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To cite this article: Michael J. Austin , Teresa Dal Santo & David Lewis (2012) Boundary-Crossing Careers of Senior Human Service Administrators: A Cross-Case Analysis, *Administration in Social Work*, 36:2, 109-132, DOI: [10.1080/03643107.2011.564720](https://doi.org/10.1080/03643107.2011.564720)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03643107.2011.564720>



Accepted author version posted online: 14 Nov 2011.



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Boundary-Crossing Careers of Senior Human Service Administrators: A Cross-Case Analysis

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Little attention has been given to the boundary-spanning capabilities of human service managers seeking to effectively manage the relationship between public and nonprofit sector programs. This exploratory study begins to identify those capabilities by documenting the boundary-crossing career trajectories of senior human service managers and directors in the United States and United Kingdom. The purpose of the study is to identify the lessons learned by senior managers as they reflected, in retrospect, on their careers in both sectors.

KEYWORDS *boundary spanning, management, nonprofit, public sector*

INTRODUCTION

The nature and extent of the contemporary public-nonprofit partnership has created a web of mutual dependence across the public and nonprofit sectors. Yet, very little attention has been given to the capabilities needed by human service managers to effectively manage the relationship between government programs and nonprofit sector service providers. This study

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used ethnographic life-history interviews to document the career trajectories of senior managers who crossed the public-nonprofit boundaries. Using an adaptation competence framework to analyze the cases, this study identified three archetypes of boundary crossers that include client advocates, organizational change agents, and team leaders. Across these archetypes, the boundary crossers all had preconceptions about the other sector, and each came away from the experience with a changed view as well as a new appreciation of their former sector. The case studies are presented in the form of brief career profiles and the discussion includes an interpretation of the data followed by implications for future practice, research, and policy. The full case studies are available online at www.mackcenter.org and can be used as teaching cases.

This exploratory study seeks to identify the career experiences of senior human service managers and agency directors in the United States and United Kingdom who have crossed the boundaries between sectors and the lessons learned as senior managers reflected, in retrospect, on their careers in both sectors. The study builds upon the study of boundary crossing in four countries by Lewis (2009), who identified archetypes of boundary crossers whose careers reflected proactive, reactive, and opportunistic strategies. The context for this study of administrators includes a review of the literature highlighting the increasingly interrelated contractual relationships between public agencies and nonprofit service providers. The analysis then focuses on the nature of boundary crossing and the elements of career adaptations required to develop a conceptual framework within which to analyze the data. Ethnographic life-history methods were used to gather the data through extensive recorded interviews. The findings are presented in the form of brief career profiles, and the discussion of the data is followed by implications for future practice, research, and policy.

PUBLIC AND NONPROFIT SECTOR INTERDEPENDENCE

The nature and extent of the contemporary public-nonprofit relationship have created a web of mutual interdependence across the sectors. For example, nonprofit human service organizations deliver a larger share of government-funded services than government agencies themselves (Salamon, 1995). Nonprofits are increasingly dependent on the public sector for funds, while public agencies are increasingly reliant on nonprofits for services. The interdependence occurs when one organization (public) provides both resources to and depends upon the services of another organization (nonprofit) and therefore the actions of one sector are dependent upon the actions of the other (Saidel, 1989).

The increasingly blurred boundaries between sectors raise concerns that nonprofit and public-sector organizations are becoming more similar

(Gibelman & Demone, 1989). For example, the growing interdependence between the sectors has resulted in the nonprofit sector acting as a substitute for an extension of government, rather than retaining its traditional identity as an alternative supplement or complement to public services (Kramer, 1994; Smith & Lipsky, 1993). Others have argued that government and nonprofit organizations share similar goals and structures and therefore coordination between the sectors should be expected in order to meet the needs of both sectors (Salamon, 1995).

There are differing opinions about the nature of the interdependence between the public and nonprofit sectors. Some argue for greater separation and competition between the sectors to ensure nonprofit survival, including the infusion of for-profit sector capabilities to help nonprofits achieve self-sufficiency and independence (Greenlee & Tuckman, 2007). Others observe that the sectors need to develop more collaborative arrangements in order to combine the strengths of government with those of nonprofit service delivery approaches (Coston, 1998; Salamon, 1995).

Advantages and Disadvantages of Public-Nonprofit Contracting

Public sector contracting with nonprofit organizations offers a number of advantages associated with fulfilling public agency legislative mandates (Gibelman & Demone, 1989). Since nonprofit organizations are experts in developing and delivering services to their specified populations, contracting offers government an opportunity to deliver more effective, flexible, higher quality, and specialized services along with more consumer choice (Austin, 2003). Furthermore, public funds can help nonprofits explore new service delivery techniques, including demonstration projects, cooperative relations, and service delivery networks. Contracting with nonprofit organizations also enables government to reach difficult-to-access communities and disadvantaged populations (Anderson, 2004). For nonprofits, a principal advantage of contracting with government is that contracts provide the financial resources necessary for nonprofits to serve its clientele and expand service delivery (Kramer, 1989). Both the stability and predictability of revenue streams offer nonprofits an ability to budget for staffing and services over time.

