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Purnima George, Ken Moffatt, Lisa Barnoff, Brienne Coleman et Cathy Paton

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Résumé de l'article

Cet article présente quelques résultats d'une recherche portant sur la construction de l'image comme stratégie de résistance chez des organismes communautaires progressistes. Ceux-ci y ont actuellement recours afin de réagir adéquatement à l'accroissement de la marginalisation de leurs usagers et usagères. Ces organismes recourent à de multiples images et représentations selon qu'ils s'adressent à des usagers et usagères, des bailleurs de fonds ou des organismes communautaires partenaires. Cette représentation différenciée de leurs interventions démontre le caractère multiple et complexe des identités de ces organismes. Plus encore, en employant des stratégies de construction d'images, ces organismes communautaires progressistes ont réussi à modifier les rapports de pouvoir entre les bailleurs de fonds et eux. Cette stratégie a aussi permis à ces organismes de fournir des réponses pertinentes et adaptées aux réalités de leurs usagers et usagères. Enfin, cet article offre une lecture intéressante des dynamiques sous-jacentes à cette stratégie et, plus particulièrement, à son recours par des organismes communautaires progressistes.



Image Construction as a Strategy of Resistance by Progressive Community Organizations¹

Purnima GEORGE
School of Social Work
Ryerson University

Ken MOFFATT
School of Social Work
Ryerson University

Lisa BARNOFF
School of Social Work
Ryerson University

Brienne COLEMAN
Research Coordinator for the SSHRC project
Field Education Coordinator
School of Social Work
Ryerson University

Cathy PATON
Graduate student in the School of Social Work
Ryerson University

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Cet article présente quelques résultats d'une recherche portant sur la construction de l'image comme stratégie de résistance chez des organismes communautaires progressistes. Ceux-ci y ont actuellement recours afin de réagir adéquatement à l'accroissement de la marginalisation de leurs usagers et usagères. Ces organismes recourent à de multiples images et représentations selon qu'ils s'adressent à des usagers et usagères, des bailleurs de fonds ou des organismes communautaires partenaires. Cette représentation différenciée de leurs interventions démontre le caractère multiple et complexe des identités de ces organismes. Plus encore, en employant des stratégies de construction d'images, ces organismes communautaires progressistes ont réussi à modifier les rapports de pouvoir entre les bailleurs de fonds et eux. Cette stratégie a aussi permis à ces organismes de fournir des réponses pertinentes et adaptées aux réalités de leurs usagers et usagères. Enfin, cet article offre une lecture intéressante des dynamiques sous-jacentes à cette stratégie et, plus particulièrement, à son recours par des organismes communautaires progressistes.

This article presents research findings on image construction as a strategy of resistance used by progressive community agencies to be responsive to the increasing marginalization of their service users in current times. The agencies project nuanced images in representing their work to service users, funders and stakeholders and community partner agencies. These nuanced images serve to demonstrate the multiple and complex identities of these agencies. The agencies have used this strategy successfully to reclaim their power with funders and use their power effectively in making their services responsive and relevant to the situations of service users. The article provides an interesting presentation on the dynamics of the use of this strategy by progressive community organizations.

INTRODUCTION

Social service agencies in Ontario have been grappling with the relentless tension of restructuring of services while remaining responsive to the increasing marginalization of service users. Agencies are being pressured

to adopt a managerialist approach, which has led to a dramatic restructuring of services, to the detriment of service users. Managerialism has led to a preoccupation with rationalism, fragmentation of practice into discrete tasks and an exacerbation of bureaucratic procedures in service delivery. This approach restricts the time practitioners have to engage with service users, and shapes the manner in which that engagement occurs. Within this context, social service agencies are faced with the challenge of reaching out to an increasing number of marginalized and alienated community members who have become disengaged from community processes.

The response of social service agencies to these changing trends has been varied. Mainstream agencies that “view social work problems in a depoliticized way” (Baines, 2007: 4) have responded to this tension by accepting managerialism and have restructured their agencies accordingly (Birkenmaier, McGartland Rubio and Berg-Weger, 2002; Dominelli, 2003, 1999). In contrast, our research finds that progressive agencies committed to the vision of anti-oppression, social justice and equity have dealt with these tensions in a different way. These agencies have used the strategy of *image construction* as one way to respond to this tension as well as engage with the most marginalized, vulnerable and diverse groups in their communities. In this way, this strategy has enabled agencies to successfully stay true to their political purpose and to maintain their vision of transformative social change.

