

Not just a tool – the responses of nonprofit leaders to “service delivery” relationships with governments.

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Overview and introduction

There are many reasons for studying the relationship between governments and nonprofits in the community services sector; it is a critical nexus through which much social policy implementation passes as it moves from conception to delivery. One key driver in search to understand the relationship between governments and nonprofits is, of course, to *explain* this relationship – does it differ from organisation to organisation, from sector to sector, event to event and from leader to leader, and if so, why?

Often this explanation occurs through looking to the structures of the organisations involved and the environments in which they operate – as theorised in the organisational theories of resource dependency and institutional theory. In this paper I apply the findings of my research, an ethnographic comparative case study investigating the relationships between governments and nonprofits in the community services sector. In doing so, I identify some strengths and weaknesses of such an approach, and I raise questions about how to explain the relationship. I also suggest features of the relationship – particularly that of the beliefs and behaviours of leaders – that could possibly compliment, enhance and build on such theoretical explanations. These findings also raise questions and have implications for the changing nature of the relationship between governments and nonprofits. Understanding the critical role played by the “values-infusion” of nonprofits may have significant impacts

on how they operate within relationships formed on an assumption by that they are “tools” of government.

The “delicate dance”

Service delivery relationships between governments and nonprofit community service providers may vary from short-term contractual associations involving minimal communication, to well-established, ongoing, negotiated partnerships involving high and regular levels of communication (Lewis 1999). The response of nonprofit leaders to this relationship with government and the strategies they employ as they engage with this relationship can be a “delicate dance” between collaboration and conflict (Boris and Steuerle, 1999; Brock, 2003). The inherent tensions in this relationship have been described as resulting in a range of consequences. Such consequences include: contractual restrictions on advocacy; gradual mission creep and goal displacement; increased and/or decreased professionalisation of staff, and; a convergence of values or delivery strategies or isomorphism (Austin, 2003; Brinkerhoff and Brinkerhoff, 2002, p.11; Considine, 2003; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Ebaugh et al., 2005; Froelich, 1999; Golensky and DeRuiter, 1999; Guo, 2007; Lewis, 1999; Lipsky and Smith, 1989; Lyons, 2001; Maddison et al., 2004; Mulgan, 2005; Smith and Lipsky, 1993; Staples, 2006).

Empirical investigations in the third sector literature reveal a variety of ways in which nonprofits “dance” through such complex and difficult circumstances. For example, Barman (2002) found that nonprofits use the strategy of “asserting difference” to demonstrate their specific niche value in a crowded market. Nonprofits have also been found to exercise specific governance and management strategies such as networking and the strategic expansion of services and client base, as well as and employing a “political frame” and

operating “entrepreneurially” as ways of securing resources (Alexander, 2000; Heimovics et al., 1993; Saidel and Harlan, 1998; Wagner and Spence, 2003). Nonprofits use merger as a proactive strategy for reducing environmental uncertainty (Golensky and DeRuiter, 1999), and have also been found to “cope” with “conditions of uncertainty” by forming hybrid structures that have features of public, private for-profit and nonprofit organisations (Evers, 2005, p.745; Kramer, 2000). Bigelow and Stone (1995) found a variety of responses varying from compliance to resistance. In this way, attempts to explain, theorise and predict this variety of nonprofit responses to various institutional pressures has often occurred through a lens looking to the environment or structural features of the organisation (Kramer, 2000; Lyons, 2001; Smith and Gronbjerg, 2006; Smith and Lipsky, 1993).

Looking to the environment to explain the relationships between organisations such as nonprofits and governments is made particularly explicit in the organisational theories of resource dependence and institutional theory. Indeed, many studies of nonprofits have explicitly used resource dependency or institutional theory to seek to explain the relationships (Bielefeld, 1992; Cho and Gillespie, 2006; Froelich, 1999; Heimovics et al., 1993; Saidel, 1991). The common underpinning assumption of these theories is “that to understand organizations, it is necessary to understand the external constraints they face” (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978, p.225). Or, in other words, that the operation, structure and responses of nonprofits is determined just as much, if not more by the characteristics of the environment than it is by their internal missions and drivers (Oliver, 1991; Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). The theoretical underpinnings of resource dependency theory therefore manifest in the actions of organisations in a number ways, the most prominent one being

that “a critical organizational function becomes the management of dependencies” (Froelich, 1999, p.248).

