

SOCIAL DIVERSITY WITHIN NONPROFIT BOARDS: MEMBERS' VIEWS ON STATUS AND ISSUES

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the views of nonprofit agency board members about current status and issues related to board diversity. Trends in agency growth and complexity and turbulence in agency environments are described. Board members view their responsibilities, especially fund raising, as associated with board diversity. Diversity issues focus on the involvement of groups that have not traditionally been involved, including low-income persons, clients, ethnic minorities, and inexperienced board members. Diversity is valued by some respondents, tolerated by others, and its value is questioned by some. Extensive use of quotations provides insights into the manner in which board members frame their views of diversity. The relationships between board diversity and agency culture are explored.

INTRODUCTION

This study builds on the explorations of the dynamics of diversity and the use of language in nonprofit boards by Daley and Angulo (1994) and Daley, Netting, and Angulo (1996). The use of a random sample of nonprofit agency boards provides a more rigorous test of earlier explorations. As we immersed ourselves in the board member interview data, we encountered a number of potentially important themes that relate to the manner in which boards operate and experience diversity. These themes and their implications will constitute the major portion of the present article.'

Nonprofit organization boards of directors represent an important opportunity for community participation. Within the diverse universe of nonprofit boards, community members may develop civic careers ranging from involvement with small, local nonprofit boards that provide entry level

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„~periences for emerging leaders, to experiences with larger, more complex, and relatively more demanding situations for experienced community leaders (Daley & Angulo, 1994). As communities become more socially diverse, nonprofit boards can be promising opportunities to integrate new leaders, groups, perspectives, and interests into our civic conversations (Daley & Wong, 1994).

LITERATURE

Much of the literature on nonprofit boards of directors touches lightly on diversity or is silent on social diversity within boards. At present, other than isolated case studies, empirical research has neglected the key tie between board diversity and board effectiveness. Literature that does address diversity tends to assume that diversity is desirable, usually without examining *why* diversity is deemed desirable (Carver, 1997; Conrad & Glen, 1983; Hodgkin, 1993). Literature from the community field identifies a number of potential benefits of diversity. A modest but growing body of literature explores ways to make social diversity a reality in nonprofit boards (Daley, Wong, & Applewhite, 1992; Duca, 1996; Rutledge, 1994; Tropman, 1992; Widmer, 1987).

Social diversity as used here means the human richness based on individuals' culture or ethnicity, gender, religion, language, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, age, community of residence, ability level, client status, length of board service, and so on. We use the term social diversity in recognition that the relevant dimensions/characteristics that define diversity are defined or constructed socially within each board. Each board defines the combination of factors that will constitute diversity within that board. We recognize the distinction between demographic diversity and function diversity (Daley & Angulo, 1994, p. 74). **Demographic diversity** (having a diverse board composition) is distinguished from **functional diversity** (incorporating diverse voices, interests and perspectives in the policy process). Therefore, a board of directors might have achieved a high degree of demographic diversity in its composition related to specific dimensions/elements of diversity, but reflect a significantly lower level of functional diversity related to these dimensions as it conducts its affairs. For example, women may constitute a significant component on a nonprofit board, but the same board's action agenda, discussions, and decisions might not reflect the perspectives, interests, or concerns of women.

Clearly all members of a given population (for example, women, the elderly, ethnics, clients, low income) do not and should not be expected to have the exact same experiences, perspectives, interests or even group identity. Nevertheless, group membership is generally accepted in most board literature as a useful starting point in considering diversity. In our society an individual's perspectives and interests usually are shaped or influenced by a combination of attributes or group memberships, such as social class, race or ethnicity and membership in specific geographically and temporally defined cohorts.

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Widmer Summarizes early research on nonprofit board composition: "Board members of human service agencies are primarily white, middle class or upper middle class, well educated professionals" (1987, p. 34). Duca observes that over time the composition of nonprofit boards has become ". . . more inclusive of politically organized constituencies such as women and people of color" (1996, p. 39). National surveys of nonprofit organizations as reported in Duca (1996) and Rutledge (1994) found board composition to be heavily White/Caucasian (80-86%) and moderately male (54-60%). Apart from isolated case studies of specific boards and a few small sample studies (see, for example, Widmer, 1987) the literature on nonprofit boards does not explore functional diversity-the influences of diverse perspectives and interests in board deliberations.

The community organization literature on citizen participation parallels our focus on board participation. Abatena (1997), Burke (1983), and Arnstein (1969) suggest potentially fruitful common points. Abatena (1997, pp. 15-26) suggests that broadcasted grassroots participation can contribute to effective community problem solving and can improve board functioning in several ways: enrich problem and needs assessment, enhance decisions about goals and action strategies, and contribute to effective program/intervention design and implementation (including initial implementation, program maintenance, refinement and expansion).

