Exploring the gendered dimensions of meaningful non-profit work under marketised conditions

Billie Sandberg, sandber2@pdx.edu
Portland State University, USA

Robbie Waters Robichau, rrobichau@tamu.edu
Texas A&M University, USA

Andrew Russo, russo2@pdx.edu
Portland State University, USA

Neoliberal marketisation is altering the nature of non-profit work, leaving workers to navigate a 'double bind' of mission- and market-based values. Some feminist scholars suggest these dynamics are particularly challenging for female workers. Drawing on a larger study of meaningful non-profit work and neoliberal marketisation as well as on contemporary critical and feminist scholarship, this exploratory study examines how neoliberalism's entrepreneurial subject manifests along gender lines among non-profit managers. Data from interviews with 28 non-profit managers demonstrate that while both men and women evoke elements of neoliberalism's entrepreneurial subject, female managers wrestle more with conflicting discourses of market and mission values and rhetoric as well as sociocultural expectations around gender, resulting in a 'triple bind'. This article suggests that neoliberal market discourses are impactful in the manner suggested by feminist scholarship but not necessarily totalising nor deterministic.

Key words gender • neoliberal marketisation • non-profit • meaningful work • entrepreneurial subject

To cite this article: Sandberg, B., Waters Robichau, R. and Russo, A. (2022) Exploring the gendered dimensions of meaningful non-profit work under marketised conditions, Voluntary Sector Review, vol 13, no 1, 77–96, DOI: 10.1332/204080521X16366270153080

Introduction

Non-profit sector work has changed dramatically in recent decades, including most prominently reframing work within neoliberal market-based values and logics for decision making and valuation (Maier et al, 2016), that is, to become marketised. Although explorations and critiques of neoliberal marketisation’s consequences for organisational life exist (see Sandberg et al, 2020, for an overview), marketisation and the subjective life experiences of non-profit workers receive less focus. As individuals
subject to marketisation, non-profit workers confront associated pressures, namely: to consider work through paid employment as the preferred venue for achieving success; to celebrate ‘commitment’ to work; and to become ‘productive’ employees and prudent optimisers of non-work time (Fleming, 2014). Yet, simultaneously, we hold an assumption that non-profit workers exemplify a selfless commitment to helping others (see Bassous, 2015), which seemingly stands in sharp contrast to marketised discourses that champion greater productivity and performance from them.

This article addresses some of the issues raised by the paradox of seemingly selfless workers working in increasingly marketised non-profits using a critical theoretical frame. Drawing on a larger study of neoliberal marketisation and meaningful non-profit work (see Robichau and Sandberg, forthcoming) and employing post-structural and feminist lenses on neoliberal marketisation, the article explores how managers, one group of non-profit workers, experience the marketisation of non-profit work along gender lines. When applied to individuals, the neoliberal market model forges an ‘entrepreneurial subject’ that embraces risk-taken, a competitive mindset, personal responsibility and self-management for optimisation (Fleming, 2014; Scharff, 2016). In the workplace, the entrepreneurial subject refocuses these efforts towards meeting organisational demands (Dardot and Laval, 2013). Some contemporary feminist scholars contend that the entrepreneurial subjectification process is acute for women at work, suggesting women are neoliberalism’s ideal entrepreneurial subjects (Scharff, 2016; Gill and Kanai, 2018). Scholars have studied the singular impact of neoliberal marketisation on women at work (for example, Davies et al, 2005; Jones and Clifton, 2018; Baker and Kelan, 2019). Additional scholarship suggests that men and women experience marketisation in work differently and thus may respond in unique ways (Worts et al, 2007; Baines, 2015). However, scholarship on the marketisation of work neglects the experiences of non-profit workers, an oversight this article seeks to remedy somewhat by exploring the experience of non-profit managers. It is worthwhile to examine the subjective experience of non-profit managers relative to neoliberal marketisation and gender as research indicates that discourses of meaningful non-profit work can act to both countervail and facilitate entrepreneurial subjectification (Sandberg and Robichau, under review) while drawing on and exacerbating existing gender inequalities in non-profit work (see Themudo, 2009). Furthermore, it is worthwhile to employ a critical theoretical frame to examine these important issues as it allows us to question and critique taken-for-granted ways of viewing contemporary non-profit work, meaningful work and the subjective experience of the non-profit worker. More pointedly, a critical theoretical frame affords us the ability to reconsider and reconceptualise the dynamics and experience of meaningful non-profit work for both women and men in a neoliberal age.

Working from a post-structural characterisation of neoliberal marketisation (Dardot and Laval, 2013) and drawing on contemporary feminist scholarship, the article first presents a framework for understanding the relationship between neoliberal marketisation and the modern non-profit work environment, highlighting neoliberalism’s emphasis on developing the ideal (female) entrepreneurial subject. The article then discusses how perceptions of meaningful work (MFW hereafter) in a non-profit context may complicate the enactment of neoliberal marketisation and the entrepreneurial subject. Then, the article presents findings from interviews with 28 managers working in non-profits across the United States (US). The findings compare the contours of the entrepreneurial subject along gender lines in managers’
discussions of MFW under increasingly marketised work conditions. The findings demonstrate that both women and men evoke elements of the entrepreneurial subject but that female managers are more likely to do so in some circumstances. Furthermore, women face a ‘triple bind’, which requires them to navigate the boundaries between market and mission values and rhetoric alongside sociocultural expectations around gender. Concurrently, both men and women discuss their experience of MFW in ways that add nuance to or break with entrepreneurial discourses, suggesting that neoliberal market discourses are impactful but neither totalising nor deterministic (see Scharff, 2016). We conclude the article by considering the implications of the complex subject identities presented by the study.