Digging deeper into an understanding of *how* the structural and environment play a role in determining organisational response, Oliver (1991) groups the responses of organisations to institutional pressures into five categories: acquiesce, compromise, avoid, defy or manipulate. Oliver’s (1991) descriptions of these categories is as follows:

Strategy	Tactics	Examples
Acquiesce	Habit	Following invisible, taken for granted norms.
	Imitate	Mimicking institutional models.
	Comply	Obeying rules and accepting norms.
Compromise	Balance	Balancing the expectations of multiple constituents.
	Pacify	Placating and accommodating institutional elements.
	Bargain	Negotiating with institutional stakeholders.
Avoid	Conceal	Disguising nonconformity.
	Buffer	Loosening institutional attachments.
	Escape	Changing goals, activities, or domains.
Defy	Dismiss	Ignoring explicit norms and values.
	Challenge	Contesting rules and requirements.
	Attack	Assaulting the sources of institutional pressure.
Manipulate	Co-opt	Importing influential constituents.
	Influence	Shaping values and criteria.
	Control	Dominating institutional constituents and processes.

The complex explanation for why some organisations have one response while others have another is described by Oliver as a multifaceted mix of cause (why the organisation is being pressured to comply – is it related to legitimacy or economic resources?), constituents (who is exerting the pressures – are there multiple constituents and is the organisation

dependent on them?), content (what are the pressures – are they consistent with organisational goals and do they impose discretionary constraints?), control (how is the pressure being exerted – does it involve legal enforcement or is it a voluntary diffusion of norms?), and context (what’s the environmental context of the pressures – is the environment highly uncertain and/or interconnected?).

Oliver goes on to describe a complicated matrix predicting the relationship of an organisation’s response of acquiescence/compromise/avoidance/defiance/manipulation to the pressures exerted in the external environment as dependent on the cause/constituents/content/control/context of the circumstances. This matrix suggests, in effect, a range of prediction-profiles for the various organisational responses and that there are a set of dependent variables with either direct or indirect correlations with the independent variable (the level of resistance to institutional pressures).

For example, Oliver suggests that defiance is more likely to occur if the pressures being exerted directly constrain the organisation’s discretion and there are multiple constituents, but is less likely to occur if the pressures have implications for the organisation’s legitimacy or financial resources and if the organisation is highly dependent on the source of pressure. Studies based on Oliver’s work have confirmed the robustness of this theoretical framework; however have also sought to complement and build on the framework with a variety of features. For example, Bigelow and Stone (1995) suggest the additional response of “symbolic compliance” to Oliver’s five types of organisation response. The study described in this paper seeks to contribute to this body of knowledge.

Gathering and digesting the NPO leader experiences

The information presented in this paper is drawn from an ethnographic study in which I conducted participant observation in three nonprofit organisations in the human and community services sector. The fieldwork at each site ranged from one to three months in duration and the sites were in three different locations across Australia: the Norton Community Centre was a small organisation, originating in the 1980s, with an annual budget of less than \$500,000, a significant majority of which was government funding; the Faith Aid Provider, also known as the Robwood Association, was a large, faith based, multi-site organisation originating in the early 1900s with a budget of more than \$30 million, of which around 80% was government funding; and finally, Faith Aid Australia was a faith based national body for a network of faith-based community services whose advocacy work was entirely funded by this network.

Nonprofits take on any of a number of roles within the service delivery relationship, from agent to advocate (Lyons, 2001). The three nonprofits involved with this study were snowball-sampled, selected for their active relationship with government – meaning that they considered their relationship with government to be *more than* just the submission of tenders to a post office box and subsequent online quarterly reporting. The nonprofits were also selected for their structural diversity, acknowledging the predominant explanatory role of organisational characteristics, structure and history in the nonprofit literature (Smith and Lipsky, 1993). The key participants – ranging from one to four people per organisation – were all part of the leadership teams within their organisations. As is typical of ethnographic research, the data collection phase included comprehensive generation of field notes about the day-to-day occurrences for the key participants, the settings in which events occurred, the behaviours of those involved; more than 45 hours of ongoing

ethnographic interviews (which, when combined with the field notes came to well more than 300,000 words of data), and a review of relevant documents both publicly available as well as private internal agency papers from each field site (O'Reilly, 2004).

