wide work.

Policies and Processes at Work Centered on Wellbeing

When asked about the policies and processes that facilitate a work/life balance at SFSJ, all participants were able to point to guidelines and programs that gave them enough personal time and explicit flexibility in scheduling work, but they also spent substantial time talking about the culture that made these policies possible. Isabelle talked about how her colleagues trusted her to get her work done and take care of herself while Helen observed that all staff held reasonable expectations of each other instead of demanding too much work or without enough notice. Helen also mentioned that an organizational value and strength was to explicitly avoid the “grow at any cost” mentality that is prevalent at other nonprofits and can lead to burnout or an uneven
work/life balance. Instead, she said SFSJ was more holistic in its approach and considerate about what its programs and initiatives would do for its communities and how it would affect staff capacities. Nancy said she never felt guilty about taking time off or setting boundaries to the end of her workday because it was modeled by all staff, and this was echoed by Riley saying these practices has been normalized within the culture of SFSJ. Evelyn was vocal about her conscious efforts at modeling these practices as Executive Director. These mentions of modeling and leadership relate to the findings of Pitt-Catsouphes et al. (2004) that show there is nothing inherent to nonprofit organizations that lead to better or more work/life balance programs; instead, organizations with women in executive leadership and a commitment to workforce diversity may play a bigger role in these policies. Evelyn, who identifies as an AAPI woman, exemplifies another finding that showed leaders of color are more likely to address racial inequality and challenge existing policies based in white supremacy (Fulton et al., 2019). Given how clearly and consistently participants described this culture, their responses also suggest a step beyond simple leadership as these values are embodied by all staff and not only the Executive Director. Here, employees are encouraged to slow down, take time off, and consider the process instead of focusing on the product, which counters the pressure that Whiteness places on organizations to constantly innovate and produce more (Heckler, 2019).

These deeply held values have led to policies and guidelines that protect this culture within the organization. Participants named the amount of paid vacation days, sick leave, and “Wellness Days” as tools that not only encourage but expect them to take time off throughout the year. Participants also mentioned that overtime is not an option, and Nancy gave an example of adjusting her schedule for special events instead of adding them on to an existing 40-hour workweek. By combining this culture of care with explicit policies that reflect these values, SFSJ
has begun to move from schema to structure in its approach to work/life balance. Ray (2019) describes this transition as the distribution or management of resources according to schema, specifically racial schema that privileges one group and inhibits others. Heckler (2019) found that many nonprofits operate from schema based in Whiteness and Masculinity that centers their markers of success: strong leaders dictating the organization, a constant drive to innovate in the short-term, funder interests over community needs, quick results over deep change, and a race- and gender-blind approach that defaults to White male norms. To achieve success as defined this way comes at the cost of personal care and growth. Meanwhile, SFSJ seems to be creating its own schema rooted in its values of wholeness, trust, and empathy that require more personal time. Paid days off, flexibility, and time management are important resources that have now been trusted in the hands of individual staff instead of micromanaged by leaders, directly opposing the typical hierarchical process at other organizations.

**Self-Driven Individual Work Expectations**

When participants were asked about work expectations instead of work/life balance, a very stark and interesting contrast appeared in their reflections. Work expectations were focused on goals, standards, and operations within each individual’s department or program. The overwhelmingly positive responses regarding work/life turned into a more general confusion and lack of clarity regarding work expectations. Most staff members started in newly created roles or changed their job descriptions quickly to match the needs of their departments, so there were little to no existing formal policies and processes for their work. Nancy and Oliver, who had the most positive reflections on these expectations, highlighted how the same flexibility and freedom they had over their work/life balance led to a lot of spaciousness when running their own programs. Nancy said that SFSJ felt like a place where the self-initiated and self-starters would
thrive with the ability to shape their own programming, while Oliver admitted he would have likely benefitted from more organization-led expectations and standards instead of struggling to create them for his own growing program. This is another area where SFSJ is pushing back against the norms; previous studies have found that some nonprofits cover up the tension between their mission and economic stability by having leadership push language that legitimizes business-like practices and turning a “return on investment” into “community impact,” but still using similar metrics to guide their work (Sanders & McClellan, 2014). At SFSJ, those standards are not being mandated by leadership, but there is some confusion about what is taking its place.

Riley, Helen, and Isabelle were more explicit about missing expectations and confusion over standards driving their departments and programs. Isabelle struggled to balance her creativity and big ideas with concrete programming because she was not always sure what she could offer her external partners. Riley described her work as “the Wild West” in its openness and lack of structure. She felt like she was constantly reprioritizing her work based on new information instead of following set standards and worried that this could lead to burnout. Despite the ease with which she talked about her work/life balance, the work itself was still causing a problem. Helen wondered if this was rooted in the small size of SFSJ and the more organic way operations usually happen instead of hierarchy-driven formal policies. Everyone was clear about the passion and purpose of their work, but they were not always clear about how to measure, direct, or implement it. This confusion suggests a gap that should be explored further. Existing research looks at how too many business-like practices infused into a nonprofit can cause feelings of manipulation, resentment, and burnout (Sanders & Robichau, 2022). Here, it may be the lack of business-like practices that is causing different types of poor feelings—not
manipulation and resentment, but confusion and frustration, because people feel lost without an obvious structure.