Burke notes the significance of who is involved and the roles of participants in exploring the history of citizen participation in public planning. Further, Burke identifies three functions (or potential benefits) of broad-based participation that apply to board effectiveness: Support for the planning effort; wisdom and knowledge contributions to the planning process; and serving as watchdogs for the rights of specific constituents during the development and implementation of policies derived from planning (1983, pp. 105-111). Finally, Burke observes that citizen participation can be used to achieve specific ends (enrich the planning process, help the poor and powerless to gain influence and access to mainstream institutions, achieve specific outcomes in a community-for example, reduce juvenile substance abuse, create jobs, and so forth). While some of the specific strategies described by Burke might not apply to board membership (for example, therapy, staff supplement, formal cooptation), others (civic education, some forms of behavioral change and informal cooptation) seem potentially useful within the context of nonprofit boards (1983, pp. 116-123).

Arnstein (1969), discussing citizen involvement in community affairs, bluntly asserts that to be authentic, especially when the disenfranchised and powerless are involved, participation must involve changes in the power relationships among groups. Other strategies or purposes may be associated with these charities in power relationships, but the sine qua non must relate to empowerment.

Discussions of board diversity often refer to the representativeness of a board. Alexander (1976) notes that the term representative has a variety of meanings. Daley and Angulo (1994, p. 182) build on Alexander's work in developing a more precise typology of representatives, including *statistical* (shares a defining demographic characteristic, but may not be typical in other respects), *modal* (group members who are typical of group), *sociopolitical* (authorized by group to act on its behalf), and *technical experts or advocates* (may have/assert knowledge about a group, but are not statistical, modal, or sociopolitical representatives). Clearly, when any person represents a group on a board it is extremely important to understand which meaning applies to this person's involvement. In an increasingly diverse community, representational patterns on boards are crucial. In what sense does an individual represent a group? The answer to this question directly affects the manner and degree to which the represented group can be said to participate.

METHODOLOGY

This essentially qualitative study explores the views of board members about board diversity, using an ethnographic approach. Patton (1997) provides an overview of qualitative methods within a broad evaluative research perspective, including the potential contributions and limitations of this approach. Ethnographic methods attempt to understand the meanings attached to social dynamics by the key actors in the social systems studied (Fetterman, 1989). Oscar Lewis (1963) pioneered this ethnographic approach in his anthropological research with Latin American families.

Sample Agencies

The study sample was drawn from lists of member agencies of United Ways located in two mid-sized cities in Arizona (population each between 350,000-500,000 persons in 1990 Census). To be included in the universe of agencies for this study an agency would have to be in operation for at least three years, be professionally staffed, and have a local policy board with at least ten members who met at least six times per year and kept written board documents (agendas, minutes, reports, and so on). We further sought boards that evidenced some social diversity—at least 30 percent of members being ethnic minorities, women, low-income persons, or persons representing some other nondominant groups (for example, age, ability level, consumer status). Given this inclusive definition of diversity, no agency from either United Way membership roster was dropped from the universe based on a lack of diversity within the board. The criteria applied to agencies, including involvement with the local United Ways, limited our ability to explore the experiences of many

small, emerging grassroots agencies. The application of our eligibility criteria yielded agency lists of 17 and 46 agencies in the two communities. Five agencies were randomly selected from each list for inclusion in the study sample. Brief written materials describing the purpose of this research, methods used, and what would be expected of agencies were mailed to sample agencies. Telephone interviews with agency CEOs clarified the study's purpose, methods, and agency expectations, and asked for the agencies' agreement to participate. One of the ten agencies selected declined to participate in the study, citing issues in its relationship with its United Way. A replacement agency was drawn randomly from the agency list.

In each agency one or two graduate students conducted the majority of data collection during the fall of 1998 under the supervision of this article's first author. Field study entailed multiple methods and sources of data, including interviews with CEOs and two to four board members; review of agency and board documents for the prior two- to three-year period (agency annual reports, funding proposals and evaluations; board and board committees agendas, minutes, and reports); observations of at least two board meetings and, in four agencies, observation of other committee meetings. Graduate students audio-taped (with the permission of the interviewee) at least one board member interview and submitted verbatim transcripts for analysis. A brief interview guide was used for the board member interviews. During these interviews, board members were considered to be experts about their board experiences and were given wide latitude in responding to the questions on the interview guide (Dexter, 1970). A case study was prepared by the graduate students for each agency. We conducted telephone follow up with CEOs to ensure that field research methods conformed to professional standards and were deemed reasonable in securing an understanding of agency and board conditions and dynamics.

Data from agency and board documents and from interviews with agency executives/CEOs were used to provide a contextual meaning for the board members' interviews. Interview data were examined to identify salient concepts, thematic trends, and distinctions, as well as the linguistic manner of framing views. We sought to identify themes that were important to board members and to understand how these themes were understood by the board members. As themes and meanings emerged, they were tested against the expressed views of other board members. In some instances widely divergent views emerged. Where such views were expressed, we tried to capture in the respondents' own words the essence of the differences in meanings. Throughout the analysis, we tried to hear the stories and themes of respondents and to avoid imposing our own notions about what might be important. A few themes we expected would be important (for example, issues of representativeness) emerged only tangentially or not at all. The emerging themes that are described below reflect the views and meanings of respondents.