Data collection and analysis are, of course, always ongoing and parallel processes (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Data collection guides analysis which, in turn, subsequently and cumulatively guides collection. Data analysis would occur during the periods of fieldwork, followed by a phase of intensive analysis following the fieldwork, at which time I thematically coded the data. An important phase of this data analysis was my careful construction of episode-based narratives to describe and explain events and processes from the perspectives of the participants (Bevir et al., 2003). I developed a series of narratives seeking to represent the data in a way that was genuine and authentic to the lived experience of the participants, but that also demonstrated the specific themes relevant to the participants experiences: bringing the “thick” ethnographic data into a manageable and digestible format (Geertz, 1973).

Understanding and coding the narratives – Oliver’s categories

The narratives were constructed around their focus on particular events, chapters or episodes that illustrated the nonprofit’s relationship with, or its response to its relationship with government. Two narratives from one of these case studies – the Norton Community Centre – are edited and summarised below as examples.¹

¹ I will use the Norton Community Centre in all the examples given throughout this paper in order to maintain a consistent “voice”.

The narrative	Narrative description/summary
The performance accountability meeting with government.	<p>During the period of fieldwork, I observed and assisted the key participant, Kelly, to prepare paperwork for an upcoming reporting and accountability meeting with a representative from one of the government department funding bodies that funded the NCC; I sat alongside her as she spoke on the phone, arranging and rearranging the meeting time and I heard her debrief throughout this processes; I was scheduled to attend the meeting, however it was postponed by the government officer to a time when I was no longer able to be at the fieldwork site and so instead I conducted a telephone interview with Kelly immediately following her attendance at the meeting.</p> <p>For the most part, this narrative was a story of Kelly's frustration and second-guessing about the data collection and accountability requirements of the department; dealing with unwieldy, long and confusing documents that related to just one part of the work occurring at the centre; frustration at the constant rescheduling of the meeting; and concern at the expectations expressed by the government worker during the meeting, which Kelly perceived as an unprecedented episode of micro-managing and controlling – the “<i>new world order</i>”.</p>
“I told him off”	<p>A short story told to me by Kelly about a defining moment in her relationship with government while working at the NCC. It came up during one of our ongoing series of ethnographic interviews, after I had made a “red herring” statement suggesting government's legitimacy in exerting control over the NCC: “<i>Well, they do pay for you...</i>”</p> <p>Kelly, quick as a flash, says “<i>no, they subsidise us.</i>”</p> <p>I ask “<i>what's the difference?</i>”</p> <p><i>“When they're using the big stick approach, they say they fund us... but when we say ‘well, you don't fund us adequately’ they say ‘ah, we give you a subsidy’... Whatever suits their purpose, that's the discourse they use... Like, one time my first government area manager came to talk to the NCC chairperson and I about the fact that we only opened the centre from 9 til 3, right, because they fund us full time. We get funding for 1.25 FTE at level 5 wage. But I'm paid at a higher level, 6, because that's the level of responsibility I have to take... a level 5 wage at 40 hours per week is a level 6 wage for 32 hours per week... So he came to read the riot act about the centre's opening hours and I had to say ‘no, hang on a sec, we only open the information and referral part of the organisation from 9 til 3, but the rest of the centre and the rest of the programs operate any time, night times, weekends’... That's why if you ring the NCC phone line now, the answering machine says that the centre is open from 9 til 3 however appointments can be made outside of those hours... that was a little strategic thing, me prodding them basically. Because the community know we're there for them, they just come and knock on the door after three o'clock, it's just that the phones aren't staffed after 3 o'clock. And they</i></p>