Despite these benefits, public-nonprofit contracts pose some disadvantages for nonprofit organizations. Applying for government grants is time and labor intensive, can distract from the original service mission (Rushton & Brookes, 2007), and requires a significant level of professional expertise (Gronbjerg, 1991; Smith & Lipsky, 1993). Also, nonprofit organizations can become overly dependent on government sources of revenue (Alexander, 1999; Smith & Lipsky, 1993), can experience a loss of independence and autonomy (Hall, 1987), and can experience a loss of autonomy when limitations are placed on their capacity to engage in legislative advocacy

(Ebaugh, Chafetz, & Pipes, 2005; McBeath, & Meezan, 2006; Ostrander, 1989; Sidel & Harlan, 1998).

COMPONENTS OF ADAPTIVE COMPETENCE ACROSS SECTORS

Within the context of public-nonprofit inter-dependence, little attention has been given to the movement of managers between the public and nonprofit sectors (Lewis, 2008). Without knowing the percentage of managers who have crossed the boundaries between the nonprofit and the public sectors during their careers in human services, it is important to explore the nature of boundary-crossing and how it might impact service delivery and management processes. How can boundaries be defined beyond the obvious distinctions of being paid a salary by a governmental agency or a nonprofit organization? To what extent do the public and nonprofit sectors require an adaptive workforce along with supportive career systems that enhance boundary crossing? These general questions provide the context in which this exploratory study is located.

Boundary crossing can be viewed as a form of “work role transition” in which managers seek to make sense of their new environment and adjust accordingly (Nicholson, 1984). Within the context of organizational careers, Morrison and Hall (2002) developed the concept of “adaptive competence” as the ability to continuously maintain congruence between one’s personal identity and those behaviors that are timely and appropriate responses to the ever-changing demands of new organizational environments. They argue that adaptive competence is made up of three elements that allow for self-directed adaptive change—namely, personal, role, and integrative components. The *personal* (internal) component is the continual striving for a more complete and accurate fund of knowledge about the self that can modify or maintain one’s identity. The *role* development (response learning) is the conscious predisposition to continuously scan and read external signals and to develop or update a diverse set of role behaviors so that they maintain an effective response to constantly changing environmental requirements in order to influence the environment. The third component of adaptive competence, *integrative* potential, is the ability to continuously maintain congruence between one’s personal identity and those behaviors that are timely and appropriate responses to the ever-changing demands of the environment. Morrison and Hall (2002) also include the concept of “adaptive motivation,” which is the willingness to develop and apply adaptive competence to a given situation. Both adaptive competence and motivation can equip managers to change or adapt when engaged in boundary crossing.

The elements of adaptive competencies can be seen in a study of boundary crossing by Lewis (2009), who found that examining the career

trajectories of individuals as they crossed sector boundaries provided a unique vantage point to view the adaptation of an individual's personal and role perspectives, as well as their view of the sector itself. Lewis (2009) notes that the types of boundary crossers varied in their adaptive 'sense-making' at the individual, organizational, or sector levels, and categorized their motivations for boundary crossing as *reactive*, *opportunistic*, or *proactive* strategies. The proactive strategy at the individual level is essentially goal-oriented entrepreneurial behaviors by managers with the goal of either improving their own job satisfaction or increasing their leverage to bring about change. At the organizational level, managers innovate by taking ideas from one sector to another, and at the sector level managers view the boundary crossing as career enhancing. In contrast, the opportunistic strategy is comprised of less planned activity and more situation-specific behaviors (individual) that respond to unexpected opportunities (organizational) and purposely seek to straddle both sectors (sector). And, finally, the reactive strategy is less a response to the "pull" of opportunity and more of a "push" related to leaving a less than satisfactory situation at all three levels (individual, organizational, and sector). As a distinctive form of 'boundary spanning' (Noble & Jones, 2006; Robertson, 1995; Williams, 2002), boundary crossing provides an opportunity to see how workplace knowledge is created and shared. This exploratory study expands upon the individual narratives captured by Lewis (2009) to explore the broader implications of sector boundary crossing for managing human service organizations.

METHODS

Building on the life history ethnographic approach, interviews were conducted from July 2008 through January 2009 to document the career trajectories of seven San Francisco Bay Area and two United Kingdom human service managers at key points in their careers as they crossed the boundaries of public and nonprofit sectors. The study examines the components of adaptive boundary crossing (sense making) and the motivations and outcome of the boundary crossings.

The life history method is defined by Watson and Watson-Franke (1985) as "any retrospective account by the individual of his [or her] life in whole or part, in written or oral form, that has been elicited or prompted by another person". In order to investigate boundary crossing, the aim was to document a person's experience of work. The method employed in this study took the form of what Ladkin (1999) calls 'life-work history' in contrast to the more open-ended life history approach. A more detailed discussion of the life-work history approach can be found in Lewis (2008).

Non-random sampling was used to identify boundary-crossing informants for detailed life-work histories. This process followed the 'purposive'

or 'theoretical' sampling approach that reflects the 'grounded theory' approach of Glaser and Strauss (1967), where informants are selected to provide a diverse set of experiences in both public and nonprofit sector human service organizations along with demographic diversity related to gender and race. The selection of interviewees was based on personal knowledge of the experiences and diversity of the nine key informants (five women and four men, two African-Americans, and one Asian American). Since there is no way to determine the size of the population of boundary crossers, this small sample provided the foundation for this exploratory study. Interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes and were recorded using digital technology. The full names of these individuals have been deleted and there is no identification of the agencies in which they worked or currently work.

FINDINGS

A set of boundary-crossing archetypes emerged from a review of the interviews that capture the range of boundary-crossing experiences. The findings are presented in the form of brief case vignettes featuring illustrations of boundary-crossing adaptive competence and motivations along with lessons learned. More complete case descriptions can be found in Austin (2010).