In this article, we understand image construction as a strategy whereby progressive organizations construct nuanced and multiple images of themselves and are deliberate about which image they showcase in various contexts and with various stakeholder groups. Organizations use this strategy to resist dominant stereotypes and definitions of their identity that originate from outside the organization. This strategy is used as a form of resistance and a way to reclaim power. This process of image construction is guided by the context, purpose and an analysis of their own power in a given context. Our research finds that progressive social work organizations use this strategy of image construction in order to successfully negotiate dilemmas in the current context of practice, and in particular, to find ways to continue to maintain a progressive approach to practice in current times. We define progressive social work agencies as those which link individual problems to societal oppressions, emphasize empowerment, challenge the status quo, and work for social justice. This article delves into the experiences of these agencies and provides insight into the dynamics of the use of this strategy of image construction within their progressive work.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Constructing the “Disempowered” Progressive Social Service Organization: Context, Power, Discourse and Resistance

The current political context has created many challenges for progressive social service agencies. Shifts in funding from public to private, and the restructuring of agencies to be “market” oriented have caused much instability. Progressive social service organizations are still in need of more ways to work within this socio-political climate where they can be true to their values rather than giving in to market driven goals. The literature discusses how members of social service organizations are well aware of the impact of this context on how they serve and whom they serve (Dominelli and Hoogevelt, 1996; Razack, 2002; Smith, 2007). For example, the literature reports that social service organizations are dealing with more bureaucracy, and workers are finding themselves spending less time with service users (Abramovitz, 2006, 2005).

Many authors argue that these changes experienced within the social service sector is causing further marginalization of service users (Sakamoto and Pitner, 2005; Bischoff and Reisch, 2000) and is disempowering workers (Baines, 2004). This context has been deemed disempowering to already oppressed groups leaving the structural conditions that maintain inequities even more difficult to challenge and thus in need of further activism and advocacy (Abramovitz, 1998; Baines, 1996, 2004; Razack, 2002).

Workers within progressive social service agencies are finding themselves in conflict with their values of upholding social justice and dealing with social processes that perpetuate oppression (Smith, 2007). Decisions they were once entrusted with are no longer theirs to make leaving them feeling devalued and powerless (Baines, 2004). Burnout, job instability, and more stressful work environments have been a common story for many workers in the field making them more vulnerable to the ills of a market driven society (Jones, 2000). With financial support diminishing for social justice and community-oriented practices (Aronoson and Sammon, 2000; Cox, 2001), and the demands from funders to focus on individualized work with clients rather than community development initiatives (Abramovitz, 2006, 2005), members of progressive social service organizations are struggling to meet the immediate demands of their various stakeholders, and keep true to their original approaches. They often find themselves juggling multiple identities and strategies to meet such demands.

The literature reports that progressive social service agencies are in need of more effective ways to deal with the current sociopolitical context (Baines, 2004; Healy, 2002). There is only a small body of work that speaks

to the strategies that workers within these agencies have so far utilized (Aronson and Sammon, 2000; Barnoff, George, and Coleman, 2006; George, Barnoff, and Coleman, 2007; Fisher and Shrage, 2000; Gilsson, 2007; Globerman, Davies, and Walsh, 1996; Moffat, 1999; Healy, 2002; Hyde, 2004; Parton, 2003; George, Coleman and Barnoff, 2007; Karabanow, 2004). To challenge the total proliferation of business ideology within human services, Healy (2002) argues for the value of social work knowledge and skills in managing social services.

Negotiating with language and communication is a form of political maneuvering. Brager, Specht and Torczyner (1987) suggested that such maneuvering is essential when agencies “have insufficient resources to resolve differences in their favor by other means” (p. 317). Particular strategies that have been used to address power differentials with service users and funders have been discussed in the literature (Lessa, 2006; Smith, 2007). Lessa (2006), for example, discusses the use of “alternative” discourse as a strategy of reframing the otherwise vilified representations of teen mothers. She demonstrates the use of discourse in presenting multiple identities of teen mothers as a way to subvert and resist negative stereotypes. Lessa (2006) argues for the significance of this subversion of stereotypes and recreation of the identities of teen mothers as a powerful strategy of resistance. Through human actions, oppressive representations of identities can be resisted and reconstructed. In addition, Smith (2007) explores similar tactics of resistance. Her work finds that social workers construct images of themselves as playing by the rules, while in reality, they continue to practice daily acts of resistance in their work.