	<i>don't even fund <u>that</u> anyway, they only fund <u>me</u>, and what am I supposed to do, sit on a phone from 9-3 I mean it's so ridiculous this stuff, it's absolutely ridiculous... I told him off. I said 'no, excuse me; you get more value for your dollar than you could ever imagine, what we put in, what we self fund... back off mate' and he did. He backed down."</i>
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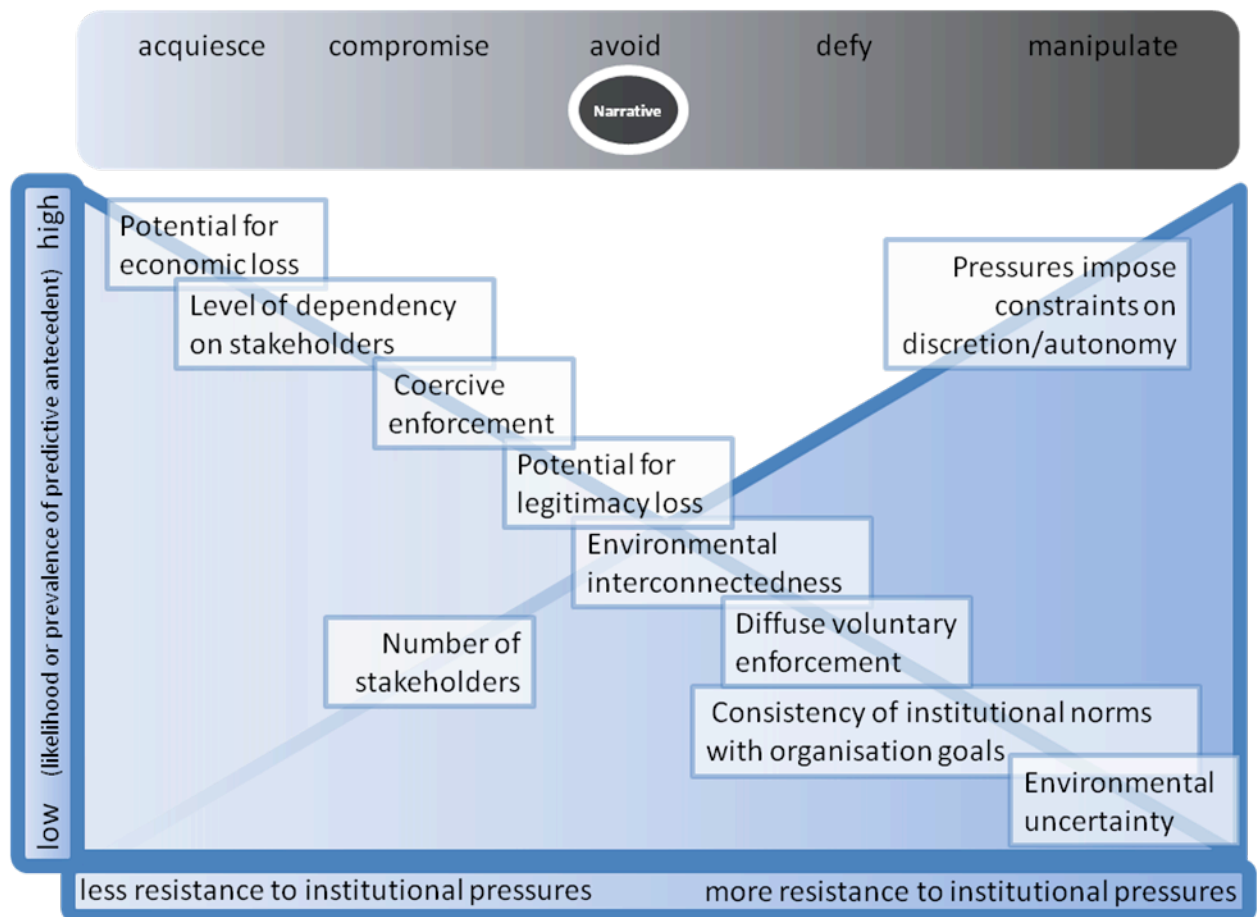
After defining and describing the narratives, I then proceeded to consider these narratives in light of the five strategies suggested by Oliver (1991). I assigned one (or more) categories to each narrative according to my judgement of best fit. Some examples of the way these narratives were categorised, including the two described briefly above, is given below:

The narrative	Narrative brief description	Oliver's category
The performance accountability meeting	About meeting with a government worker to submit the annual performance reporting paperwork.	Acquiesce; Avoid
"I told him off"	About resisting the government worker's attempts to dictate throughputs such as staff working hours and centre opening hours.	Defy; compromise; manipulate
"They've all been to my courses"	About actively seeking to change the composition and expertise of the board when she began working at the NCC.	Manipulate
PBI compliance	About developing detailed procedures to ensure they have complied with the Australian Tax Office requirements for a Public Benevolent Institution.	Acquiesce
Tolerating short term losses for long term gains	About "giving up" funding for her centre that was inconsistent with the goals that had been set for the NCC.	Compromise
Fly under the radar	About the work of the NCC in a nearby town where the circumstances had changed, making it difficult to keep delivering the service agreement outcomes, and subsequent attempts to avoid scrutiny on this.	Avoid

My next step in analysing the data according to Oliver's framework was to consider the constellation of antecedents – the prediction-profile – for each narrative. Then to compare

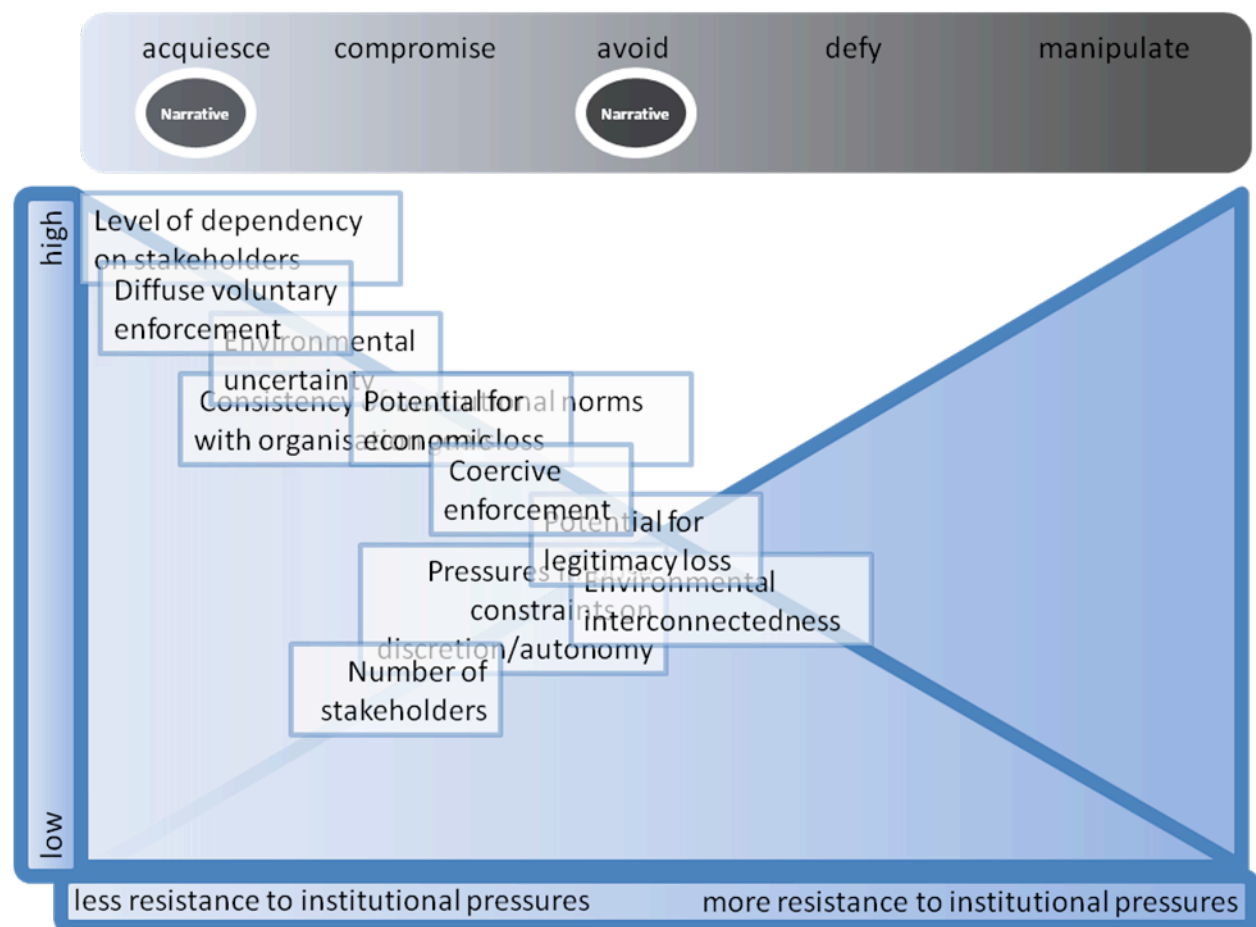
this profile with the way I had already coded the narrative as one (or more) of the five responses. In order to do this I operationalised Oliver's matrix into a heuristic model, with the five response-types on a horizontal axis in Oliver's suggested order of most to least "resistive". Then, for each narrative, and from the perspective of the participant, Oliver's dependent variables were plotted along a descending or ascending diagonal line according to the high or low likelihood or prevalence of this variable. For the eight predictive antecedents with a negative correlation to an organisational resistive response, the horizontal line on which they were plotted was descending. For the two dependent variables with a positive correlation to a resistive response the diagonal line on which they were plotted was ascending.