Client Advocates

The first category of boundary crossing human services professionals features the strong professional identity of client advocates. These boundary crossers are motivated by their long-term personal interests, values, and goals to advocate on behalf of the plight of poor children and families in the nonprofit sector. When crossing boundaries into the public sector these individuals maintain their advocate identity and, if the agency is incongruent with their professional values, they attempt to: 1) change that organization to fit their values and goals, 2) adapt by leaving, or 3) are fired for maintaining their ideals.

CASE 1: MARGARET

Margaret's mother was a social worker whose heroine was Jane Adams, and both women inspired Margaret to pursue her own career in social work and her first job at a New York City settlement house. After relocating to California she "found the social service delivery system much less developed than on the East Coast with much more emphasis on the public social service system and much less on the private nonprofit sector." Her social work career in various nonprofits "involved a lot of group work and community

building” and “interpreted mental health service very broadly and turned traditional mental health work into community work and ultimately community mental health.” In addition, she left several positions because she “got into so many disagreements with staff over rules that did not support clients” and reflected her early roots in advocating for children or “got into a big fight with the agency . . . as a result of advocating for more services for clients who possessed a mix of disabilities.”

Eventually Margaret found the ideal position for her community advocacy and spent the majority of her career as the executive director of a nonprofit children and youth services organization advocating and planning for children’s services. She grew the organization from its initial focus on juvenile justice and child welfare reform to a comprehensive advocacy agenda for all children, such as housing, childcare, schools, health and social services, etc.

Margaret’s transition from the nonprofit to the public sector came later in her career when the newly elected mayor asked her to take over the city Department of Children, Youth, and Families that she had helped create. Her management style in the public sector was the same proactive approach that she had used throughout her career and is illustrated by the following quote: “I arrived with a long career as a community advocate and thought that I would do the same thing from inside city government.”

The boundary crossing that Margaret experienced was motivated by her desire to enter government in order to bring about change and gain a different perspective of the nonprofit sector from within government. “It’s great to have been in the community and then go into government at a point where you know enough and are confident enough to not be caught by the constraints of government. However, when my friends in the community began to criticize the mayor about his budget priorities, I sometimes found it difficult to respond to my advocacy friends when I am defending the mayor’s priorities. It was very upsetting to me but was part of my job. I have good enough rapport with the community constituency to acknowledge our differences but I know that I’ll pay a price for it. . . . The truth is that there are initiatives that I would like to launch that I don’t think would happen if they all required being vetted in multiple public forums due to their complexity.”

CASE 2: PAT

Pat is an African-American woman whose father was a lawyer and mother was a teacher. As she began her career as a social worker in nonprofit agencies, she “wanted to help people and particularly children that didn’t have the kind of family support that they needed, and that has been the driver of my entire career.” She worked for children’s agencies where “I came up against the disrespectful treatment of the birth mother in public sector

agencies and felt badly for those mothers having to interact in that system.” Her work with unwed mothers who had babies that they did not want encouraged her to go to work in family planning in the public sector at the city health department. She eventually got a master’s degree in public health. She worked at several nonprofit children and family agencies with high levels of government funding. She became the executive director of two nonprofits in African-American communities that were about to fall apart, and it was her job to revive them by revising policies, hiring and training strong staff, and securing additional funding.

Eventually she was recruited by a nonprofit with service contracts from several public agencies. “One of the county programs reflected an insensitivity to the needs of children who were being removed from their families in a typical bureaucratic way.” She was promoted to regional director of the agency, but quit after having a conflict with the unethical behavior of the new statewide director of the agency. She ended up being recruited by a foundation to run their new child welfare initiative, which was “a growth experience and was really the place to learn new things and provided me with a way to broaden my impact on the field. . . . If grant applicants had a good, creative idea and the ability to do the work, then we would work really closely with them to help them with finding success.”

Pat’s career transition from the nonprofit to the public sector came when she was recruited from the foundation to become a county child welfare director. She told the new human services director that she “was not interested, but he came back around one or two more times and really pursued me because he wasn’t finding the right person for the position. He was in crisis and the state was trying to take over the program for being out of compliance with regulations. He convinced me that I brought something that they desperately needed, so I decided to make the move.” While at the county agency she was able to bring the program back into compliance with state regulations. Eventually, a new mayor was elected, her boss was fired, and she did not have the same support from the new director, so she transferred to another department and eventually went back to the nonprofit foundation that she had left to take the public sector position.

One of the key boundary-crossing transitions occurred during her transition from the public sector back to the nonprofit foundation. She found that she “had so much more experience from my work in government that I thought was useful to the foundation. For example, during my previous employment at the foundation, we provided more support for innovations being implemented by nonprofits that would not necessarily impact government but we would hope that it would. After I got back, there was a dramatic shift of grantmaking to help nonprofits and government work together to make change. Funding of nonprofits and government was new and a lot of foundations won’t do it. I felt strongly about the need to develop stronger partnerships between nonprofits and the local government.”

During her final year at the foundation, she helped to fund some programs that featured practices related to successfully locating permanent families for teenagers in the child welfare system rather than having them age-out with dismal outcomes (e.g., homelessness, unemployment, substance abuse, and school failure). The findings were shared regionally and nationally with the child welfare community. Ultimately, she left the foundation to start a non-profit program by the foundation and worked in partnership with a number of counties to help them institute this new youth permanency practice that sought to improve permanency outcomes for teenagers. Based on that work and three more national conferences, a movement was begun.