Organizational Identity

There is a literature that documents how organizations are focusing efforts on finding new ways of maneuvering within the present social climate. In particular, this literature highlights how organizations can be active in constructing their “organizational identity” in order to serve their particular vision of their organization (Gilpin, 2007; Pope, Isely, and Asamoah-Tutu, 2009; Schultz and Hatch, 2005). Brown, Dacin, Pratt and Whetten (2006) note that this rise in concern over organizational identity is related to organizations having to be increasingly accountable to many demands and diverse stakeholder groups. These authors describe “organizational identity” as including both an intended and a construed image (Brown *et al.*, 2006). The intended image of an organization is mainly defined by the “associations” that the organization want to have with their stakeholders or potential stakeholders, whereas “construed image” is what the organization believes stakeholders “actually” have of their organization (Brown *et al.*, 2006). Brown *et al.*

(2006: 104) note that: “The intended image promoted by [a] company will often differ across stakeholders groups... The choice of which attributes to communicate is up to an organization; the organizational may even choose not to intentionally communicate a particular image to a particular group.”

Being active in constructing an “image” provides a way for organizations to remain strategic in responding to the interactional dynamics they encounter (Brown *et al.*, 2006).

Representation – Constructing an Image that Influences Social Dynamics

The concept of image construction is closely associated with that of representation. Guo and Musso (2007) summarize the literature that aids in conceptualizing “representation” and its occurrence within the non-profit sector. According to them, representation refers to how organizations “act for” or “stand for” who they are supposed to represent. Guo and Musso (2007) present a conceptual framework arguing that representation has five dimensions: substantive, symbolic, formal, descriptive, and participatory. “Formal, descriptive, and participatory representation are different means of achieving substantive and symbolic representation; the latter being measures of the extent to which organizations ‘act for’ and ‘stand for’ particular constituencies” (Guo and Musso, 2007: 308). Further, “[s]ymbolic representation occurs when constituents believe in the legitimacy of an organization because of what it is perceived to be, rather than whether it actually acts in their interests” (Guo and Musso, 2007: 313). Illustrating the use of this strategy in the field, Tomlinson (2008) discusses how racialized settlement workers took an active approach in constructing their organization’s image. They strategized on how to promote themselves as “non-problematic” in their daily interactions with stakeholders and project an image of their willingness to work with “mainstream” organizations. As such, this reflects conscious acts that aim to build trust and “represent” the organization as a worthy associate (Tomlinson, 2008).

Literature has focused on the use of representation as a strategy of resistance and change. Galewski (2008) discusses two types of representation through which queer women resist: ironic and synecdochic representation. While engaging in ironic representation queer women present themselves as *straight* and disclose their identity once they are accepted by the mainstream. This form of representation is used to surprise and disrupt heteronormative assumptions of the mainstream society. This is contrary to synecdochic representation where queer women put forward an image that makes their identity *visible*. Galewski (2008) advocates for combining both forms of

representation while engaging in resistance. Even though Galewski's (2008) work has relevance in the context of individuals it provides insight on the use of representation as a strategy for resistance and change. Alternatively, some groups have used the power of representation to counter hegemonic forces of dominance, such as the Zapatistas in Mexico (Thomassen, 2007). In Thomassen's (2007) article, he presents the debate on how the Zapatistas sparked a social movement using the power of representation. The use of the "mask" as a symbol to challenge the notions of power and gain strength "horizontally" acted as a bridge to build solidarity (p. 113).

In order to actualize their commitment to addressing personal struggles and the structural conditions that have created them, progressive social service organizations need access to more tools. We argue that social work research needs to explore further the strategies of resistance used by progressive social work organizations in order to maintain a progressive approach to practice in the current context. Social work research has not thoroughly explored the ways in which such organizations could or do use a strategy of "image construction" in order to accomplish their goals. Our work aims to address this gap in knowledge.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper reports one aspect of the findings of a SSHRC funded research study and a pilot preceding the SSHRC study. Interviews for the study were conducted in four cities in Ontario. A total of twelve agencies were selected with the help of a faculty member (consultant) from a school of social work in each of the selected cities. A set of criteria for selection of agencies were provided to the faculty members to select agencies. The agencies had to be community-based and adopt a structural analysis to the problems of service users. The agencies needed to commit actively to address multiple and intersecting forms of oppression. Further, they should be engaging in social care as well as social action initiatives, and should have a social justice agenda. The faculty members used these criteria to identify agencies in their cities that matched these criteria and sent us a list of such agencies. On receipt of this list a brief search about these agencies was done by reviewing their websites. Agencies serving diverse sectors of social work were short listed. A letter of introduction was then sent to each agency on the short-list along with a brochure that outlined the study purpose as well as the criteria we had used to define progressive agencies. A number of agencies then came forward to participate in this research. Our final sample represents a diverse

group of agencies including community and neighbourhood centres, youth services, women's services, seniors' services, services for people who were homeless and settlement services.