A fictional, stylised example of how the antecedents and the narrative might be plotted – with a focus in this instance on plotting in a way where each of the elements in the model is able to be clearly seen – is provided below. This demonstrates the eight variables on the descending, inversely correlated line, and the two variables on the ascending, positively correlated line as well as the position of the narrative aligned with one (or more) of Oliver's theorised organisational responses.



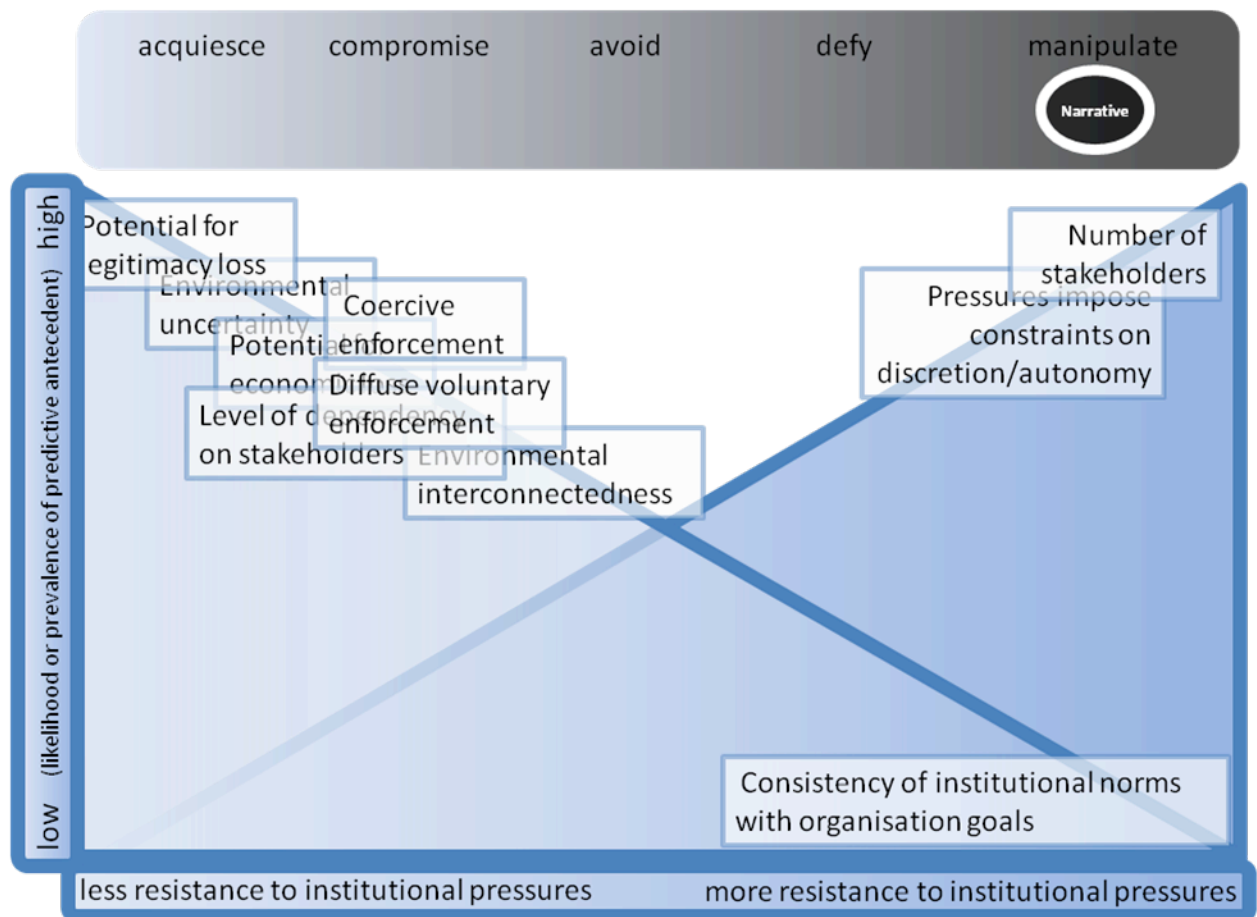
The Oliver Heuristic Model (OHM - stylised)