CASE 3: BRIAN

Early in his career, Brian served in the Marine Corps and upon discharge went immediately to work in a Catholic group home for boys in a predominantly African-American neighborhood. The agency sent him back to school for a graduate degree in social work and he eventually became the agency's executive director. Eventually, he went to work for the Peace Corps and spent two years in Africa: "It was a temptation for me to change career tracks and look at overseas work, but we got caught up in violent government change and it was time to come home and get back in the safe world that we knew."

Upon his return he worked in the state capital for an advocacy organization representing children's service providers. Based on this experience, he was recruited to serve as executive director of one of these provider agencies in another part of the state that included a mix of residential and community-based mental health services and foster family care and family preservation services. "I loved the agency because it still gave me some contact with the kids." The agency provided him with a chance to return to running an organization where he had the opportunity to use his policy advocacy experience by participating in the city's planning council, which included participants from universities, business, government, and nonprofits. "It was an exciting time for me and it helped me position the agency for a higher profile in a very large county and at the same time meet some of my own advocacy needs."

Brian's next transition from the nonprofit sector to government came after a mayoral election in his hometown, where "a number of people who knew the new mayor and knew me recommended me for the position of director of the city's Department of Human Services." The move "was coming home and it was a community that I knew pretty well . . . and I was challenged by it." He left that politically appointed position after four years when the mayor was not re-elected. He was recruited to work for a large national for-profit consulting firm that worked with state and local governments on

human service programs. Within a few years, he was recruited back to the nonprofit sector to become director of a large Catholic youth organization that eventually merged with the large Catholic social service agency where he served as executive director until his retirement.

Brian's boundary-crossing experiences included all three sectors and reflected a keen interest in the politics associated with each position. His experiences in the Marine Corp, Peace Corp, city government, legislative branch of state government, children's residential treatment, and Catholic social services reflected a strong commitment to advocacy on behalf of others. In his position in the public sector he found himself "lobbied by advocacy organizations and provider groups. As a city of activists, everybody's got something to say on every issue. I have never been in a job that had more of an incredible rush because of the interface of politics, policy, and service delivery where every day revealed different issues that were both challenging and fascinating."

Organizational Change Agents

The second category of boundary crossers can be characterized as individuals motivated by their strong organizational knowledge and skills derived from training and experience in delivering services in either the nonprofit or public sector. They took on the mantle of social engineers as they sought to make the role of agencies more efficient and responsive to the needs of the community. They dealt with a variety of challenges by drawing upon their experiences in modifying organizational structures and processes. These individuals often sought boundary-crossing opportunities in order to pursue new challenges in applying their skills and experiences in a new setting.

CASE 4: WILL

Will was a long-time employee of a nonprofit Catholic social service agency committed to social justice issues in the area of housing and the prevention of gentrification (e.g., rent control and condominium conversion). He also worked as a community organizer in community development related to immigration and eventually became the executive director of the agency. His "view of government was rather limited and largely negative," and he felt "government agencies were actively driving poor people out of their homes by buying up properties for redevelopment."

His transition to the public sector came "because he felt a chill had gone through the religious organization" with the appointment of a new conservative religious leader. The choice to move to the public sector in an idyllic neighboring county was enhanced by a sense of the county being a progressive, political community with a small and manageable agency;

however, he “overestimated the breadth of progressive activism that turned out to be more rooted in environmental issues than economic and social justice.” He felt the pull to work in government because there was “little prospect of community change related to an unjust social order, and local governments were doing the most to help poor people in creative ways, more than any of the nonprofit agencies.” His boss very explicitly said that she hired him to be a “social engineer,” not a traditional “welfare director.”

His subsequent career move within the public sector was a return to the city where he had been director of the nonprofit. He became the director of an urban county human services department during the welfare reform era that gave him the opportunity to be a social engineer by “implementing reform in a progressive environment that would not be punitive and use the reform as an excuse to turn people away from services.”

Throughout his career he sought to bring about change and as he moved up into administrative positions, beginning with his nonprofit experience when he began to “shape the agency’s focus to see how we could influence local government.” In contrast, his move to the public sector allowed him to become a social engineer of organizational change. In terms of lessons learned, he was able to transfer his nonprofit community organizing skills by facilitating organizational problem-solving “behind the scenes so that other people can own the conversation and thereby avoid being in the position as agency director of simply presenting something as a revealed truth. This process was part of my community organizer training.”

CASE 5: RODGER

Rodger is an Asian American who grew up in a poor, largely African-American neighborhood during the civil rights era of the 1960s. During his senior year in college, he volunteered in a mental health clinic in San Francisco’s Chinatown and developed an interest in improving Asian mental health services while pursuing a doctorate in clinical psychology. While in graduate school, he worked in a private nonprofit Asian community mental health agency. His part-time job led to a decade-long career of increasing responsibilities. By advocating for Asian mental health policies and increased funding, he eventually advanced to the level of executive director where he helped to expand the staff from 10 to 50 and the budget from \$200,000 to \$1.4 million, primarily through grants.

Rodger’s unusual transition from the nonprofit to the public sector was based on an invitation by the county mental health department director to serve as a volunteer on the department’s management council working on county policy and managerial issues. He was eventually hired as assistant agency director to the county health care services agency. Ultimately, his reputation as a problem solver led to his appointment by the Board of Supervisors as the director of the county social services agency.