FINDINGS

Composition of Sample Boards

About 60 percent of the boards studied had male-female compositions ranging between 50:50 to 70:30 (male-female). Ethnic composition varied considerably, with a few boards reflecting minimal involvement of ethnic minority members (less than 10%) and only two boards reflecting the ethnic proportions in the general populations of the two communities, approximately 30 percent minority population. About 50 percent of the sample agencies appeared to serve ethnic minority clients in proportions that exceeded their proportions of the general population. No agency with such a high percentage of minority clients had a similar high percentage of minority board members.

The agencies serving the elderly reflected large percentages of elderly board members, as did most of the other boards. An agency serving persons with AIDS reflected those served, including friends, partners, and family members, although as discussed below, the board did not reflect the emerging population of low-income, minority clients. Low income and client status were noted by many board members as important. These two demographic dimensions were often treated by respondents as a single dimension or factor. Data were not collected on the numbers or percentages of low-income or client status board members, but interview data strongly suggest that with a single exception (where as many as 20-30% of a board consisted of low income and client status), involvement of low-income or client status board members usually was low. Such involvement, however minimal in scope, frequently was viewed as significant by other board members. Other characteristics recognized by respondents as significant to the composition of boards included status and influence in the community; being known to other board members; specific expertise or professional background (business, law, gerontology, social services); and, especially for one religious-based agency, the denominational mixture.

Respondent Characteristics

Most of the 30 respondents were long-term community residents who were active in a variety of civic affairs. Most appeared to fall in the 40-to 60-year-old range, to be well educated (high school, college, or professional school) and to have good jobs in business, religious, or human service fields. Eighty percent were males. Most interviewees were long-term board members. A majority had served for over six years, with one respondent noting an association that extended over twenty years. A majority served in leadership positions, including board president, treasurer, and committee chairperson. Several respondents referred during interviews to service on other nonprofit boards.

THE IVIES

Theme One

High levels of organizational growth, complexity, and environmental turbulence emerged during interviews as significant themes influencing organizational and board operations. Growth and increased complexity are changing the culture of these agencies and their boards of directors. The familial-like relationships described among long-term members appear to be evolving into forms as yet undefined. New members are no longer being chosen based on their membership in traditional pools, but on how they can help sustain agencies' growth.

Size. Several board members (including two CEOs who serve as board members) commented that their organizations once were small and had very modest budgets, but recently have grown to be very large. This growth trend is also reflected in the for-profit sector, a source of many nonprofit board members. Describing a low-income housing agency, a board member notes: "... (our founder) talked about when he started and had a budget of about \$300. Well now the budget is about \$2 million. . . ." The CEO/board member of a large organization serving people with disabilities muses: "... should we try to take on more programs locally or should we shrink down in size ... we have some people that say we only have so many dollars and we need to go out there and the only way to attract more dollars is to expand more programs so that your profit margin brings in more dollars that help support everything else. I tend to believe that we will have to expand, offer more services and programs. And maybe take over more programs that are suffering." A board member describes growth in a large agency serving youth and families as the agency initiated a high-cost residential program: "... So the huge cash flow really pumped us up. When we started our budget was like 515,000 a year. Now it's about 8 million or 12 million." Finally, a board member of an agency that has incorporated two smaller agencies within its organization observes that size is a survival factor at times: "It is really hard today for a small agency to make it. It is really hard. So all the funding organizations want combinations and it makes a lot of sense and so we took over (a women's employment program) . . . same thing with (a shelter for homeless families)."

Complexity. Growth in size was often associated with greater organizational complexity as new programs serving new populations and new needs are incorporated into established service agencies. One board member of a housing agency notes: "... (based on recent additions of new programs) we're really three boards in one. We have different organizations . . . (but) we serve as the board for all three organizations . . . that in itself creates some difficulties and confusions." Several respondents noted the difficulties experienced by new board members often related to the complexities of the

service agencies. At times the agencies had changed at a faster tempo than the boards. The boards appeared to lag behind the complex transformation of the agencies they were leading.

Environmental Turbulence. Respondents frequently relate agency growth and increased complexity to the influences of turbulent environments on their agencies. A senior center CEO-board member reports that his agency has frequent opportunities to merge with other (smaller) agencies or to start new service programs. This has caused the CEO and the board to develop a process to be used in considering these opportunities: "If we are going to look at a new program, we have a process in place that we walk through to insure that it makes sense for us, that we have the financial capabilities to provide the service, and that we know what we are going to do when we start implementing it." Another large agency developed formal criteria to assess opportunities to start new services: "One, does it fit our mission. Two, does it meet the financial viability of the agency. Three, can it be staffed properly

These changes in size, complexity, and environmental turbulence have direct consequences for boards, especially in the areas of integrating new members and new perspectives for the purposes of policy setting and fund raising. The transformations reflected in the study agencies seem to mirror trends in the corporate field. Changes may reflect mission and concerns for community needs or perhaps at times the changes may reflect an element of corporate Darwinism. Most of the sample agencies represent success stories. They have prospered, grown, or at least survived. To qualify for United Way funding they are required to meet certain standards of fiscal and program accountability. Not represented in our sample are the agencies that have not survived, that were perhaps not as agile to adjust to the environmental turbulence or that lacked the flexibility, sophistication, or influence needed in these competitive times. What constituencies were served by the unsuccessful agencies? Are their perspectives, interests, and needs served by the new organizational arrangements? These serious issues deserve to be examined further but are beyond the modest scope of the present study.