Literature review

The marketisation of work

Scholars increasingly express concern regarding the adoption of the logics and values of the neoliberal marketplace in the non-profit sector, that is, the neoliberal marketisation of non-profits and non-profit work (see Sandberg et al, 2020). Neoliberal marketisation involves creating market-like spaces where none previously existed, promoting market-based values such as competition throughout all corners of life, and inserting enterprise-based models for decision making and action (Dardot and Laval, 2013). In the contemporary workplace, neoliberal marketisation manifests in a milieu du Gay (1996) deems ‘enterprise culture’ through which market-based, ‘business-like’ narratives and practices are assumed. In the non-profit sector, enterprise culture manifests under the guise of corporatisation, commercialisation and managerialisation and concomitantly with professionalisation (see Maier et al, 2016). In practice, enterprise culture involves the adoption of flexible work arrangements, performance regimes and extrinsic reward systems to make work more efficient and to enable greater productivity and accountability (see Robichau and Sandberg, forthcoming).

Altogether, enterprise culture enables organisations to control workers and their productivity without acting directly on them (du Gay, 1996). Rather, organisations control workers and their work efforts by extending personal responsibility to them to perform efficiently in pursuit of organisational goals, a subject discussed more in depth later in this article. The extension of personal responsibility to workers requires total commitment to work from them, which blurs work and non-work boundaries as well as personal and professional values (Fleming, 2014). The blurring of boundaries can produce adverse consequences, which seem acute for non-profit workers who navigate what Venter et al (2019) deem the ‘non-profit double bind’ in which workers continuously toggle between mission- and market-based values, leading to confusion and conflict around personal, organisational and professional values and identity (Ruud, 2000; Kreutzer and Jäger, 2011; King, 2017), which then increases stress levels, leads to work–life imbalances and fuels burnout (Baines, 2015; Cunningham et al, 2017).

The entrepreneurial subject

The success of enterprise culture in the workplace requires the cultivation of the worker-as-entrepreneurial subject (du Gay, 1996; Dardot and Laval, 2013). Briefly, through the entrepreneurial subject, individual lives are imagined like enterprises
such that one is ‘to be the entrepreneur of [their] existence, [doing what is required] … to become as “enterprising” as possible’ (Dardot and Laval, 2013: 116). Imagining one’s life as an enterprise allows one to cultivate one’s self to make it fully available to meet organisational demands, which requires one to assume full responsibility for one’s self, to self-regulate and to cultivate in oneself a drive to make the most of one’s human capital (du Gay, 1996; see also Beefink et al, 2012). There are contours that define and bring life to the entrepreneurial subject relative to work (Scharff, 2016). First, one begins to see oneself as an enterprise, manifested by using ‘business language’ to refer to oneself as well as constantly working on one’s self for self-optimisation in the workplace (Scharff, 2016: 112; see also Rottenberg, 2019). Second, the work of self-improvement for self-optimisation necessitates being active and avoiding idleness (see also Davies et al, 2005; Scharff, 2016: 112). Third, one embraces risk as if one were a business enterprise (see also Dardot and Laval, 2013; Scharff, 2016: 113). Fourth, one seeks to actively manage any difficulties experienced and frame them positively as something that is necessary to prosper (Scharff, 2016: 114). Accordingly, the entrepreneurial subject becomes responsible for any personal failures as well as successes, disavowing any semblance of weakness or vulnerability in the process – the fifth contour (Scharff, 2016: 115). All contours of the entrepreneurial subject are underpinned by a competitive mindset, a pervasive sense of personal responsibility and an assertion of autonomy (Scharff, 2016).

**Gender and the entrepreneurial subject**

Some feminist scholars suggest that, although the discourses of the entrepreneurial subject evoke traditional notions of masculinity (Jones and Clifton, 2018), women constitute the neoliberal market’s ideal entrepreneurial subject (Scharff, 2016) because they are attuned to the relentless personal dissatisfaction and self-monitoring (at least in Western society) that is required by neoliberalism’s entrepreneurial ethos (Gill and Kanai, 2018). McRobbie (2015: 9) refers to this proclivity towards heightened self-regulation as ‘the perfect’, through which women engage in inner-directed self-competition vis-à-vis self-beratement in an effort to aspire to ‘the good life’. The ‘perfect’ is exacerbated by neoliberalism’s emphasis on individualisation and on the equation of success with an illusion of control (McRobbie (2015: 4). Moreover, scholars assert that neoliberalism has co-opted and marketised feminism such that rather than question and resist the political, social and cultural structures that engender inequalities, women now focus on individual success (see Banet-Weiser et al, 2020) so that the calculus becomes: ‘If I work hard on myself, I will become successful.’ The onus is on a woman alone to overcome barriers and achieve success. As such, the entrepreneurial subject is funnelled through not only existing gender inequalities but also through feminism as well.