Data were collected through individual qualitative interviews with the exception of two interviews which were held with more than one participant. Twenty-eight agency personnel participated. Twelve personnel were leaders of their agencies and four were members of a collective and performed managerial as well as frontline function. Three described themselves as middle managers and nine others described themselves as frontline practitioners. All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcribed data were read repeatedly and interpreted according to the emerging themes (Padgett, 1998; Creswell, 1998) as well as the intended purpose of the study (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). The qualitative software program NVivo (Bazeley and Richards, 2000) was utilized to assist with data management and analysis.

IMAGE CONSTRUCTION

We found that these progressive agencies often engaged in the strategy of image construction. In particular we found there were primarily three groups with whom the agencies utilized this strategy: service users, funders, and community partner agencies.

Image Construction with Service Users

While describing their work participants discussed their efforts at being responsive to the emerging needs of service users. Some participants spoke about how their agencies consciously promote a particular image of themselves in their efforts to be inclusive of service users from diverse cultures and backgrounds. One of the participants said:

... We have services, we call them basic needs services and we never used to have those. We just had community development services but we found that a lot of our services were not reaching our most vulnerable people in our community to come through the doors or to emerge out of various places they are in the community where they are hidden. And so we started providing basic needs services like food, access to clothing, those kinds of things which we see as band aid services not necessarily the purpose of our organization as a community development organization. But what that does is we get people out of the woodwork who are our most vulnerable community members. (Gaia)

This quote from Gaia clearly demonstrates the efforts made by her agency to more effectively reach out and engage with the most marginalized people in the community. In order to do so, this agency intentionally projects

an image of a “*provider*” of basic needs rather than as a community development agency. Agency members consciously use this image as a strategy to attract the most vulnerable in their community. Once these community members are “hooked in,” the agency is then able to engage them in other kinds of initiatives that have a more community development oriented focus. Gaia reveals this when she says:

People will come for food. A guy will come in for food, we see he lives in the local rooming house and we'll say, “You know what?, We are going to be starting a men's support program and why don't we give you a call when we get that started?” And so, [we are] establishing relationships with people in the community so that we can do community development work with the most vulnerable people.

According to Gaia the agency uses this strategy as a response to the intense deprivation experienced by their community members. For people facing such social realities, meeting basic physical and material needs necessarily takes precedence over every other issue.

Kathryn spoke about her agency's efforts at responding to the increasing diversity in their community. This agency wanted to reach out to racialized women who were not currently accessing services. Feedback from the community was that this was in part related to the language used in the agency's name. The use of the term *sexual assault* in the agency's name meant that certain groups of women would not be comfortable using those services or would not see the service as relevant to their particular needs. This was not because they did not experience sexual assault, but because they did not necessarily identify their realities as such, nor did they feel comfortable with that term. Upon realizing this, the agency strategically changed its name in order to *increase access for these groups of women*:

We really had to start analyzing who comes for counseling. Should we be doing outreach? Maybe [certain groups of] women can't walk through these doors because it's called [name]? So, we re-branded ourselves. I hate that term but I can't think of another. Because we heard from a lot of communities that [name] is a barrier. So we tried [new name] and that has surprisingly been a help. (Kathryn)

The agency has now dropped the term *sexual assault* from their name and in doing so has constructed a nuanced image of itself. The new name does not project a particular feminist ideological orientation, nor does it force women to identify their experiences in a particular way (i.e. through the use of the term *sexual assault*). The agency has taken this action as a strategic response in order to be more inclusive of racialized women in their community.