Theme Two

Board composition issues relate to the participation of the traditionally marginally involved and often stigmatized groups (low income, ethnic minorities, clients) and in particular how these group members contribute to board responsibilities of policy setting and resource development.

Board Composition. Dimensions of board social diversity typically deemed important in the sample boards included ethnicity/culture, socioeconomic status, client status, gender, profession, and expertise, and, less frequently, age, sexual orientation, geography, and religious affiliation. Respondents seemed acutely aware of the composition of their boards, both

ideal and actual. Responding to a question about the ideal composition of a board for an agency serving persons with disabilities, the CEO-board member distinguishes between the ideal and the actual: ". . . (the ideal) would be a reflection of, should be a reflection of (this community). Unfortunately, it is not. We do not have any Hispanics on the board; we have in the past. We don't have any Black/African Americans on the board; we have in the past. I would like to see (the board) more reflective of the community as a whole." Continuing, this leader states: "We were asked by the United Way why we did not have any minorities on the board and our answer was-I don't know." Finally, this respondent reports: ". . . we had an influx of four new board members this year, all Anglo, two men, two women. It just happened that way."

A senior center board member notes: "We don't have good composition. We always get in trouble for that with United Way but I don't know why that should matter. We did have a black president but he hasn't been involved much since he was president. We have one black woman and that's it ... I'm not sure why minorities don't want to be on the board." A Latina board member of an agency that serves youth and families continues this theme of unreflective acceptance of gaps in board diversity: "I really I don't understand why, for example, more Hispanics or Blacks don't get involved but they don't get involved in things like this." A respondent from an agency serving seniors notes that their board is heavily weighted towards the elderly, adding: "We generally prepare a grid of the different skills and talents that we have on the board so we can see where we might be lacking." Again, the theme of skills as defined by the corporate sector, from which many board members are drawn, appears to overshadow a more inclusive member composition, including, for example, low-income persons, consumers, and ethnic minorities. Board members appear to be aware of the lack of inclusive composition but lack understanding of the reasons for the lack of involvement.

A board member of an agency that serves primarily low-income individuals and families, including many minorities, observes: "We have come to the conclusion that we are very much a white Christian board ... considering much of the (minority) population that we are serving. We have, I think, one Hispanic, one Black, we are working on courting a Native American lady ... So that's kind of our goal for the next year ... to try to make us a little more cosmopolitan-a little more representative of the actual people that we are serving." This respondent raises the issue of board representational patterns or as Kotler & Anderson (1987) might describe it, abilities to represent significant publics and provide specific expertise: "If we get someone on the board, in our effort to be more broad based in terms of the community, who's not quite a professional, the reality is they've got inroads to segments of people that I might not have ... if we can truly make (the board) cosmopolitan, then what we are doing is tapping into every segment of the city. The board member can be the liaison to go back to that particular constituency Another member

addresses other dimensions of diversity: "I was on another mental health board ... and they were real big on having a client representative on the board and they did—they had one or two. I didn't feel it was productive for several reasons but I guess it is a philosophical issue to a degree. We try and do bring in people who are active in the community, connected. We want bankers ... We want an attorney, we have several. You know I'm a real estate broker. We try to bring in segments of the community that can be helpful with connections because that is the key." Again, the struggle between ascribed qualifications and diversity emerges as a theme. Who makes a good board member? How does diversity contribute to the board's outcomes? For a number of respondents, these two questions appear to be at the core of the resistance to diversifying the composition of the boards.

Responses to Limited Board Diversity. Describing his thinking on adding members to a family service board, a leader comments, "And you bring people who you know, . . . (who) you trust. . . ." A respondent from an AIDS service agency described a problem involving low-income and minority clients, and the board's response: ". . . we have HIV positive members on the board, but they tend to be from the upper echelon, if you will, of the client base we serve. The recent (low income and ethnic minority) client base is still not getting a voice and that's still a problem. We've addressed that by having (a staff member) create a client advisory group ... Through her, we are able to get feedback to the board about the needs of that Group of people. So I think that we are addressing the needs of specific demographic segments of the base without having to incorporate them as members of the board which I think would be detrimental to the board." As this case exemplifies, board members may be aware of the lack of diversity and develop alternative strategies to incorporate the views of those not involved without altering the existing board composition and dynamics. Agencies use client advisory boards, satisfaction surveys, and input from advocates who are not themselves clients or former clients to gather input about clients' views. These means of securing client input do not alter the existing (exclusionary) board composition.