Evelyn was the main outlier in her responses; she focused on how she had designed a shared leadership structure at the organization that, in her opinion, redistributed power and expectation-setting to the individual departments and programs instead of one single person. Instead of contradicting the other responses, it confirmed them. She trusted her staff to embody the organizational values and set the standards they believed would best uphold them and guide their work, the same way she trusted her staff to protect their personal time and needs with work/life balance. However, it is clear from other responses that this approach is not being experienced in that same way. This could be explained by how fundamentally Whiteness is embedded into not only our organizations but our understanding of how organizations operate (Heckler, 2019). Staff may find it easier to take back control over their work and personal time than to take that same control over their work expectations. This may come from deeply-held beliefs around managerialism—driven by Whiteness—and having one person set and define goals under the guise of objective metrics, implement programming designed to meet those goals, and evaluate activities based on efficiency and effectiveness toward those metrics (Heckler, 2019). These types of metrics are also directly tied to legitimacy, which leads to access to funding necessary to operate (Heckler, 2019). Even if this understanding of operations is changed and the schema is updated to reflect a less hierarchical, top-down process, connecting that schema to resources that turn them into an established structure may be more difficult because funding still favors White practices.

*Collaboration and (Lack of) Clarity in Decision-Making*
Decision-making was another area where these same issues appeared. Participants were asked about organization-wide decision-making as well as their own specific programs and the amount of power they felt they held in the process. There was a unanimous consensus around feeling like a member of the decision-making process and finding space to share thoughts and opinions. “Collaborative” as a value and descriptor appeared in all the responses, further confirmed by staff discussing how comfortable they felt expressing their opinions or being in the room for discussions. As Helen described, “We’re good at the information collecting,” but the next step was where collaboration fell short. Oliver said he had observed challenges, disappointment, and even occasional anger from other staff because they could not figure out which decisions Evelyn, as Executive Director, fully trusted them to make, and which decisions she wanted to weigh in on. Riley and Isabelle both said they did not always know how to make a decision or if they had the power to make it at all. Helen said that Evelyn may have attempted to share authority with other people, but it was not implemented as she intended. The responses here suggest that staff are still looking to a traditional leadership structure for direction in decision-making, just like their responses about their work expectations. Again, this may be explained by those Whiteness- and Masculinity-centered ideas of structure and power that sit within most organizations (Heckler, 2019). It may be difficult for staff to accept that their decision can be considered final without one single person holding ultimate power over the organization.

Continuing these beliefs, Riley wondered about how the non-hierarchical structure of SFSJ affected the understanding of power dynamics at the organization. Since five of seven employees have “Director” in their job titles and most departments and programs only consist of one staff member, leadership looks flattened from the outside. Yet something has not connected
for all staff to feel comfortable making decisions despite this current structure. This may imply that there is more of a hierarchy than the titles suggest, or it may reflect how deeply our understanding of organization operations are rooted in hierarchy even when leadership has been redistributed. Research has also found that nonprofit managers are most effective when they are able to empathize with their employees’ experiences and acknowledge the impact of their decisions on their teams, something that is not expected of for-profit managers (Bish & Becker, 2016). This empathy adds another angle to the confusion around power and decision-making, as it is clear that all the participants care for each other and already consider how their requests affect other staff members. It may be even more difficult for SFSJ staff to make decisions when there are always so many variables at play and they are trying to balance everyone’s needs at once. It is not as simple as bringing back a mainstream hierarchical power structure to the organization, because the culture—the schema—that has been adopted at SFSJ is so deeply rooted in wholeness, empathy, trust, and collaboration. In ethical management, the focus should not be on an individual leader, but rather how leadership maintains ethical standards within the organization (Jeavons, 2016). At this point, SFSJ appears to already hold the standards and values needed for ethical management, but it is still figuring out how to apply them in every situation, and what new processes may need to replace traditional ones.

**Pressures and Influences at the Organization**

Participants were asked about other pressures and influences that affected their work, what drove change and evolution at the organization, and their dreams for the future of SFSJ. It was a surprise to see that racial identities did not play a huge role in the experiences of women of color, but it was no surprise to see that funding was at the forefront of most reflections in this area. The significance of funding reinforces how Whiteness is still deeply embedded into the
operational structure of a nonprofit; literally, it is necessary for the survival of the organization, and it may also relate to why staff continue to look for traditional hierarchical power dynamics to clarify their work.