A burgeoning body of research has explored the implications of these dynamics for women at work. Initial findings suggest that women are manifesting facets of the entrepreneurial subject in the workplace, including individualising their successes and failures (Scharff, 2016; Gill and Kanai, 2018; Baker and Kelan, 2019), dismissing systemic barriers for gender inequalities in the workplace (Scharff, 2016; Gill et al, 2017; Jones and Clifton, 2018) and experiencing a heightened sense of personal responsibility to be productive (Davies et al, 2005; Scharff, 2016; Jones and Clifton, 2018). Additional research suggests that neoliberal marketisation and the
entrepreneurial subjectification of workers produce uneven effects in the workplace among men and women by drawing on and exacerbating existing gender inequalities (Worts et al, 2007; Baines, 2015; Heckler, 2019). This study draws on these insights to illuminate the contemporary subjective work experience of male and female non-profit managers.

**Meaningful non-profit work**

Non-profit work offers a unique context to examine the entrepreneurial subjectification of workers along gender lines. Research suggests that although individuals pursue and experience MFW across myriad professions and careers (see Wrzesniewski et al, 1997), individuals who pursue non-profit work seem to be driven by a particular combination of values and motivations, including prosocial behaviours (Bassous, 2015), a desire to serve others (Lapworth et al, 2018) and a calling to be part of something larger than oneself (Schabram and Maitlis, 2017) in their pursuit of MFW. These conceptions of selfless non-profit work and workers seemingly stand in sharp contrast with the market-based discourses and contours associated with the entrepreneurial subject (see Sanders, 2015; Breeze, 2017). Examining how mission- and market-based discourses of work and worker identity (see Sanders, 2015; King, 2017) interplay in a contemporary professionalised non-profit work context, particularly along gender lines, remains crucial (see Dale, 2017). While research demonstrates that non-profit work is indeed MFW for many workers (see Sandberg and Robichau, under review), when examined closely, non-profit workers’ experiences of MFW are more complicated than is typically acknowledged (see Park et al, 2018). Non-profit work and the values that animate some individuals to pursue such work are strong motivators and, relative to neoliberal marketisation, can act to, in some ways, countervail the influences of marketisation (Sandberg and Robichau, under review). At the same time, dedication to MFW can come at high personal costs to workers’ wellbeing (Bunderson and Thompson, 2009; Oelberger, 2019) and, in turn, add fuel to entrepreneurial subjectification processes (Sandberg and Robichau, under review). A small but compelling body of research indicates that paradoxical MFW experiences may vary along gender lines (see Williamson and Geldenhuys, 2014; Dale, 2017; Lips-Wiersma et al, 2020) and be exacerbated by existing gender inequalities in the non-profit workplace (Themudo, 2009; Teasdale et al, 2011; Baines et al, 2014).

**Methods and data**

*Data collection and sampling strategy*

This exploratory study examines how non-profit managers manifest the entrepreneurial subject along gender lines, through discussions of MFW. As such, a qualitative approach is an appropriate one, for it can illuminate the ‘lived experiences’ of practitioners (Creswell and Poth, 2018). In total, 28 semi-structured interviews were conducted with non-profit managers between 2015 and 2016. Interviews ranged between 27 and 108 minutes, averaging 60 minutes. Of the interviews, 27 were conducted in person and one was conducted over the telephone.

We employed a three-pronged snowball sampling strategy to offer greater depth and some breadth to the gendered experiences of non-profit managers in marketised
environments (see Moser and Jorstjens, 2018). First, initial participants were selected using a purposeful sampling strategy, where researchers determined whether the individual qualified for participation by having non-profit management-level experience. Second, additional participants were interviewed only if they met the predetermined management criterion. Lastly, additional participants were recruited through a parallel snowball sampling technique starting with professional contacts of the research team across multiple regions in the US. This technique broadens our findings to reflect multiple sample networks rather than a singular one (Cohen and Arieli, 2011). Snowball sampling enables numerous advantages for this study (see Creswell and Poth, 2018). It allows us to engage with information-rich practitioners who are not easily accessible using more rigorous sampling techniques (that is, there are no central databases of non-profit managers to sample). Snowball sampling is beneficial for exploratory topics of a personal nature as the relational aspects of this approach nurture trust and openness (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Moser and Jorstjens, 2018). To ensure a robust sample of participants, we further sought participants from a range of professional backgrounds, organisational types and sizes, and regions and with differences in terms of gender identity, ethnicity and experience levels (see Table 1).

Analysis and rigour

Each interview was recorded, de-identified and transcribed verbatim. The research team reviewed transcripts for accuracy, then uploaded them into Dedoose, a cloud-based qualitative data analysis software package, for analysis. A primarily deductive codebook was developed based on neoliberal marketisation and MFW scholarship. Emergent indicator codes captured inductive patterns. Several strategies were implemented to ensure the rigour and quality of the findings. The research team used a double-blind coding and reconciliation process, line by line, to aid in identifying themes. The team engaged in discussion, consensus building and crystallisation techniques to finalise themes and ensure credibility (Tracy, 2010). Once coded excerpts were finalised, we entered them into data matrices, then filtered them by themes, subthemes and demographic characteristics for analytic purposes. Furthermore, quotations from as many participants as possible were incorporated to afford readers an opportunity to extrapolate findings to other contexts (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

Findings

In this section the findings are outlined along the contours of the entrepreneurial subject (Scharff, 2016), with similarities and differences among men and women noted (see Table 2). Findings that challenge or add nuance to entrepreneurial discourses are then highlighted (see Table 3).