After nine years, he was recruited to become the director of a large county health and social service agency in another part of the state because of his unique background in both health and social services. In his new position he worked to build bridges between the public and nonprofit sectors that had a history of mistrust, broken promises, and lack of cooperation. He created in his department a new resource development unit to assist nonprofits by identifying grant funding sources, allocating funds for nonprofits to hire grant writers, sponsored workshops and training sessions for nonprofits, and convening a symposium of federal, state, and local funders as well as foundations to focus on sustainability and “shared responsibilities for shared outcomes.” None of this had ever happened before. This collaborative approach had been developed in his previous county experience, but the new technical assistance program evolved into a more comprehensive approach. His goal was “to use public money to stimulate innovation and develop a more flexible approach to dispense funding outside the usual county contracting process.”

Rodger’s boundary-crossing experience began with the transition from the nonprofit sector to the public sector, where he learned that government could not provide all the needed services and had to rely on the nonprofit sector by forming meaningful contractual relationships. He was sensitive to the needs and challenges of nonprofit agencies, especially the need to strengthen public-private relationships by encouraging government agencies to transcend the funder role by helping to sustain nonprofit community-based organizations that were so dependent on time-limited and episodic foundation funding. Despite his successes in the public sector and the politics of public life, he found the impediments of public-sector bureaucracies require a continuous generation of creative solutions to circumvent them.

CASE 6: MARTIN

Martin was brought up in a very political family in the United Kingdom and had fleeting political ambitions but instead studied public administration and spent the majority of his career as a public servant in the national prison service. “In public administration I found everything I wanted. It was managerially challenging, trying to help hugely disadvantaged people get a reasonable deal.” He saw the work as being about “running a service, making the agency a more decent place, and trying to affect change, which I thought had been all but abandoned.” He eventually moved to a post in the home office of the national government where he was accountable for running two services, but over time he also became the principal policy maker. He was eventually promoted by someone who thought he “might have the makings for moving to the senior level of national government.” He eventually was promoted to a position at headquarters, which was “another stroke of luck which ultimately changes your life.” He eventually became

a senior civil servant leading major policy issues. Political change in the cabinet made the job difficult, and he found that “I had to either put up with it or go, and I decided to go. I never quite started looking for anything else but I started thinking about leaving and then, supporting my notion that this all is largely luck, a head hunter called about a job at a nonprofit children’s agency.”

Martin’s transition from the public to the nonprofit sector occurred late in his career. He states, “The attraction to working there started to build up very slowly to the point at which I became very keen. I had the advantage from day one of working with an extraordinary group of trustees. I took about three months before giving my opinion on almost anything. By waiting, I started to convince people that I might be a force for good in the organization. But there were still some people, because of my past in public service, who were unconvinced by what I was trying to do.”

His approach to nonprofit work is to apply the principles of public sector management to nonprofits by “measuring what we do by using key performance indicators, keeping to budget, and striving for greater value for money. Some people in the charitable sector (nonprofit) would find this ‘managerialist’ approach somewhat to be at odds with the values of charitable work. In my view, it’s absolutely in parallel with our values, because if we don’t spend the money we get from individuals effectively, then that would be outrageous. There is often discomfort with anything remotely approaching hard-nosed management in the charitable sector.”

Martin’s boundary crossing from an extensive career in government to the last few years in one of the largest countrywide nonprofit children’s organization is still in its infancy. “I still see myself as essentially a public sector person helping to deliver publicly funded services. I no longer think it matters who delivers them, as long as they are delivered at high quality to the public. Most of our work is funded by [public sector] local authorities for children who are in need. The fact that we must compete for funding with other competent organizations means the public gets a good deal as a result.”

Martin’s views of the nonprofit sector have also changed: “Previously, I had not been particularly impressed with the voluntary sector. I thought some of the advocacy campaign organizations that I came across were self-righteous and deeply irritating. As a government official, I had contracted out a lot of service provision work to the voluntary sector, and thought as service deliverers they were unreliable. So I certainly was not looking for a move to the voluntary sector but I am so glad that I did.”

Team Leaders

Boundary crossers who view themselves as pragmatic problem solvers and seem to fully integrate their personal and role identities by adapting to any

opportunity or new territory can be categorized as team leaders. They often reflect the capacity to bring people together by using a high level of interpersonal skills and the ability to mentor others. By effectively integrating their professional identity and managerial roles, they are able to generate timely and appropriate responses to the ever-changing demands of their environment. Their motivation for crossing boundaries is often external to their professional or role identities, including the challenges of family relocation or the process of recruitment. Their motivations often relate to the opportunity to more closely align their professional and role identities.

CASE 7: NANCY

Nancy has a degree in social work and was employed for the majority of her career in various government health departments, first as the administrative director of medical and psychiatric services for city jails, which she left when her department was subsumed under the management of a new director who dismantled her department. After taking a maternity leave, she returned to the health department in a mid-level manager position on a grant-funded project investigating health care for the homeless.

Her next career transition occurred when her husband received a short-term transfer to a position in the southern part of the state. In her new location, she used her connections and “called everyone” she knew and ultimately was hired as a consultant in large urban health department. While taking a civil service exam in preparation for a more permanent assignment, the new health department director turned out to be someone she knew from her home city; he hired her as an assistant and she ultimately became his deputy director. Eventually, her husband’s job ended and she heard about a job as the county health and human services director in the northern part of the state. She did a lot of work in preparation for the job and “flew up a couple of times and spent hours in the library trying to learn about the community and the key players, reading every newspaper article from the past 15 years to identify the social issues and the membership list of nonprofits.” As a result she was very well prepared as an outsider and was offered the position, which she held for several years.