**Pressures and Stakeholders in Decision-Making**

Across the board, the organizational values returned when participants were asked about pressures and stakeholders they considered in decision-making. Wholeness, empathy, and collaboration were evident when everyone said they centered the communities that SFSJ serves and the workloads and capacities of other staff members in their decisions. But alongside these answers, funding repeatedly surfaced as a significant pressure in decision-making. Though the organization is not committed to growth at all costs, as Isabelle pointed out, “A lot of what we’re thinking about is, can we fund this?” There was an overall acknowledgement that funding is not always easy or simple to source. Helen said that when she pursued funding for programming, she took into consideration “how we describe it, who we tell, when we tell them.” When it comes to nonprofit funding, neoliberalism and Whiteness combine to create data-driven metrics rooted in capitalist practices that define success in ways that privilege Whiteness (Dumas, 2015; Heckler, 2019). What is not always valued is the complex, messy, nuanced storytelling that SFSJ provides because it is difficult to quantify. That understanding of what funders seek versus what SFSJ wants to achieve creates a stress and pressure that came across in all the participants’ reflections. Other nonprofits deal with this pressure by adjusting their language and adopting the metrics that funders seek (Sanders & McClellan, 2014). But the schema at SFSJ calls for something different, though admittedly by Helen and other staff, it is still a work-in-progress to articulate their impact. Because of how strongly funding issues showed up in participant responses, there appears to be an ongoing tension between producing results in a manner that funders can
understand and honoring the mission of the organization. These pressures and tensions may also be directly related to how most staff seek clarity in decision-making and power at the organization. While SFSJ may have worked to develop an internal culture rooted in that complexity and wholeness, it is still an organization that must operate within the larger system of nonprofits, which includes pursuing funding as a resource and making the decisions that can help access those resources. At this point, individual leadership can only do so much; without access to resources, the schema cannot be fully installed as structure within the organization.

When asked directly about how identities played a role in these pressures and influences around decision-making, most staff did not view their race and gender markers as having any significant impact. Among the AAPI women, none felt that their race hindered them from accessing opportunities. Evelyn was the only one to wonder whether her identity was linked to an assumption of hyper-competence and resilience, but it was difficult to separate from how the role of Executive Director contributed to this perception. Existing research suggests that nonprofit organizations are often perceived as not doing enough to connect their commitment to diversity with practices that recruit and empower diverse staff, particularly among Black women (Adesaogun et al., 2015; Schwartz et al., 2011). Because the organization is so small and the current women of color at SFSJ all identify as AAPI, it is difficult to know how other BIPOC, particularly Black women, would perceive access to opportunity at the organization. That said, all participants felt that the organization consciously made space for BIPOC members to center their experiences instead of White perceptions of those experiences, and White participants were quick to note their racial privilege. Riley also named how she was unlearning her relationship with perfectionism, and that she felt the organization was still finding a balance between producing high-quality work while preserving the complex and nuanced narratives from their
communities. Tied back to funding, it can be difficult for an organization to create authentic work that also matches the expectations set by Whiteness when the original goal is to subvert mainstream storytelling.

**Driving Factors of Organizational Change**

Thinking about how change happens within an organization, the answers similarly centered staff needs and collective action. Most participants believed that staff collaboratively sharing their perspectives led to change, and Helen added how staff would also uplift the needs of the communities they served and not only their individual needs. Isabelle, Nancy, and Oliver said that global and societal issues often led to change, using the COVID-19 pandemic and anti-AAPI violence as examples of how the organization developed specific protocol to address these issues and how staff may be personally affected. Organizational values continue to play a large role as many of the changes mentioned were intended to make more space for employee wholeness.

There was one point of contrast between intention and implementation, echoing the issues that were named regarding work expectations and general decision-making. Helen and Riley both shared an example regarding the hiring of a consultant for an organization-wide project and feeling unclear about how the consultant was selected. In her own interview, Evelyn had believed the process was a success because she did not move forward with hiring the consultant until staff had approved, but Helen and Riley felt they had to approve him because there were no other options provided. In this case, while there was a standard information-gathering process to discuss the consultant that aligned with the values of the organization, there was still confusion around how the process unfolded and how final decisions were made—something that had been mentioned before. This example continues a trend that shows SFSJ has
been able to implement deeply collaborative and open processes in their work/life balance, but it is still figuring out how to bring that across all areas of decision-making and into the fabric of the organization. There appears to be a tension between how staff seek traditional power dynamics to guide them in their work while also wanting to be openly collaborative and freeform to make space for as much creativity and care as possible. Participants found it easy to adopt the schema of collaboration and support into their personal time management, but most struggled to apply that to decision-making at the organizational level. Heckler (2019) suggests that traditional markers of Whiteness and Masculinity are reinforced in organizations by being rewarding individuals who display these traits through visibility. Because staff are constantly modeling and encouraging each other to prioritize a work/life balance, they are also able to see the direct benefits to their own and others’ wellbeing. However, staff can also see—and have articulated—the struggle to source funding and match the metrics set by funders, which are rooted in those traditional markers of Whiteness. Here, the pressures caused by Whiteness again may be the contributing factor in why staff are still looking for traditional hierarchies in decision-making and organizational direction.