Contours of the entrepreneurial subject

Self-as-enterprise

While participants did not frequently evoke ‘business language’ to refer to themselves, discussions of pay and compensation diverged from this trend. A small number of both men and women utilised business language to describe pay as a reflection of one’s
Exploring the gendered dimensions of meaningful non-profit work

“value” or “worth” to the organisation, as the following demonstrates: “I realised … they could tell me all day long that I’m so valuable to them, but … at some point they need to show me money. I’m worth way more than this. [Otherwise,] what am I doing, right?” (woman, fundraiser, non-profit serving women and girls, 17 June 2016). A few women took this notion further by explicitly linking their level of pay to professional opportunities and the ability to advance in the organisation as well as an affirmation of their abilities: “I went to grad school so I could make more money and have more responsibility. I knew that I was worth more than I was making, but I wasn’t going to make more unless I had some credentials” (woman, policy lead, public health non-profit, 28 April 2016). In short, for some women, it seemed that their pay level acted not only as a reflection of their value to the organisation but also as a measure of their worth as managers and of their ability to garner more influence.

Participants were more likely to evoke an ethos of self-improvement for self-optimisation. For instance, when asked about performance management relative to their experience of MFW, participants indicated a genuine desire to receive feedback

Table 1: Individual and organisational profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual demographics</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
<th>Organisational demographics</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Primary area of activity</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Arts, culture and humanities</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latinx</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Environment and animals</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiracial</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Health</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Human services</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender identity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Public, societal benefit</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Religion related</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Organisational revenue</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 30</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>&lt; $1 million</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30–39</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>$1–10 million</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40–49</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>$10–20 million</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50–59</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>&gt; $20 million</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60+</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Position</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Region</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C-suite</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Arizona</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper management</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>California</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle management</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Front line</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>New York</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Oregon</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: N = 28. Organisational revenue figures are drawn from Form 990s FY2016. We were unable to locate Form 990s for three organisations. Codes from the National Taxonomy of Exempt Entities (NTEE) were used to identify field of activity. One respondent chose not to identify age and ethnicity. C-suite refers to executive officers such as chief executive officers, chief operating officers, chief financial officers and chief information officers.
from supervisors and colleagues. This desire indicates the presence of a link between self-improvement and upholding the organisational mission. Generally, both men and women desired feedback perceived as ‘authentic’ (that is, elements to sustain performance as well as improve work) but they differed in the purpose for which the feedback was sought and used. For men, discussions of performance seemed transactional in that feedback was tied to expectations around pay and promotional opportunities. Men seemed to expect to be paid commensurate with their work efforts and the performance evaluation process was a means to ensure this outcome. For women, performance management seemed personal and meaningful. The process of receiving feedback on their work performance appeared in interviews as an affirmation for themselves and for work well done in pursuit of a worthy mission, as this quotation indicates: “Whatever this says of me, I derive a lot of my own value at work from [my supervisor’s] appraisal of me” (woman, policy lead, public health non-profit, 28 April 2016). Indeed, women more so than men viewed ‘good’ organisational management generally as the conveyance of continual feedback on performance to workers. Hence, women sought confirmation from their colleagues and supervisors to gauge their levels of self-improvement to help ensure optimal work output.

The importance of being active and avoiding idleness

The second contour of the entrepreneurial subject, which demands staying active and avoiding idleness, manifested among participants in discussions of work–life balance.

Table 2: Summary of findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contours of the entrepreneurial subject</th>
<th>Similarities along gender lines</th>
<th>Differences along gender lines</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-as-enterprise</td>
<td>Self-monitoring and self-regulation; business language to describe self and achievements</td>
<td>Women – prize individual success despite systemic barriers; work–life image of self melds together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Men – work and pay as transactional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The importance of staying active and avoiding idleness</td>
<td>Busyness as ideal work state</td>
<td>Women – perceived inability to maintain obligations in work–life; almost proud of it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Men – perceived control of work–life balance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Embracement of risk</td>
<td>Desire to embrace risk for business and personal success</td>
<td>Women – express powerlessness when barriers arise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Men – acceptance of red tape, nonchalant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing difficulties positively</td>
<td>Positive framing of conflict and difficulties</td>
<td>No differences – keep ‘mission-focused’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Dis)avowing vulnerabilities</td>
<td>Express vulnerabilities through work–life context; take personal responsibility for addressing issues</td>
<td>Women – cope by seeking self-improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Men – willing to disavow vulnerabilities; cope by maintaining boundaries</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Exploring the gendered dimensions of meaningful non-profit work

and of the importance of work generally in their lives. All participants conveyed a sense of busyness at work as well as difficulty balancing workloads with non-work obligations. Men, however, tended to evoke a stronger sense of agency in their ability to balance work with other obligations. In discussions of work–life balance and of the place work played in the totality of their lives, men were more likely to articulate an ability to control perceived priorities as well as take time and space outside of work to decrease their stress levels, as indicated by the following quote: “As I’m getting older and more mindful of it, I get more deliberate and intentional about my own space … you need to take some time off for self-care” (man, executive director, emergency food provider, 16 June 2016).