The transition from the public to the nonprofit sector occurred late in her career. While she loved her public sector job, her family was miserable in the new community and wanted to return to their home city. She went “quietly through the recruitment process” for a new job as executive director of a nonprofit social services agency and was successful. Her transition clearly integrates the personal and role perspectives reflected by her planned activity toward a goal. However, the transition was less about remuneration or job satisfaction and more about making her family happy. She also acquired a more positive view of the nonprofit sector from her new vantage point and

also feels like the nonprofit sector is where she really ‘belongs.’ She thought that the move from a public sector agency “with a \$200 million public sector budget to one with \$25 million nonprofit sector budget would be an easy transition.” But it was not any easier: “It was challenging just in a different way—like night and day.”

CASE 8: OLIVIA

Olivia spent her early career as a social worker in a large county department of social services and transitioned through the agency to take advantage of opportunities within the agency to obtain an MSW degree while on salary. She went back and forth in the agency from direct service supervision to program policy analyst work, depending on the availability of work and the assignments and promotions made possible by supervisors. Subsequently, she made several career transitions to and from county and state public agencies because of her husband’s frequent transfers in and out of government political appointments. While working full-time, she completed a part-time doctoral program in a public administration for working administrators.

She eventually “retired” from the county to finish her dissertation while working on a federal grant that she had secured. It was at this time that her career trajectory crossed into the nonprofit sector when she moved out of state, after a divorce, to live near her child and grandchild. A headhunter recruited her to work for a national well-endowed nonprofit children’s agency as a program manager. While she had never worked for a nonprofit, she had often contracted with them over the years. However, she was shocked by the large size of the endowment and the minimal attention paid to expenditures while working with hard-to-place kids. Compared to the public sector, she found this a very unusual work environment. Because of a re-marriage to her previous husband and his job demands, she transitioned back to the public sector and “felt like I was back in reality.” However, when her political appointment ended, she was again recruited to work for the same nonprofit children’s agency. “The thought of working for an agency that has a whole lot of money to invest in a poor community appealed to me. I went into denial about the unrealistic approach based on so much money.” Eventually, she had to leave again because the leader of the agency “had no idea about what I was trying to do because he had never set foot in a public child welfare office and I just didn’t want to deal with this ineffective way of doing business.”

Her next job in the nonprofit sector service with neglected and abused children proved to be attractive as “we are actually doing the work funded by the county child welfare programs.” “Even though I work for a nonprofit that is 99% funded by public money, it is a pleasure to work for some counties that are appreciative of the role that nonprofits play.”

CASE 9: ALISON

Alison grew up as the daughter of a head gardener at a private boy's school, where she often worked on Saturdays. Her mother was a residential social worker who helped Alison find jobs at the residential home for children during vacations from her university studies. Alison worked for a London local authority as a committee clerk and rose to become a council clerk, which led to a path up the career ladder in the public sector. She was thinking of leaving London when "a job came up" as an assistant to the chief executive of city council, which was mostly policy work, briefing papers, special projects, and liaisons with the voluntary sector. The local authority often had an uneasy relationship with the voluntary sector based on their view that it was run by middle-class "do-gooders," whereas the local authority saw itself as trying to meet the needs of all the people in the community. Members of the voluntary sector would often seek her advice about how to go about working with local government, especially with whom to approach and how decisions were made.

In reflecting on her transition from the public to the nonprofit sector, she noted that she had become "bored with my government job and living in a small place. . . . There are very few jobs there. I began to think it was time to do something different. I had developed a growing interest in the voluntary sector and its 'frontline work.' I had gotten involved with HIV/AIDS work because it was an issue that affected some friends of mine. I also decided to try to combine my interest in working in the voluntary sector with the fact I had never worked abroad. So I applied to Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO)." At her first post in Eastern Europe she became the fundraiser, "because that was really the best help I could give them. . . . Part of my job was to show that if you could help establish themselves as an organization with a really good reputation, then people would want to do repeat business with you."

Transferring to another post with VSO, "my job was to raise funds internationally, because there wasn't anything available locally. I used my various contacts." In addition, she used her local authority experience to set up some projects with the local government. Alison eventually returned to the UK to take a public sector job in grants management, where she assessed grant applications and managed a caseload of about 40 grantees. Subsequently, she got a position at a nonprofit and now thinks of herself as more of a 'voluntary sector person' than a public sector one, "but in this nonprofit sector job I deal with a lot of local authorities and public sector bodies and find myself defending public sector organizations in discussions with my colleagues." For example, with regard to governmental roles and procedures, she finds herself saying, "There is a reason for these procedures." Her attitude about nonprofits has changed over time and she notes, "Once the voluntary sector seemed very amateur, but now it is viewed as a

set of specialized organizations able to deliver professional services with government funding. The third sector now works 'alongside' the public sector, but nonprofits are sometimes prevented from focusing exclusively on their mission because we are so immersed in government-supported 'mainstream services.'"