Not only did the agency take the term *sexual assault* out of its name, it also began to expand its services to include a focus on more than just sexual assault, as a way to engage and become more relevant to diverse groups of racialized women:

We were constantly hearing from particularly women from immigrant-refugee communities that coming to a [old name] for a group on sexual assault is just not what is going to happen for many, many women. That it's a real barrier. That the kinds of services we offer, traditional quote-unquote sexual assault services, are not capturing the needs of many groups of women. So, we had to get out of that very narrow understanding of our mandate. We started running [what] we called "women helping women groups." We would run a 12-week group, and the agreement was that two of the weeks had to be on woman abuse issues. We had to realize that [women are] not going to come and talk to you about sexual violence when [they're] going to be deported or have no food or have no housing. So we had to start understanding ourselves in a new way. (Kathryn)

According to Kathryn this change in approach has allowed the agency to reframe its image and its approach to service delivery.

Gabriel spoke about his agency's tension in projecting an image as a *gathering place* for diverse groups in the community rather than as a place for galvanizing the entire geographic community to a common cause. He says:

In this case what we are trying to do is community development from different vantage points. Sometimes it's helping one community youth if there is such a thing as a community youth, or newcomer youth. At other times we are trying to build across different subcommunities and we are trying to bring people together. This is a tension in any kind of community development work. How much time you should spend on trying to bring different communities together into one big community.

The basis for this tension in the agency's image arises from the differential understanding about the agency's mandate by community members. Out of its concern to be inclusive of all its community members the agency continuously struggles to strike a balance between these various nuanced images.

In the context of increased marginalization and the changing demographics of neighbourhoods these agencies have changed their images through a change in services delivered as well as how they represent themselves. The agency members are conscious of these changes but do not see them as a change in direction to their agency mandate but rather as an enrichment that enables better access for marginalized groups. The strategy used by agencies here is akin to the ironic form of representation discussed by Galewski (2008). In order to provide access to the most marginalized and diverse community members these agencies construct a nuanced image

of themselves and their services and gradually influence their service users to become engaged with core issues related to housing, employment or the violence they might be experiencing. Drawing on the conceptual framework developed by Guo and Musso (2007), it seems that this strategy facilitates agencies ability to achieve substantive and symbolic representation.

Image Construction with Funders and Stakeholders

Our work found that community based agencies also engage in a form of image construction when dealing with funders. Participants spoke about their challenges with funders and discussed various ways they represent their work to funders in order to be successful with this important stakeholder group. We found that these agencies use the strategy of image construction even where they enjoyed considerable credibility and had long-standing positive relations with funders.

In order to continue to obtain funding, these agencies were often careful and deliberate in how they would consciously represent themselves as less “radical” and more “mainstream”:

You can't appear to be too radical and you can't appear to be too grass roots. You can't appear to be working with a certain type of youth, as horrible as that is. The image you portray as an organization effects the different things that happen to you as an agency. If we appeared to be too radical or too grassroots and not following proper procedures or whatever, funders would be more hesitant to fund [us]. (Shadow)

The excerpt highlights the limitations faced by participants in portraying a particular image especially in the current context, which does not favour agencies that have a stated political intent.

Shadow went on to describe how she reconstructs a positive image of service users in order to obtain funding. In her experience funders are often reluctant to support projects that engage with certain populations. She explains:

When you say that you're doing after-school programs, as opposed to you know we have like hardcore programs for youth who are really disengaged from all major systems in society. When you talk about that, it's not as acceptable as saying we have “after-school programs.” A lot of times it's the ones that are not, that are totally disengaged. They are not even in the school system. They're not a part of any major systems. They don't feel comfortable coming into even a youth agency, let alone a school. When you start talking about that, a lot of [funders] don't want to touch you cause that's too risky or whatever. That's why I feel image seems to play a lot [in these situations].

Shadow points to the importance of context when utilizing this strategy. She notes that the agency uses this strategy with funders (and in some cases with certain community partner agencies) but not with service users. With service users, she stresses that they engage in what they perceive to be a more *authentic* image construction. In her words, “I mean you have to portray yourself in one way to certain people, and portray yourself the way you truly are to the youth and the program participants and the people you serve because for us, that’s the most important thing.” Once again she speaks of how her agency continually makes conscious choices with regard to how they construct their image, according to the focus of engagement of the agency, for example, whether it is directed at funders or potential service users.

Some participants spoke about the ways in which they construct the image of their agencies as *compliant* and *efficient* by providing particular kinds of information to funders. For example, at one agency, participants talked about how they exercise discretion in their collection and reporting of statistics for funding requirements.