Women, on the other hand, conveyed less of a sense of control over their priorities or obligations in or outside of work. Generally, women lamented a poor work–life balance and an inability to manage all their obligations well. Concurrently, women were also more likely than men to ascribe an important place for work in their lives and in terms of their sense of self or perceived identity. A frequent pattern among women was the view that the workplace (especially the non-profit workplace) was a space where they could create meaning for themselves outside of other roles (for example, as a spouse/partner, mother, daughter and so on). Indeed, non-profit work appeared to play an outsized role in women’s perceptions of their identity and perceptions of self in the world. Women were not just spouses/partners or just mothers or just daughters, although those identifying with such roles conveyed an importance to them. These women were also making an important difference in the world. As such, decrying a poor work–life balance emerged as a point of pride. For example, one woman “work[ed] [her] tail off” to earn holiday time (woman, therapist, disability services non-profit, 16 June 2016), while another found meaning in working more hours: “Even though I probably work ten hours more a week than I was [in my last role] … every moment I am working it feels like we are moving forward” (Woman, support services director, homeless service organisation, 8 August 2016). Despite the sometimes burdensome nature of work, the busyness these women felt around

Table 3: Summary of contradictory discourses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contradictory discourses</th>
<th>Similarities along gender lines</th>
<th>Differences along gender lines</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Importance of relationships</td>
<td>Connection to others and seeing the impact of one’s work enhances MFW, challenging the idea of a competitive entrepreneurial subject</td>
<td>Women – workplace as ‘family’; impact felt relative to beneficiaries’ individual progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambiguity around competition</td>
<td>No similarities noted</td>
<td>Women – some women evoked a competitive ethos – viewing credentialling as a channel for increasing pay and advancement leading to power over their career and organisational decision making; other women found rewards through work itself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety around perceived identities</td>
<td>No similarities noted</td>
<td>Women – self-talk aimed at making sense of the coexisting identities of work and family/home; the importance of work evolved for women with children</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unauthenticated | Downloaded 09/14/23 11:14 AM UTC
their work fulfilled a sense of purpose and identity untethered from association with another (for example, a spouse/partner, child, parent and so on).

**Embracing risk**

We had a clear sense from both men and women that they would have *liked to* embrace more risk at work – for example, to expand programmes, pursue bigger grants or prominent donors, or tackle problems at a systems level – but were largely prevented from doing so. Both men and women spoke of being frustrated by numerous factors internal and external to their workplaces that limited their ability to take more risks and thus be more entrepreneurial. Internal to their organisations, the burdens of so-called ‘administrivia’, bureaucratic inertia, obstructionist co-workers and a lack of resources all conspired against participants to prevent them from taking greater risks in pursuit of the organisational mission. So too did external factors such as unrealistic expectations from funders, red tape from government contractors and plenty of politics between them. Women took their frustration over these impediments further by expressing a sense of powerlessness against them, particularly donors, philanthropic funders and policy makers, as the following quotation indicates: “There are times when I feel a lot of frustration [with donors' wishes] because of the lack of control we have over community issues that are based in historical systems designed by people very intentionally” (woman, community investment director, grant-making organisation, 11 April 2016).

Men, on the other hand, were more likely to view these frustrations as part of the cost of doing non-profit work, as the following quotation demonstrates: “[If] you’re focused on making measurable change … you have to start making concessions … to compromise … [and] partner with people who don’t necessarily share your endgame” (man, marketing director, philanthropic foundation, 30 June 2016).

In either case, research participants embraced risk and understood risk to have value for the advancement of the organisation’s work.

**Managing difficulties positively**

When presented with questions concerning coping with difficulties experienced at work, including those described above, both men and women articulated strategies deployed to maintain a MFW experience. Engaging in self-care, using humour, taking comfort with their co-workers and staying organised emerged in interviews. However, the prevalent strategy for coping with the work-related difficulties involved framing them positively, particularly in relation to the organisational mission. For both men and women, staying ‘mission focused’ was a strategy that helped frame difficulties with positivity. For instance, one participant working at a culturally specific non-profit justified her low pay because she could see the impact of her work in her community. Another respondent working in a refugee resettlement non-profit declared that while his workload did not allow for more personal time with family, the context suggested little concern compared with other interviewees, particularly women. He expressed acceptance and control over the imbalance, electing to take it in his stride since the difficulties faced by his organisation’s beneficiaries were comparatively worse. Another lamented paperwork and co-workers’ lackadaisical efforts but framed her efforts as for children “whose very lives are involved” [woman, therapist, disability services non-profit,
Exploring the gendered dimensions of meaningful non-profit work