Alison also reflected on the professional growth derived from her public sector experience when contrasting it with the nonprofit sector. "What I've really appreciated about working in the nonprofit agency is that you have freedom. You are not constrained in what you do when I compare my experience with the public sector. If you see a problem and can find the energy, the resources, and time, you can generate ideas for action. In the public sector, you can only do what you have the power to do within certain set agendas." From a human resources perspective, she finds that the nonprofit sector is much more flexible and encourages people to move around and try out different approaches, "whereas the public sector tends to view people in a particular way and you have to fit into a particular box."

DISCUSSION

Very little attention has been given to the career dynamics of human service managers with experience in managing both public sector government programs and nonprofit sector services. This exploratory study sought to capture the boundary-crossing changes in the personal and role perspectives of senior human service managers and agency directors. The purpose of the study was to identify: 1) the dynamics of people's career trajectories between the sectors; 2) how their personal, role, and integrative perspectives develop across the nonprofit and public sectors; and 3) the means to strengthen the capacity of both sectors.

Client Advocates

The client advocate type of administrator often has a proactive management style that was developed in a nonprofit career and utilized in public sector experiences as demonstrated by a commitment to professional values. Without public sector support for their values, several administrators left their positions.

In order for advocate administrators to be effective in the public sector, they need to have the experience, knowledge, and confidence to operate within the constraints of government. They also learn through this experience that their public sector actions designed to benefit clients could also be viewed as obstructionist by the nonprofit advocacy organizations. For example, when advocacy organizations and provider groups lobby public sector

administrators, they are often challenged by the politics, policy, and service delivery pressures that they experience as boundary crossers.

In contrast, the traditional roles played by individuals in the nonprofit sector include serving as an early warning system that can identify problems or service gaps and advocate for them so that government can understand and address them. Their nonprofit sector roles can inhibit them from engaging in advocacy because of their current funding contracts with the public sector.

Organizational Change Agents

Boundary-crossing administrators with an orientation to organizational change and policy advocacy display an array of skills and abilities necessary to improve organizations and address the needs of its various stakeholders. Often their training and experience are motivations to move from one sector to another in order to use their acquired organizational strengths developed in their former sector to make real changes in their new sector. The challenge of innovating and developing flexibility in policies and practices seems to motivate these boundary crossers.

These boundary crossers also bring with them an array of organizational sensitivities and perspectives that they use to better serve their various stakeholders as they seek to strengthen public-private relationships and/or apply the principles of public sector management to nonprofits or vice versa. In their efforts to use knowledge, connections, and skills in the new sector that they have entered, they tend to focus more on the organizational issues and less on interpersonal issues. Despite their successes as organizational change agents, these boundary crossers encounter significant political challenges that often lead them to relocate either in a politically congruent public agency or back to the nonprofit sector.

Team Leaders

Boundary crossers who function as team leaders display significant adaptive competencies as illustrated by their self-confidence and role responses to the ever-changing demands of the environment. They can effectively scan and read the environment (inside and outside of organizations) to identify when changes are needed and new skills required. For example, one boundary crosser “transitioned through the agency to take advantage of opportunities within the agency to obtain an MSW degree while on salary” and “went back and forth in the agency from direct service supervision to program policy analyst work, depending on the availability of work and the assignments and promotions made possible by supervisors.” When faced with the prospect of moving on, they went back to school, called everyone they

knew, made preparations to take civil service exams, and learned about the community and the key players. The motivations to cross boundaries for these individuals were often external to their professional or role identities and included family relocation, recruitment, or an opportunity to closely align their professional and organizational identities.

In summary, these individuals used their considerable interpersonal teamwork and reflective capacities to understand and integrate their experiences in the public and nonprofit sectors. They appear to be keenly aware of the personal and role demands in both sectors. They learned about the flow of funding from the public to nonprofit sectors, the impact of public policy on nonprofits, the role of public employee unions, the importance of the mission of nonprofits, and the freedom and flexibility of the nonprofit sector in supporting different roles and approaches.

One of the universal experiences of all the boundary crossers was the learning that occurred when crossing boundaries. Everyone reported having had a preconceived notion about the other sector, and each came away from the experience with a changed view as well as a new understanding of their former sector.

IMPLICATIONS

Sensitizing the Public Sector

The case vignettes of boundary crossers illustrate the important role they can play in bringing the “client voice” from the nonprofit sector to the attention of the public sector. When administrators who reflect a client-advocate, team leader, or organizational change agent orientation cross over from the nonprofit sector to the public sector, they help to sensitize government to its mission of service to the community and its citizens within the context of regulation, politics, and power.

The nonprofit boundary crossers to the public sector also provide firsthand knowledge of the impact of public policies on individuals and groups in the community as they negotiate and implement contracted services. The public sector often does not have the capacity to see firsthand the consequences of its policy decisions.

Finally, the public sector can benefit from an infusion of the nonprofit sector’s service delivery values of listening, consensus building, cultural competence, and client satisfaction. In contrast, the case studies of individuals with government experience reported that their work revolved around roles and activities such as developing procedures, writing reports, monitoring services, developing policy, requesting proposals, and briefing leaders. The nonprofit sector boundary crossers help to soften the bureaucratic approach to policies and procedures by interjecting the community’s experience and the importance of service values.