An actual example of the heuristic model's application to one of the NCC's narratives – the performance accountability meeting with government described above – is as follows:



OHM: The Performance Accountability Meeting

This provides a good example of how the prediction profile could, for some narratives, appear to give a realistic and clear estimation of the organisational response. In this case it was that the organisational response would be either to acquiesce, compromise or avoid (although it does not, in this instance, explain why the NCC did not compromise). This second example below – “they’ve all been to my courses” (indoctrinate the board) – provides a good example of how, sometimes, I found that the antecedents did not, at face value, appear to bear much relationship to whether the narrative was fundamentally a story about compromise, defiance or indeed any of the responses.



OHM: Indoctrinate the Board

Using this model and data analysis process was an extremely useful heuristic technique for visualising the relationship between the nonprofit strategies and their so-called predictive antecedents, particularly for identifying antecedents, responses or narratives that did not “behave” as might have been expected. Also, this data analysis method served as a useful interpretive check, alerting me to possible misinterpretations in the way I understood my data, and in my coding and plotting. A preliminary attempt to analyse all the narratives using this method has occurred and raised a number of questions and issues.

Oliver's answers and puzzles – suggesting Selznick?

Of the questions and issues arising from this data analysis, two issues were central. The first key issue related to the “behaviour” of two particular predictive antecedents: the constraint on discretion/autonomy; and the consistency of institutional norms with organisational goals. These two predictive antecedents appeared to play a different kind of role to the others, for example they were not always clustered with the rest of the group of antecedents. Also, there were occasions where I had coded a narrative in a particular way and these two antecedents seemed to be the only consistent factors that corresponded. So I revisited my data and sought to gain a deeper understanding of my participant's experiences of those circumstances where the constraint on discretion/autonomy and the consistency of institutional norms featured strongly. The second issue was that I needed to re-analyse or seek alternative or complementary ways to explain the narratives which did not appear to “fit” with Oliver's theoretical framework and to understand why they did not fit – with reference to the work of other authors who have also analysed their data based on the Oliver framework.

This phase of data analysis is ongoing. However, some preliminary “hunches” are proving fascinating. Exploring both of these issues is revealing a possible role of leadership or the actions and opinions of the organisational leaders. Consider the following two quotes, the first is a quote from Kelly, the coordinator of the Norton Community Centre:

“So the lesson for me out of all of this is that's where you have to have your vision of what you want your work to do... these organisations that you come across where they just keep changing depending on what the funding is that's coming up. I think that's such a mistake. It's the principle based stuff. You stick with your values. You stick with your principles. You stick with what you believe you should be doing. And you find funding... I mean there is funding out there... you find funding that meets those objectives first... funding where the aims are broad enough that you could put your kind of stamp on it, which is really very good... You don't willy nilly change tact and go wherever to chase the next funding dollar.