**Hopes and Dreams Reflecting Organizational Values**

The interviews ended with an example of change that each participant wanted to see at the organization, and everyone answered with something that would continue to reinforce organizational values or bring their experience more in line with those values. Four of the six focused on funding in their response, dreaming of a world where they could hire enough staff to dive deeper into projects and serve even more communities. Oliver wanted to turn back time and bring the relationship between external and internal values closer together earlier, believing that SFSJ consciously choosing to install wholeness as an internal value made a difference in his
work. And Helen wished to feel more heard by her first supervisors, feeling like it had affected her start at SFSJ and that this experience went against what she expected from the organization. These answers all continue to highlight how integral the culture of SFSJ has become to staff and the passion they feel toward not only the mission but how they do this work. With a majority of answers focused on funding, they also reinforce the limits of what one organization can do before structural challenges arise and how deeply staff may experience the embodied Whiteness within the nonprofit system. Participants were acutely aware of how the organization’s sustainability and growth depend upon securing funding and that access to more resources would allow them to pursue more of their meaningful work. This acknowledgement of the role of funding, even in a question about hopes and dreams, further confirms the role of Whiteness in establishing how people understand the way their organization operates. Staff may have found that their personal and organizational values were impossible to separate, but the idea of success and the ideals of Whiteness are also difficult to pull apart in this racialized structure.

**Recommendations**

While this case study focuses on only one small and specific organization, the results leave room for further examinations of other organizations similarly committed to improving the nonprofit worker experience and fundamentally changing how nonprofit organizations operate internally. Existing studies focus heavily on the experiences of leaders in these spaces, and it is important to pursue further research that includes the perspectives of a range of staff. From this study, we can see that there were some differences between the Executive Director and other staff experiences, and these variations are important to interrogate. Recommendations for future research would be to examine other organizations with flattened hierarchies, especially shared leaderships, where power and decision-making are explicitly redistributed. Collecting responses
from full staff could yield interesting results based on how people experience and understand the hierarchy, or lack thereof. In addition, larger organizations of staff sizes over 20 with at least three people on each team could provide a more generalizable look into organizational structures and the schemas that create them. Because the nonprofit industry covers a wide range of missions, future research could also include large-scale surveys that determine whether there is any pattern to the type of nonprofit work and the cultures that their organizations cultivate.

Nonprofit leaders invested in the care and wellbeing of their staff would benefit from closely examining the culture of their workplace—the schema that underwrites their rules—and what beliefs drive their everyday processes. Perhaps most tellingly in these interviews, Helen said, “Sometimes a leader has to be a leader, you know?” This came with the assumption that we all hold the same understanding of how a leader is supposed to lead. Yet the biggest potential for change in any organization is to spend time determining just that: what is a leader, what do they do, and how does that help us? Starting with where these concepts and ideas come from would provide a crucial foundation for understanding how the organization operates and create more opportunities to change those operations.

Nonprofit staff at all levels can also acknowledge the role of the organization itself. Instead of a race-neutral space, viewing the organization as a racialized entity means viewing all the organization’s operations as racialized choices. This can lead to deeper and more thorough investigations of why the organization pursues certain programs and how they implement them, which could make space for more complex ideas and new standards of success instead of those driven by Whiteness and neoliberalism. While this would not immediately solve the issue of access to funding, which is still tied to those institutional metrics, nonprofits can advocate for
their own goals and standards that are based in what they know their staff and communities need, instead of what funders want to see.

Conclusions

This case study is one specific window into a nonprofit organization, but it suggests that there is possibility and potential in changing the way organizational structures function. The findings showed that organizational and personal values play an integral role in how individuals experience the work they do and even how they choose their work. These values are also key to the first step of challenging an organizational structure, because they provide the foundation for culture and schema to develop. The organizational structure is driven by not only policies and guidelines, but how people assume and believe it is supposed to operate. Because of the deep roots of Whiteness in greater society and especially the nonprofit industrial complex, these assumptions and beliefs are tied to these ideologies, even subconsciously.

By amplifying the perspectives of an organization that is actively challenging its biases and racialized practices, this study begins to identify how an organizational structure could change, and the challenges and boundaries of trying to change within a larger system that still centers Whiteness. Even if SFSJ has not been completely successful in changing its organizational structure in all areas, they are trying, and it is clear that they will keep trying.
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