Sensitizing the Nonprofit Sector

Boundary crossing from the public to the nonprofit sector also has implications for managing contracted services. First, boundary crossers from the public sector often bring with them a big-picture perspective related to policy development and implementation regarding the major social problems facing society (e.g., homelessness and housing, child welfare, domestic violence, prisons, and health care reform). The administrators in our case studies brought with them a wide range of understanding of how to interpret public policies and funding practices. The public-sector experiences also illustrated a range of expertise in promoting accountability and measuring outcomes. The government administrators often have the resources and expertise to monitor funding and develop tools for assessing outcomes. In addition, many of the administrators in our cases who had accumulated a significant amount of time in the public sector had considerable involvement in measuring performance and outcomes in relation to service contracting. While none of our cases illustrated the significant public sector investment in information systems, this expertise can also benefit the nonprofit sector.

Finally, experience in the public sector provides administrators with an understanding of how personal troubles are translated into public policy. In being responsive to the entire community, public sector administrators learn how to deal with multiple stakeholders, including advocacy organizations, business interests, multiple levels of government, and political constituents. In addition, multiple interest groups often lobby public sector administrators, and these sources of information need to be managed.

Facilitating Boundary Crossing

With few exceptions (occasional reassignments in the UK and inter-governmental personnel transfers between levels of government in the United States—both short-term experiences), there are few support mechanisms for those who cross over between the nonprofit and public sectors. As illustrated by the case vignettes, boundary crossing can result in significant impact on the individuals and organizations involved. On the individual level, moving back and forth across the nonprofit and public sectors can significantly impact the lives of administrators. Managers often sacrifice seniority, retirement benefits, insurance, and compensation in their transfers back and forth across the sectors, especially women who often carry the weight of family transitions and care-giving demands. For example, while Olivia was able to maintain her public-sector benefits as she transitioned to and from several county and state public agencies, this was not possible in the nonprofit sector. Creating a mechanism that would support the career transfers between the nonprofit and public sectors could address one or more of the following objectives: 1) strengthen management capabilities to

be able to operate effectively in both sectors; 2) assist the transfer and use of new technologies for organizational problem solving within and between the sectors; 3) create an environment for more effective government policy and program development; and 4) provide experience that would strengthen the capacities of both sectors, especially enhanced inter-organizational relations.

From an organizational perspective, this study begins to identify the benefits of boundary crossing for both the public and nonprofit sectors by sharing experience and expertise that can strengthen organizations in both sectors. For example, Rodger created a new nonprofit resource development unit inside a public sector organization “to use public money to stimulate innovation and develop a more flexible approach to dispense funding outside the usual county contracting process,” especially since foundations are increasingly interested in projects that develop stronger relationships between nonprofits and local government. Finally, managers with public sector experience can empower nonprofits in the same way that administrators with nonprofit sector experience can enlighten public sector policy and programs.

LIMITATIONS

There are several limitations to generalizing from this exploratory study. First, a broader sample of respondents is needed to expand the depth and breadth of inquiry needed to address the range of boundary-crossing issues and generalize from the findings. Second, other data sources (e.g., agency documents, perceptions of ‘direct reports,’ perceptions of nonprofit and public sector board members) would help to triangulate the findings beyond the retrospective, and potentially biased, recollections of the respondents as well as the limitations imposed by one interviewer. Third, with the first two limitations addressed, future studies that build upon this exploratory study would benefit from further refinement of the boundary-crossing process with respect to identifying different types of boundary-crossing as well as additional in-depth investigation of the capacities of boundary-crossers to manage public-nonprofit sector relations. And fourth, the identification of archetypes often relies on the judgments of the investigators with respect to content analyzing the interview transcripts. While gender, race, and years of experience in each sector might have led to the construction of different archetypes, the three that emerged had their roots in the respective careers of client-centered practice (e.g., advocacy), managing in highly politicized environments (e.g., organizational change agents), and promoting intra- and inter-agency collaboration (e.g., teamwork). These practice-based archetypes related to the human services build upon the previous research that identified more generic organizational characteristics of management styles (e.g., reactive, proactive, and opportunistic) identified by

Lewis (2009). Despite these limitations, this exploratory study provides directions for future research on understanding the career trajectories of human service administrators whose careers span both the public and nonprofit sectors.

CONCLUSION

This study provides important insights into the personal and role behaviors needed to effectively cross public and nonprofit sector boundaries by using ethnographic life-history interviews to document the career trajectories of boundary-crossing senior managers. The data from this exploratory study suggest that, while there may be distinctive benefits associated with bringing ideas or values from one sector into the other, there are also positive benefits for individual and organization capacity-building that arise from crossing boundaries from either direction. The preconceptions about the cultures of either sector highlight the potential benefits of developing mechanisms for increased boundary crossing so that more managers can gain experience from working in different sectors.

The identification of different adaptive behaviors associated with the three archetypes of boundary crossers that emerged in this study illustrates different aspects of role transition and organizational learning. The components of adaptive competence suggest some useful lessons related to improving human services management practices (e.g., proactive management styles based on a set of well-defined service values, organizational role-taking related to adapting sector specific management styles, and the adaptive personal and role responses needed to respond to the ever-changing demands of the environment).

There are also organizational implications for improving public and nonprofit human services management practice. Public sector governmental programs can acquire a greater understanding of the mission of nonprofit service organizations and the impact of public policies on individuals (e.g., how personal troubles are translated into public policy primarily through advocacy). In a similar way, the nonprofit sector is able to acquire a greater understanding of policy development related to major social problems and the related expertise of policy implementation that involves measuring performance and outcomes through the use of information systems. The transfer of these understandings across sectors can benefit each sector and ultimately the community and clients they serve.

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