14 June 2016). And, despite the difficulties involved in maintaining relationships, donors and policy makers were deemed “important, influential, and worth meeting” (woman, fundraiser, non-profit serving women and girls, 17 June 2016) for the sake of the organisation. Indeed, participants may have lamented the difficulties posed by individual donors, but they did so in a manner that highlighted their importance to the organisation’s mission. In short, all participants deemed difficulties worthwhile and worth enduring unrealistic or burdensome expectations because such self-regulation ensured success, leading to fulfilment of the organisation’s mission

(Dis)avowing vulnerabilities

Men were more likely than women to disavow any perceived vulnerabilities, although both did so in some measure, such as those related to the difficulties described above. Concurrently, both men and women were willing to share some vulnerabilities through discussion of work–life imbalances. Some participants described a sometimes psychically painful inability to put work away at the end of the day, which led them to feel at risk of burnout. Yet, no one ascribed fault to the organisation for this situation or their feelings about it. Rather, they said the fault lay with themselves and their inability to cope effectively with any imbalances between work and non-work obligations:

‘During the week I don’t do anything but work. I think the reason I am that way is because I’m finding a lot of meaning in [work]. My family is very important to me but at the same time I’ve always been focused on what I’m doing and my goals.’ (Man, human resources manager, homeless services organisation, 31 August 2015)

Assuming personal responsibility for work–life imbalances or burnout was acute among women. As discussed previously, men seemed better able to exercise agency in setting priorities, adjusting obligations and taking the time and space for themselves to cope with work-related stress generally. Women, in contrast, interpreted work–life balance as their own responsibility. They sought balance between work and non-work life via personal care strategies such as exercising and eating healthily to cope with stress or by engaging in positive self-talk that emphasised the good they were doing in the world through non-profit work. Acknowledging rather than disavowing any vulnerabilities caused by work–life imbalances or burnout, interviewees always took personal responsibility for addressing those vulnerabilities.

Contradictory discourses

Several findings indicate the presence of discourses that seem to contradict and, in some ways, break with those that facilitate entrepreneurial subjectification. Contradictory discourses include the importance of relationships, ambiguity around competition and anxiety around perceived identities.

The importance of relationships

During discussions of sources of MFW, both men and women emphasised the importance of relationships with others to their sense of MFW. When asked to
outline the sources of MFW, men outlined factors including the ability to use their talents towards a greater good and the ability to see the impact of their work in the community. Additionally, men emphasised relationships with their colleagues and with beneficiaries as a key source of MFW. Women also highlighted the importance of relationships to their sense of MFW and did so to such an extent that it seemed antithetical to the competitive mindset of the entrepreneurial subject. More specifically, women pointed to camaraderie with colleagues as an essential part of a MFW culture, often describing relationships as familial. This sense of ‘family’ extended most prominently to organisational leaders who women viewed as essential to their sense of MFW because of their role in providing ongoing, authentic feedback (as described above). Relationships with beneficiaries were important to women’s sense of MFW as well. Women evoked the same desire to see the impact of their work that men had; however, in their discussions of impact relative to a MFW experience, women emphasised seeing the impact of their work in the lives of beneficiaries relative to their individual progress rather than on a more abstract sense of community. For those working with particularly vulnerable populations such as children, as the following quotation demonstrates, the effect appeared potent:

‘I am super excited about being here and working with children and families. That’s what drives me. … I can go home feeling good at night. When I see a smile on a child’s face or … when you can see a child understand [something], that’s very rewarding for me. When parents tell me they trust [me with] their children, that’s all I need.’ (Woman, director, children’s services non-profit, 27 May 2015)

So, in this arena – one’s sense and source of MFW – relational bonds with others as well as seeking to contribute beyond oneself to a greater good rather than competition and autonomy took precedence.

Ambiguity around competition

Concomitant with an emphasis on the importance of relationships, some women evoked a competitive mindset, a phenomenon seen most readily by revisiting discussions around pay and performance. As discussed, some women viewed the obtainment of advanced degrees and other credentials as essential steps towards professional advancement. These women also tied credentialling to financial rewards such as increased pay. These women did not view career advancement as a competition against colleagues exactly, but for some women, the credentialling/pay complex equated to power. That is, with more credentialing came opportunities for professional advancement, and with professional advancement came more pay, and with pay and professional advancement came power – more specifically, the power to wield influence over others and organisational decision making. As such, the competitive mindset was self-directed in that it was tied to the advancement of the women’s own careers, but also other-directed in that it indicated a desire to ascend to positions that wielded power over others. And yet, other women, while affording some importance to pay to make a living, were willing to forego more pay and career advancement and the power these might bring. These women sought and experienced other rewards...
through the work itself. For example, several women placed more importance on good leadership. Other women found meaningfulness in mentorship opportunities. As such, some women seemingly evoked a competitive ethos more so than others did. Interestingly, male participants did not raise these issues.