As noted above, most respondents were aware of both ideal and actual board compositions. Many were aware of gaps and limited social diversity, often in terms of ethnic minorities, low-income, and client/consumer status (these latter two variables were often considered as one variable in their comments). Many were surprisingly unreflective about the reasons for discrepancies between the ideal and actual compositions, framing their thinking in passive terms: "It just happened that way," "We don't know," "I don't know why minorities don't get involved," or "I don't know why minorities don't want to be on the board."

Comments address the lack of involvement of specific groups. A respondent from a family agency that serves significant numbers of minority clients reports: "We're underrepresented with Blacks and it's very, very difficult

to find Black people to come on the board just because of numbers and because people who are interested in the Black community are in terrific demand to be on boards. Same thing with Hispanics, we have one Hispanic for sure right now, the principal at an elementary school." Board members' explanations for the lack of ethnic minority participation are similar to commonly repeated corporate explanations: "There is nobody qualified," or "They are too much in demand-too busy."

Consumer/Client Involvement. Several respondents articulated strong rationales for involving consumers/clients as board members. The board chairman of an organization serving people with disabilities asserts: "fifty-one percent of the people on the board have a child that is in a program, or a child with a disability, or a brother or sister or some type of relative that has some type of disability, so that they have that understanding of what it is like. You know we try to bring in business people, we try to bring in educators, but we still need to have that personal relationship. Otherwise you may get lost looking at business plans and expansion and things like that and forget why you are really here."

A board member of an agency providing housing services to low-income people notes the need for boards to bring the views and interests of consumers into the board dialogue: "The idea of bringing client members on is that-not only the idea that the people that you serve should be represented in the decision making body, but that the decision making body should have the benefit of their perspective and their experience. And I'm not sure boards, and I'm on a number of boards that have client members, always do the best job in making sure those points of view are expressed and thinking of ways that they feel comfortable in expressing them." Notably, this board member recognizes the need to change board culture if nontraditional members are to participate fully.

Diversity by Force and Other Negative Views of Diversity. Debate about board diversity frequently focuses on groups that have not traditionally served on nonprofit boards, and groups that often are devalued. Involvement of these groups is not universally viewed positively by respondents. Several respondents expressed dissatisfaction with their past experiences with board diversity. A board member of an AIDS agency reports commitment to the concept, but reservations about the practice of board diversity: ". . . Philosophically, I do believe in diversity. I do believe to some extent that the board should represent the population that is served by that organization. It is important that we have HIV positive people on the board. But . . . our client base is changing dramatically ... It used to be nice white well educated gay men who were clients of AIDS service organizations. Nowadays that is just no longer the case. We have a huge population of African American women who are drug users and I'm not saying anything to diminish them. Except that if you take some of those people, who are on many levels low functionin2_>, you can't put them on a board of directors and expect them to make policy. Some of these people have

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A board leader is blunt in assessing requirements for diversity: "It runs against my grain to work with a board that is as diverse as the AIDS board. I believe that the requirements that are placed on organizations to be as diverse . . . and incorporate as many different voices as the board is required to incorporate puts an undo burden on the organization. The board's responsibility should be primarily, primarily fund-raising, the financial well being of the organization. When you are saddled with people who have difficulty in that arena it ties your hands to a considerable effect and I'd say it's one of the most difficult things about running an AIDS service organization, because of those requirements." This board leader concludes: "Funding sources requiring a certain board composition, doesn't make any sense to us organizationally . . . I think the biggest limitation of the board is the people who come to the table and do not know anything about fund-raising and have never been on boards before. They do bring some good things to the table and I don't mean to say that they don't. They bring a connection to our client base that is important. But they also bring a lack of expertise in fund-raising and a lack of expertise in terms of organizational management and those are detriments."

These negative views about diversity appear to be based on implicit, unstated assumptions that people of color, people of lower socioeconomic status, or clients are less capable or less able to perform at the level at which traditional board members perform. The AIDS agency example illustrates the triple jeopardy for women of color who are HIV positive or who have AIDS. In the outside world they are discriminated against because of their HIV/AIDS diagnosis and because they are women of color. In the agency that serves them, they experience prejudice because they do not conform to the standards set by the board majority. As the demographics of the HIV/AIDS epidemic change, the power base of this agency does not appear to be changing accordingly. The lack of representation of women of color on the board may deprive the agency of the opportunity to make the agency more culturally competent in its service delivery systems.

A board leader for a housing agency for low-income people relates past experiences: ". . . I've had experience with (other boards). One of the lessons I have learned over and over is that it is a mistake when you artificially place someone on a board to meet a demographic requirement. We certainly know that here (at the arts organization that employs this person). Whenever we place someone on the board because (of their ethnic background) and we hope they develop an interest in the arts, it just is not going to happen. First and foremost a person coming onto a board has to have as interest in the cause. Then and only then can you look at matching them to a particular demographic requirement. If you get that mixed up you might as well shot yourself in the foot before you start the race."