And I've seen so many organisations do that, and in the end they lose who they are and they wake up one day and they realise 'what are we? We're just a service centre, we're just a service centre that rolls out a million programs.' They've lost their I dunno, reason to be there..."

The second is a quote from an interview I conducted, with Kelly's permission, with the leader of a nearby organisation. This was a nonprofit which Kelly defined as being the absolute opposite kind of organisation to the NCC. On visiting the organisation and speaking with its leader, my interpretation was that there were more similarities than Kelly might have considered, however with the key difference illustrated in this quote:

"I think that by necessity we have become quite compliant and systemized and structured and organized, even though our service delivery on the ground is still innovative and contemporary and creative..."

The tide heads only one way. Everything is heading towards more compliance, the downside is it will tend to favour the large, and it will tend to be dominated by compliance instead of outcomes... We are in the business of delivering a service. We are not a grassroots organisation that is here for the benefit of our community, although we think that we create great benefit to our local community by delivering services on behalf of whoever is funding it...

There are a lot of community organisations that take for granted the fact that they get funded. They believe it is a right... they believe they have a right to exist. But we have never adopted that... All the funding we have had has been "deliver an outcome or lose it"... everything we have could be gone in three years. Versus another type of organisation, who says we have been here for 100 years and we will be here for another hundred years... Whereas for us... we know that if we don't deliver those outcomes for those target groups for that client, that funding will be gone."

At first glance these two quotes appear to be about funding. However, I would suggest that they can also be seen through the organisational leadership lens provided by Phillip Selznick – where one is a story about an organisation which is “infuse[d] with value beyond the technical requirements of the task at hand” (an institution), and the other is a story about an organisation which is “an expendable tool” (Selznick, 1957, p.17). Perhaps a complementary set of explanations for understanding the relationship between

governments and nonprofits it through this institution building and maintenance, and the leadership which contributes to it.

The role of leadership in shaping nonprofit relations with governments is also hinted at in the work of Barman (2002), Smith and Lipsky (1993), Vanderwoerd (2004) and Bigelow and Stone (1995). For example, the latter identify leadership factors which neatly complement Oliver's framework: the skills and values of the nonprofit administrators and leaders; the internal relationships within the nonprofit; as well as the history of the relationship between the nonprofit and funder and the relationships between the nonprofit and other organisations.

As predicted by resource dependence and neo-institutional theory, the nonprofits in this study undertook a range of activities to manage their dependencies on the external environment. They established formalised relationships with other services. They streamlined and consolidated organisational administrative practices. They attempted to diversify revenue and reduce reliance on government funding. However, they also engaged in a variety of *other* types of activities which were still about their relationship with government but not so much about managing their dependencies. These were activities where the discourse was not so much about securing financial resources for resources sake, or even securing legitimacy as a precursor to resources. Instead, it was about protecting and exerting the niche professional practice and value-base of the organisation as defined and defended by the leader (or leadership team). This has significant implications for thinking about the implementation of social policy via third party providers. For the nonprofits involved in this study, its leaders also arguably sought to influence policy implementation through their focus on maintaining the organisation's way of doing things.

Conclusion

The “delicate dance” navigated by nonprofit leaders is a dynamic and subtle balancing act, and organisational response is not necessarily clear cut and straightforward. Just as Oliver (1991) and others (Bigelow and Stone, 1995) identify a range of organisational responses to external pressures to conform – this study also identified a complex picture of acquiescence, compromise, avoidance, defiance and manipulation. While Oliver’s “antecedents of strategic responses” play a role in determining the type and extent of an organisation’s response, there are also possibly other factors – such as the leader’s behaviour – that play a part in this process. The way that particular leaders understand and frame the role of the organisation, for example as an organisation which delivers government programs, a *tool* of government, or as an institution – an organisation that is infused with value – possibly play a significant role in the response of nonprofits in the community service sector and their relationship with government. This is particularly significant considering the current debate in public administration about understanding service delivery, or social policy implementation via third parties as a “tool” of government (Osborne and Gaebler, 1992; Salamon, 2002).

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