Hybrid Careers: How Chief Executive Officers of Faith Based Organizations Characterize their Career Drivers

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Our empirical paper focuses on careers of nonprofit managers. It contributes to the conference’s leading question: What challenges and opportunities are the third sector and civil society facing at the end of the first decade of the new millennium?; and to the subtheme: management as well as social entrepreneurship and social enterprise. The paper follows the argumentation given below.

Research problem, aim of the research and research question

The current discussion about the economizing trend in nonprofits (Ferries, Graddy 1999; Gioia, Thomas 1996; Hammack, Young 1993) highlights changes in the context of organizational careers, where chief executive officers play a more important role (Harrow, Mole 2005). As Onyx and Maclean (1996) observe, however, it is still widely assumed that executives who choose to work in nonprofits either have no other choice, unable to achieve well-paid career positions in profit organizations, or are motivated by the ideal of selfless service rather than personal achievement. Despite their growing importance, Harrow et al. (2005) remark that we still know little about the career accounts and intentions of nonprofit chief executive officers. Due to this lack of empirical and theoretical study on the careers of the key post holders, we do not yet know who the chief executive officers in nonprofits are; why and how they got there; why are they staying or going, within the sector, and for what lengths of time (Harrow et al. 2005). This empirical paper intends to contribute to closing this gap by exploring patterns of career drivers among executive directors in German faith based nonprofits. We follow the question: How do the chief executives of German faith based nonprofits characterize their career drivers?

Theories and concepts

Previous studies show that, because of the tension between faith based values and an economizing trend, the faith based organizations (FBO) offer an extreme in the nonprofit context (Ebaugh et al. 2007; Fischer 2004; Gibelman, Gelman 2002). Especially for careers of chief executive officers this tension questions if they work for faith reasons and, if not, how they deal with faith issues. Therefore, FBO are a good example while highlighting the career patterns of executive directors in the context of economization trends.

Defining ‘career drivers’, we follow Chia et al. (2008) but transfer their individual to a narrative concept. They argue that career drivers “originate from within an individual and stimulate action. Career drivers are not deliberately chosen, but evolve from the individual’s personality, abilities, values and self-image. They are revealed rather than selected” (Chia et al. 2008, 43; see also Francis 1994). Transferring their individual to a narrative approach, we define ‘career drivers’ as work history experiences. Methodologically speaking, we conceptualize career drivers as critical events in the work history that have a significant influence on an individual’s career path.

Method

Following the career history method (Bailyn 1989; Cochran 1990), we conducted narrative interviews of about two to three hours with current post holders. Between June 2006 and
November 2008, we conducted the research process in five steps: First, we realized a focus group discussion with the German Evangelic Church experts about the main management challenges faced by the chief executives. Based on these results, we developed the criteria used to select 23 chief executives. Second, from September to December 2006, two researchers conducted narrative interviews with the selected interview partners by travelling to their working places, in locations across Germany. Third, the interviews were transcribed on 950 pages and coded. Fourth, in January 2007, in a two day workshop with 60 chief executives of FBOs of the German Evangelic Church, three focus groups were conducted on the main results of the interviews. Fifth, in November 2008, nearly two years after the last focus group, there was a second focus group with five experts from among the chief executives. We intended to increase the plausibility and relevance of our findings.

empirical and theoretical findings

Supporting the results of Onyx et al. (1996), the majority of our interview partners were not oriented to a linear career model. We nevertheless identified five career drivers that influenced their career path: ‘experience of solidarity’, ‘sense of social work’, ‘capabilities for executive function’, ‘appointment for executive function’ and ‘self-effectiveness’. In sum, the interviewed chief executives were able to work with the tension between the faith based mission and the economization trend. They were neither solely career driven nor entirely selfless. They worked out of a social will which was deeply rooted in their biography; but they recognized the need for professionalization and thus they built their capabilities for leadership functions. In contradiction to the widely cited assumption, the career of the interview partners was less affected by being altruistic, and more so by professionally supported solidarity.

There is a relatively intense discussion about the ‘sense of social work’ topic and about ‘capabilities for executive functions’ (Anheier 2005; Haas, Robinson 1998). There is less insight into the phenomenon of the ‘experience of solidarity’ and ‘self-effectiveness’. We propose that we need further studies on how chief executives are able to manage tensions, not how they find synthesis. This is important in a context where nonprofit managers have to deal with multiple bottom lines. This hybrid organizational phenomenon seems to be transferred from the organizational level to the individual career. Based on our results, one might call careers in the context of the presented career driver model ‘hybrid careers’. On the one hand, the chief executives feel the energy of solidarity personally and experience social work as meaningful. On the other hand, they strive to develop executive function capabilities. In this sense, they picture hybrid organizations who act amidst the tension of mission and economization.

Literature