Anxiety around perceived identities

By diving deeper into women’s discussions around work–life balance and the role work played in their lives, we find additional paradoxes around identity. As discussed, non-profit work seemed to play an outsized role for many women, both in their lives and for their sense of self. Even so, women struggled to manage work-related obligations alongside personal and other obligations as they took personal responsibility to do so. Women navigated this difficult terrain oftentimes by engaging in self-talk aimed at making sense of a multifaceted identity that seemed conflicted. For the women we interviewed who had families, particularly families with children, sometimes this self-talk revolved around trying to make work work relative to their children’s and partner’s schedules, with flexible work arrangements being viewed as a key strategy in this endeavour. Some women acknowledged that experience with child raising changed both the notion of work and its importance. The role work played in their lives and to their sense of identity was not necessarily diminished. Rather, their work identity co-existed, sometimes uncomfortably, alongside their identity as a mother. The following quotation illustrates this point: “There are the days when I look up and I’m like, ‘Oh, my God! Everyone’s leaving. It’s 5!’ Wow, okay then. I need to pack it up. I need to put my ‘I’m going home face’ on and do the family thing” (woman, social worker, child welfare non-profit, 10 June 2016). This state evolved for women as their children grew up and left home. Work again resumed paramount importance in their sense of self. For the women we interviewed who did not have a partner and/or children, self-talk revolved around where work fitted in their lives as they contemplated the future. Here, women confessed that work played a perhaps too important role in their lives and sense of self, and they worried about this, that it was not ‘good’ or ‘healthy’ for work to mean so much to them, as the following quotation indicates:

‘[I] try to not let the tail wag the dog. When I have healthy boundaries, things go much better. If I’m in a season of not-so-healthy boundaries, where I’ve let things run amuck with my schedule or I’ve said yes to too many people or too many things, then I’m not as productive or as effective.’ (Woman, pastor, faith-based organisation, 19 July 2016)

In either case, it was the women we interviewed rather than the men who engaged in this anxious self-talk around the place of work in their lives and sense of self.

Discussion

This article explores non-profit managers’ experiences of work under increasingly marketised conditions along gender lines. The findings enhance prior scholarship and suggest some new avenues for research. The interviews convey non-profit managers
engaging in the discourses associated with the entrepreneurial subject and manifesting many of its contours. At the same time, subtle differences between how men and women narrated their experiences of MFW support certain aspects of women as ideal entrepreneurial subjects (Scharff, 2016), lending support to the extant literature (Davies et al, 2005; Gill et al, 2017; Gill and Kanai, 2018; Jones and Clifton, 2018; Baker and Kelan, 2019). For example, both men and women viewed themselves as enterprises, relating their organisational worth to their pay. However, some women viewed pay as an affirmation of their accomplishments and abilities, suggesting pay offers a competitive edge and serves in part as a vehicle towards gaining power and influence over others. Evolving attitudes towards pay may indicate some acquiescence to neoliberal market values (Sandberg and Robichau, under review), but such attitudes may also indicate successful navigation of the precarious balance between ‘mission and margin’ that non-profit workers navigate (Breeze, 2017; Kellner et al, 2017; see also Venter et al, 2019). Indeed, research indicates that workers who successfully incorporate neoliberal market values into their conceptions and experience of non-profit MFW are more satisfied at work (Sandberg and Robichau, under review; see also Maier et al, 2016).

And yet, while all participants indicated work–life imbalances, the women we interviewed appeared compelled to commit to a narrative of overwork as an aspect of their core identity, almost as if creating a balance between work and home would adversely affect their personhood. Women managers’ overt declaration of their commitment to work may indicate a desire to declare their status as non-profit professionals and not amateurs (see Hwang and Powell, 2009), given their perilous status in executive and managerial roles (Themudo, 2009; Teasdale et al, 2011). It may also indicate the personal anxiety around meaning and identity that neoliberal marketisation engenders for women (see Scharff, 2016) vis-à-vis an aspiration towards ‘the perfect’ and some abstract notion of ‘the good life’ women can achieve through self-competition (McRobbie, 2015). The predicament for women around work–life imbalances seems to speak to the adoption of an entrepreneurial mindset in which women come to embody ‘the firm’, ever seeking to produce more of themselves to meet others’ needs (Rottenberg, 2019). Indeed, while all participants embraced risk, managed difficulties by framing them positively and took personal responsibility for work–life imbalances, women believed that rectifying vulnerabilities was a personal responsibility, requiring that they double down on their efforts towards personal and professional success (see Banet-Weiser et al, 2020). These results suggest that while all participants turned their attention inward as the source of blame and solution, men seemed able to cognitively distance themselves from the marketised workplaces and entrepreneurial discourses that intensified their dilemmas. Overall, these findings reflect longstanding hegemonic forces that privilege men over women, masculinity over femininity, in non-profit workplaces (see Heckler, 2019).

Simultaneously, the study found that some participants wrestled with the discourses of the entrepreneurial subject. Some managers, significantly some women, employed counter-narratives to the entrepreneurial subject to articulate the paradoxes of conflicting identities and perceptions of the self relative to the workplace, that is, the ‘non-profit double bind’ (Daly, 2013; Venter et al, 2019) in which they found themselves. Some women refused a competitive mindset regarding pay and
advancement as a source of power. Rather, these managers embraced a more relational approach to non-profit work where colleagues and beneficiaries were viewed as a ‘family’ that was impacted by their personal commitment to organisational ends. As such, personal sacrifice was warranted. Scholarship on meaningfulness in work points to relationships as a significant source of MFW for workers (see Rosso et al, 2010) but it is unclear what role gender and sociocultural norms around gender play within this dynamic. Possibly, relationships are a crucial source of MFW for women in non-profit management (see Sandberg and Robichau, under review), such that viewing work as a communal, relational space becomes a coping mechanism to resist or mitigate marketisation and its competitive, autonomous ethos.