We don’t keep files on anyone. We do not say how many are this age, and how many have mental health problems and how many – like it’s not how you report things. You think about whole people instead of specific definition of problems. But, when you report you have to come up with some kind of numbers for that and I say to staff, “What percentage of youth would you say have something that would be called mental health problems?” So, they would say, “At least half of them have been hospitalized, or have diagnosis.” So I would put down 50%. [Katia]

Some participants clarified that they do try to educate funders, but are often guarded about what they share with them:

So, I’m trying to educate the funders around [how] this is good work for them to support. ... I think we are probably careful and cautious too, in all honesty about how we speak of our work to other than you guys and certain community groups. But, to my funder I might be more cautious in how I discuss it. I think I might not talk about how we help with immigration forms as much, or whatever, you know. Like again, I will choose my time to educate, because I’m always thinking my role is to help the funder get that sexual violence work means housing, food bank, immigration, like you can’t just cut a woman off and say go here, here, and here, like you’ve got to work with them. But sometimes I just might be less focusing on certain parts of what we do with funders. [Kathryn]

The quote demonstrates that even when agencies do attempt to educate funders they exercise caution and share information selectively. They are careful as to the nature of the image they project in terms of who they are and what they do. They do this to protect themselves, but more importantly

to protect service users. They believe that the way they provide services is ultimately what the community needs and so they are careful to not jeopardize their ability to continue to provide those services.

Zack shares the same frustration as Kathryn and Katia with regard to the lack of funders' tolerance towards what he describes as a "holistic" approach to service delivery. His agency engages in a dual strategy, whereby they conform to the funders' expectation of providing specialized health services (for example, programs for people living with diabetes) but at the same time, they challenge the funders' approach in their use of a more community development and/or health promotion approach in some of their programs. When presenting their work to their funders, they "play up" the specialized health services and "play down" the community development work. According to him:

It's like a hoop you have to jump. You have to give them the data. They don't do anything with it, but you have to give it to them in order for you to get your funding. ... [But we also] spend time organizing tenant's association because you know, they are living in lousy health, lousy conditions. We have spent time organizing around welfare benefits; very limited success. Nonetheless, there is no bigger health issue in our society than poverty. And I said that to one of our MPPs recently, and he kind of looked at me like – what are you talking about? In fact, I was at [name of a hospital] not long ago and there was all these heads of different [name] departments, that I don't even know why I was there, but anyways, they went around the table and they were asking people, you know, what are your needs and somebody said, well I need another M.R.I. machine and somebody said well this and that and I said, well the biggest, biggest problem is, you know, tenants are getting evicted from their apartments. And the whole place just went silent.

These findings showcase some of the ways in which progressive agencies consciously construct their "intended image" (Brown, Dacin, Pratt and Whetten, 2006) to place themselves within existing discourses of funding agencies (Tomlinson, 2008). These findings also highlight how these agencies are concerned about their "reputation" (Brown *et al.*, 2006) with funders. In particular, we see how they are concerned with presenting themselves in ways that demystify the stereotypes funders may have about them and present themselves as "non-problematic" (Tomlinson, 2008). These agencies use the strategy of image construction in order to survive in the current context. They need funding in order to exist. As a result, they construct particular images of themselves which have proven to be successful with funders. The images they project are not false, but they are not always wholly accurate either as they might render certain aspects of their work or their approach more visible than other aspects.

Image Construction with Community Partner Agencies

When talking about their work with community partner agencies, most participants identified this as a space that enabled them to put forward a more *political* image of themselves. This was seen in contrast to how they represent themselves with both of the other two previously discussed stakeholder groups. For most participants engagements with other agencies offer them an opportunity to address issues more radically. This is clearly demonstrated by Gabriel when he says:

As you go out and talk you get angry and you go and talk to other people and they get angry, and so you join up. We are a member of the [name of a coalition]. We are also a member of the [name of a coalition]. There are ten of us that are in [name of the first coalition] and there are thirty of us that are in [name of the second coalition]. There is more action. There is action at [name of the coalition]. It is a matter of coming together and sharing our concerns about this and looking at how can we assist.

Participants also use their connections with community partner agencies to enable certain kinds of discussions with funders – discussions they felt they could not have otherwise:

We try to join together with other organizations who are all getting the same information and say, we need to negotiate this. We had negotiations with the Ministry and everybody sat down and went through things. Like here is what we want, here is what we don't want. And I think, when we are a huge body of centres saying this does not work for us, then we have the opportunity to negotiate, but if it's just us saying it, it would not be possible. (Rainstorm)

When in a group, participants felt less of a need to engage in image construction with funders. The protection provided by a group allows progressive agencies to be more open about their progressive agenda.