A respondent comments on the potential problems with client involvement in policymaking: "I think for others, who might have lost someone they care to HIV, there is a sense of wanting to get involved almost in their honor or as a way of paying back somehow. That's true of me as well. I've probably lost 40 friends over the last 10 years to AIDS ... I would say that of the people on the board right now probably half of them are motivated in that way. I think it's a dangerous motivation to be honest. I think it brings too much emotion to the table ... It's dangerous because the expectations and emotions that are brought to the table are so intense. As an example, one of the things that the CEO is very good at is establishing a balance between the client service functions that the agency provides and the prevention and education functions that the agency provides. If someone has been closely involved with someone who died of AIDS, particularly if that person was in need of services, they see client services as being all important. They focus on that because that is the need they saw ... So you get that kind of emotional argument in the equation and you can't make rational decisions based on need." Board membership may be in part motivated by personal experience with AIDS (or homelessness, or mental illness, or child abuse). This involvement may be therapeutic for the individual while at the same time providing unique expertise on AIDS (or homelessness or child abuse) to the agency board. The subjectivity that is described as problematic may also be viewed as unique expertise—a strength or asset.

The one who pays the piper calls the tune. Funders' requirements provoked the following reaction from a housing agency board member: "... we have had to adjust the board (composition) because of some of the state grants that we have had or may have—that they required that you have low income people on the board—either they would tell you their income was less than a certain level or that they lived within a certain zip code. You might have a millionaire living in this zip code but then that was all right."

Some respondents challenged the value of diversity. A Latina board member in a youth and family service agency commented about representativeness of her board: "No! I don't (see myself as representing a Group), I'm one of those people who sees others as people. I don't like to be put in a little square that says this is what you are. I don't like to do that either. I think that is one of the things that has caused a lot of people losing self-esteem. As far as the women's organizations, I don't believe in those. I wouldn't join a strictly female organization ... What are we going to accomplish? What we're doing is segregating ourselves. So I don't see myself as a part of a specific unit and I don't know about the other people but they don't act like they do."

We need to pay the bills. Board members report constant tension between the need to provide service and the need to secure program resources. Further, in their comments, securing funding is directly related to board composition and social diversity. The board's responsibility to secure funding may be shared by staff, especially CEOs, but members report a strong sense of obligation to fund-raise in the vast majority of sample agencies. Traditional board

demographics-white, male professionals and business leaders who are "well connected"-tend to be viewed by respondents as board assets, especially in securing needed program resources. Groups that tend to be viewed negatively in this responsibility include low-income persons, many client, groups, and young or inexperienced ("new") board members.

The service versus funding issue is described in a senior center agency: "The mission statement is really into the caring and compassion ... will the program help? But will it be viable financially? You know it (must) stand on its own. Everybody has programs but nobody's got money. And you gotta have money to make it work. None of us like to think that, but you do." Another respondent from this senior center board observes: "When you can see someone who comes to the senior center who is quiet, reserved, and maybe even introverted in many ways, and even depressed in many ways, and you can begin to see them blossom within this environment, when you begin to see someone who is on the verge of going into a nursing facility begin to become more fully independent ... for most people involved in this type of work, that ultimately is the value to them and that is what keeps them doing this work." A board leader in an AIDS service agency laments: "We are also embarking on a capital campaign ... It's a huge challenge for the board. Again this goes back to the board diversity issue. Many of them have never had experience in raising a lot of dollars before. I'm a fund raiser and I do fund-raising every day and that's not a lot of money from my standpoint but there are people on that board who have no experience raising money and it scares them. It's a huge challenge." A family and youth service agency considered closing an intensive service if funding could not be secured: "... after at least two board meetings and a lot of discussion, our direction to (the CEO) was, you must get this much money. Or we will shut down. If we don't operate on a business like basis, we're going out of business. And it happens everyday to these non-profits, everyday." Finally, a board member in a family service agency observes: "With this board, we've never been able to get people to step up to (fund-raising) and part of the problem is the make up of the board ... working people ... not well to do. And they don't necessarily know well to do people. I think there was a focus on younger board members. For example, we have 2 or 3 board members that are young parents. They're not really good board members because they don't have enough experience in what it means to be a leader, a board member. They're too young. Because usually people in their late 20's don't have that experience yet In contrast, another respondent reports poor performance by experienced, "old time" board members in a family service agency: "I think the thing that hurts the board is, there are members who have been on for a long time ... when you have the folks that just show up to the meetings, and really aren't actively involved and that just drags everybody down. Because we are so small, we need everybody to be pitching in. And so that is my biggest concern, that everybody shares (the work)"

A leader of an AIDS service agency board sees requirements for social diversity as an externally imposed constraint to be worked with: "I've really tried to place an emphasis on the fund raising necessity of the board and the participation of the board members in the fund raising process ... (but) a certain number of members have to live in a poverty stricken area and all that stuff. It puts a lot of constraints on a board with a fund raising focus but we've tried to maintain that focus ... We've insisted that all board members participate in certain fund raising projects and events that take place throughout the year. They don't have to give money necessarily, but they can sell raffle tickets or other things that everyone is able to do. So that everyone is conscientiously participating in the fund raising process."