In contrast, one participant shared an experience of how, as a group, feminist agencies in her community purposefully construct images of themselves not as *feminist* agencies, but instead as neighbourhood *resource centres*. These agencies represent themselves as utilizing a “locality development” approach; that is, an approach that essentially focuses on a consensus based development within a neighbourhood and understands people’s problems as rooted in disorganization of society as a result of urbanization. As a group these feminist agencies construct their image in this way because they recognize that “social action” (an approach that focuses on power relations and engages in active mobilization of community members towards destabilizing existing power relations) is not an approach that is currently supported by most funders. Feminist agencies in this community use the strategy of image construction in order to be able to continue their progressive work. While in

their private work with partner agencies they are able to present themselves as political and progressive, when this group of agencies presents themselves to the public they have agreed to use the strategy of image construction to downplay this aspect of their work.

These findings highlight how agencies make themselves “visible” (Galewski, 2008) to their partner agencies and gain strength “horizontally” (Thomassen, 2007) to challenge existing power relations and the allocation of resources with funders. These agencies use these horizontal networks to create spaces for advocating a social justice and equity agenda and to resist the status quo position of funders (Thomassen, 2007).

DISCUSSION

This research illuminates important information about how progressive social work agencies maintain a progressive approach to practice in the current context. These findings highlight how progressive organizations actively use a strategy of image construction; i.e. they construct and project multiple and nuanced images of themselves according to their audience and goals in particular contexts. This finding challenges our previous understandings on organizational identities as singular and consistent. It reveals the fluidity and evolving nature of organizational identity. Viewed from this perspective multiple and nuanced identity construction can be seen as political. In constructing nuanced and multiple identities these organizations not only subvert any misrepresentation about them by funders and other stakeholders but they actively reclaim the power of defining who they are.

This study reveals that the type of identity these progressive organizations construct is contextually dependent. How they represent themselves depends on who they are interacting with, the purpose of their interaction and an assessment of how power operates in that context. We saw, for example, how agencies construct seemingly conforming identities or intentionally subvert their progressive identities when they are guided by the need for survival and where they hold relatively lesser power (for example, with funders). With community partner agencies on the other hand, agencies project their progressive identities which enables them to forge solidarity and develop horizontal networks which work together for political purposes. They do this based on their assessment of their limited power as individual organizations but enormous power as a collective. These organizations have used this power effectively to demand change, for example with regard to the allocation of increased resources from funders. When working with service users, we saw how these agencies construct yet a third type of image. Here they often highlight their abilities to assist with basic survival. By focusing

on basic needs, these agencies hope to project an image of themselves as useful to marginalized groups thereby increasing access. In this case we see how in situations where agencies command relatively greater power than service users they use this power to accomplish their purpose of equity and social justice.

These findings direct us to focus on how for these agencies, the process of identity construction is complicated, dynamic, and political. With different stakeholder groups, power relations take different forms, and an agency's purpose changes. As a result, their self-representations take different forms as well.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study provide important insights for understanding the practices of progressive organizations. They reveal the multiple, fluid and contextual nature of organizational identity and provide a caution against labeling organizations on the basis of their single identity. These findings highlight the possibility for organizations to reclaim their power and define who they are by engaging in nuanced identity construction. This is a relevant strategy for organizations feeling extremely vulnerable in current times. Such organizations could explore alternative ways of redefining their work and their service users. The findings also establish the significance of horizontal networks in resisting the status quo and advocating for a change with funders and other stakeholders. Despite enormous constraints of time, resources and personnel, organizations may want to re-think and develop creative strategies to maintain and participate in networks with community partner agencies and service users in order to bring about social change.

CONCLUSION

From this study identity construction emerges as a powerful strategy of resistance in the current context of practice. This strategy has enabled these agencies to maintain a social justice and equity agenda. The presentation of nuanced and multiple identities as a strategy of resistance responds to the emerging challenges of our current times where "service professionals and educators are challenged to develop management approaches that recognize the demands of the new environment without sacrificing the humanitarian value base and knowledge of the complexities inherent in professional practice that social workers bring to management" (Healy, 2002: 539). These progressive agencies have demonstrated this through their work and have given us hope.

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