Theme Three

Although most board members appear to view diversity primarily in terms of board composition (demographic diversity), a substantial minority express concern about integrating new members and their new voices, perspectives, and interests into the ongoing board processes (functional diversity).

A socially diverse board composition is a necessary first step to developing a board process that incorporates diverse perspectives in board decisions. But respondents note that composition does not ensure that diverse perspectives will be part of board deliberations. Board members recognize difficulties in incorporating new members and new perspectives into board discussions. This integration seems particularly problematic in boards with substantial blocks of long-term board members. Board members describe high levels of comfort among such members and note discomfort among new, "different" members. Developing primary group relationships and group cultural norms for the board is a challenge in socially diverse boards, yet this sense of group and these norms are necessary to make boards effective.

Dynamics related to incorporating low-income clients within the board of an agency providing housing services are described: ". . . I don't think we're insensitive . . . we include them, right.'" You know, not that people aren't friendly to them ... It's hard for new board members. For many of us, we've been around for a long time ... It's not like we have a clique or it's not like we exclude-1 think it's, you know, we talk certain ways or think about certain things and sometimes we're not sensitive to new board members. (The new members are) not necessarily keyed into what we're talking about, but because we've been around a long time, some of us have a real history with the organization." Discussing a second agency serving homeless people, a member observes: "... a board like ours, that reaches out to the community to bring clients onto the board is a wonderful idea ... They all represent a valuable point of view, but I think at times, it's difficult particularly for the client

...members ... Sometimes they feel intimidated. And I think you have to be extra sensitive ... I don't know if it's a (board) weakness-it's not really a weakness (the client members) have. It's probably our sometimes insensitivity ... I mean for many of them it's the first time they've really been on a board or in this kind of situation."

An AIDS agency board leader describes two incidents that illustrate the limitations and unique expertise of client members: "There is definitely a communication barrier . . . Recently we were talking about (asset) depreciation ... and it was clear that some people did not understand. They had never worked with finances in this way before. So I stopped the discussion and asked the treasurer to explain. I think the treasurer was surprised but there were people in the room who would not have understood the discussion without an explanation ... (Another time the board was discussing) the possibility of a clinical trials unit for new medications program. I am pretty much convinced that the HIV positive people on the board were right in step in terms of that discussion. But I think there are other people on the board who haven't been involved with clinical trial issues who missed a lot ... People find it hard to ask what something means because it is very intimidating in a room of 28 people to admit that you don't know what someone is talking about. I see that as my job to stop people and ask them to rephrase something or ask them so spell it out for anyone who might not understand."

Board orientation of new members is viewed by several respondents as a promising mechanism for integrating new members, but also a mechanism that frequently is slow and incompletely used. A board leader described how he learned what was expected of him: "Just experience. It just takes time. You know I would say it takes a couple of years. We are a fairly complex program. I would say probably the biggest drawback to learning about our program and learning about what we really do, is that we use too many acronyms ... (for agencies and programs)."

A long-time board member of a youth and family agency discusses the influence of a cadre of long-term board members: ". . . we do have term limits, our board is set up in three year terms and 1/3 expire each year. But we routinely, almost routinely ask them to come back, . . . The biggest thing longevity gives us a huge institutional memory. We have board members (who have served for) 15-18 years a lot ... that's why our board meetings are done in an hour. And we do a huge amount of business. But it's like a marriage, you're almost talking in short hand. Because you know all the history, and because our board attendance is very strong. So you don't have to spend a lot of time explaining. It kind of frustrates new board members sometimes because they don't know what is being said." The CEO-board member of this agency sees long-term members as organizational assets: ". . . So people finally get committed and stay committed (and then) they have to leave. That's not smart ... it became clear to the board members that hey, we really do like serving and if half the

people leave, just because 'their term is up' is ridiculous ... And what we discovered is this process, we do have enough turnover, we do have enough new blood that comes in without instituting term limits ... It would be stupid to have to feel obligated every year to find five new board members. That to me does not initiate or instill a sense of consistency and a sense of stability."

With environmental turbulence, increasing organizational size and complexity and pressures to secure funding, boards are changing the way they operate, such as the manner in which board meetings are conducted. In an AIDS service agency, a respondent observes: "... board meetings are very much business meetings. The last one, everyone was surprised ended in 58 minutes ... Not that the length of the meeting itself is so important, it's just that we're focused now. Board meetings are not the place to come and complain. They are not the place to theorize about 'what ifs' or 'how could we' kind of things. I think that there is a time and a place for that, but I don't think it's in a board meeting. But we've shifted that culture and we've become much more businesslike environment."

Selecting new members from nontraditional groups has become more challenging. Many sample boards appear to use informal ways to select new board members, without consideration of the many dimensions of diversity. The boards, in essence, select new members who replicate the demographics of those who have served in the past, sometimes using shared past experiences as an informal criterion. A social activist describes a prior experience shared with a new board member: "... I was involved in the homeless issue ... I had done some things ... including doing civil disobedience ... I think (a fellow board member) and I got arrested together ... we got arrested one time on Christmas eve at the federal building."

Another respondent describes the unique mission of his agency that serves the homeless: "... we like to think of ourselves as not just a typical social service agency ... and we try to bring people on board who feel comfortable with (the organization's focus on services and policy advocacy). So we're a self-selecting board ... We're very particular and we try ... to find people that we think will fit with us."

A very long-term (over 25 years) board member of a youth and family agency with a significant cadre of long-term members and minimal diversity describes the board recruitment process: "Oh, I don't know, sometimes I think (it's) hit and miss. Board members are typically brought on by another board member. And it's the type of informal situation that is kind of nice."

DISCUSSION

The themes that emerged during the interviews with board members help us to explore the views of board members (including board leaders) from a

randomly selected sample of nonprofit agencies that are affiliated with United Way in two of Arizona's mid-sized cities. The small sample size and criteria used to select agencies suggest that the findings of this investigation need to be generalized to other agencies and boards with great care. Nevertheless, we think these findings suggest insights about a broader universe of nonprofit agency boards.

As agencies and their boards experience considerable environmental turbulence, become larger and more complex, and struggle with achieving board diversity, community developers, agency administrators, and board leaders are challenged to facilitate improved board functioning and to ensure levels and variations of social diversity that are appropriate to each board.

As we review the narratives of the sample board members we are impressed with their openness and their commitment to be "good" board members—members whose service is useful to their agencies. Respondents' comments are impressive evidence that they want to help their agencies to be forces for good in their communities. Yet board membership seems to entail an increasingly difficult set of responsibilities. The introduction of increasing social diversity within nonprofit boards poses challenges to board leaders, members, and CEOs. Issues relating to board diversity often must compete with other board concerns. The well documented responsibilities to develop policy, secure resources, and respond to community needs compete with efforts to increase or enrich diversity.

Many board members seem to have a sensitivity to diversity issues. Yet, as reflected in the narratives of our respondents, many boards have not addressed these issues systematically or effectively. Much work remains to be done if the ideals of social diversity are to be fulfilled. We are concerned that a number of respondents did not seem to appreciate the potential benefits of board diversity. Others used extremely passive language in describing boards' efforts to achieve diversity—they cannot explain how their own boards think about or pursue diversity. Others explain that things "just happen."

These board narratives suggest the need for many boards to address more systematically and proactively the question of board diversity. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to propose a systematic approach to achieving board diversity, the outlines of such an approach can be drawn from this research and the work of others. A systematic approach to achieving board diversity would likely include the following elements: (1) identify the benefits that enhanced board diversity can bring to the organization and to the board as it seeks to fulfill its responsibilities; (2) based on an assessment of the board's roles and responsibilities, identify the specific board's ideal and current composition; (3) identify existing board diversity strengths and areas for targeted board development; and (4) develop specific board plans to enhance diversity, including goals, objectives, sequenced activities, timetables, and responsibilities for implementation. The content of these development plans would probably

include components focusing on board recruitment, screening of potential members, board orientation, mentoring and supporting new members, designing challenging board assignments, and recognition of board member achievements. Carver (1997), Daley, Netting, and Angulo (1996), Duca (1996), Rutledge (1990), and Widmer (1987) each provide specific and practical guidelines for enhancing demographic and functional diversity within nonprofit boards. The starting point for any effort to enhance board diversity must be the board's recognition that diversity can positively impact the organization's mission and also contribute in unique ways to the board fulfilling its responsibilities. From this starting point a board can reflect on its own needs, preferences, strengths, and capacities to accept challenges related to board development. Then a board can incorporate diversity as one integral element of its own development plan. Clearly, empirical evidence from this study and other studies (Daley, Netting, & Angulo, 1996; Widmer, 1987, 1993) suggests that a systematic approach to board diversity needs to involve work with current board members as well as with new board members from underrepresented groups. A systems approach must go beyond orientating new members to existing board policies, procedures, and culture.

In our socially diverse society, the huge universe of nonprofit boards offers rich opportunities for civic involvement by a wide spectrum of society. In a community, nonprofit board membership can provide meaningful opportunities for community members to be involved in civic affairs that range from relatively basic, entry-level experiences to involvement in more sophisticated, comprehensive processes. As we seek to facilitate civic careers for members of under-represented groups, nonprofit board memberships provide a promising arena of civic life.

NOTE

1. A personal note: We believe that, especially when writing on sensitive or controversial topics, scholars should describe their own values as they relate to the topic they study. We both have made long-term commitments to helping the boards of nonprofit organizations as they seek to achieve functional diversity. We believe that both ideological and practical arguments can be made for developing functionally diverse nonprofit boards. Still, our own experiences and the shared experiences of others certainly reflect the serious investments needed to make functional diversity a reality within nonprofit boards.

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