Alternatively, viewing workplaces as ‘a family’ could also mitigate workers’ ability to separate their work and non-work lives (and selves). When work becomes a substantial source of meaningfulness and when work is perceived to impact one’s colleagues-as-extended-family, workers, particularly women, are more likely to devote more of themselves to it, thus forcing them to continuously regulate time and identity at both work and home (Hochschild, 1997). Such oppositional – perhaps incommensurable – narratives of one’s roles at home and work illustrate some reasons why women engaged in anxious self-talk around their conflicted identities and sense of self that undercut somewhat the notion of the entrepreneurial subject.

Seemingly, these findings indicate that while both female and male managers were manifesting aspects of the entrepreneurial subject, the women we interviewed conveyed their anxiety around work more openly than men. As well, female managers seemed more conflicted than their male counterparts about their work identity relative to their non-work selves, despite (or perhaps because of) the sense of meaningfulness that non-profit work engendered for them. As such, these findings lend some support to the notion that the psychic life of women in Western society is more vulnerable to the values and logics of neoliberalism and to entrepreneurial subjectification (Scharff, 2016; Gill and Kanai, 2018). In the arena of non-profit work, a question lingers: To what extent do extant discourses on meaningful non-profit work and notions of what it means to be a non-profit worker contribute to this milieu for female managers? MFW can be viewed as an exchange in which one feels one is ‘receiving a return on investment of one’s self in a currency of physical, cognitive, and emotional energy’ (Kahn, 1990: 703–4, emphasis added). An exchange of (at least part of) one’s self for MFW, while generating a sense of meaningfulness in work, can also be a ‘double-edged sword’ (Bunderson and Thompson, 2009) in which workers sacrifice personal wellbeing to sustain their sense of ‘deeply meaningful work’, thus generating a ‘dark side of meaningful work’ (Oelberger, 2019). Perhaps the paradoxical dynamic in which workers invest their selves in work in exchange for a sense of meaningfulness manifests profoundly for female managers in non-profit work. Female interviewees expressed a struggle not only to develop a meaningful non-profit work identity comprised of ‘integrity with self’ and a ‘unity with others’ (see Lips–Wiersma et al, 2020) but also to contend with the burden of conflicting societal expectations around sources of meaningfulness in which women are expected to find meaningfulness at home and with families as well as with work (see Hochschild, 1997; see also Lopez and Ramos, 2017). All of this is exacerbated by the gender inequalities that pervade non-profit work (Themudo, 2009; Teasdale et al, 2011; see also Heckler, 2019).
Limitations

This study is subject to some limitations. The focus of analysis is on individual, managerial experiences in the US, thus limiting understanding in different work environments, organisational levels and globally. Additionally, the sample size is relatively small and homogenous, particularly relative to race and ethnicity, lessening the ability to extrapolate findings to all non-profit workers. Given the exploratory nature of our research design, the findings are interpreted cautiously and may not be generalisable to all non-profit managers; instead, the goal of this study is to offer an opportunity to learn about the gendered experience of the neoliberal subject (Stake, 2005: 451). However, the overall diversity of managerial positions, identities and organisations represented within the sample encourages us to believe the findings will illuminate some aspects of managers’ shared experiences regarding neoliberal marketisation, entrepreneurial subjectification and MFW. Subsequent research could assess how well these findings are substantiated within certain organisational settings, among male and female non-profit managers generally, and among certain male and female non-profit managers (for example, managers who are mothers, managers who are people of colour and so on). Considering these limitations, we sought transparency and rigour throughout the study.

Conclusion

The findings from this exploratory study offer insights into the mechanisms creating a ‘triple bind’ for female managers in non-profits as continuously navigating the influences of mission and market as well as sociocultural expectations around gender emerged in discussions. As non-profit work continues to be stratified along gender lines (Themudo, 2009; Kosny and MacEachen, 2010), these complex dynamics warrant deeper examination along both conceptual and practical lines. Relative to practice, it behooves non-profit leaders to explore how they can build an ‘authentic’ experience of MFW for managers, paying close attention to how different interpretations of work experiences between women and men act to shape their perceptions of and expectations around MFW, while simultaneously keeping in mind that interviews indicated a greater risk for work–life imbalances and burnout among women. Additionally, the analysis herein offers scrutiny of neoliberal marketisation and the processes of entrepreneurial subjectification, which may hold singular implications for female managers in non-profits. A deeper critical examination of the role that gender as well as expectations around gender roles play in the neoliberal marketisation of non-profits and non-profit work is warranted. While important advances have been made in explicating gender inequalities in non-profits (for example, Themudo, 2009; Kosny and MacEachen, 2010; Teasdale et al, 2011; Heckler, 2019), the intersection of gender, gender inequality and neoliberal marketisation in non-profit work remains lamentably opaque.

Note

1 For the purposes of this study, the term ‘gender’ assumes a binary between female/male and woman/man. We recognise that this designation limits understanding of how non-binary workers experience non-profit work.
Acknowledgements
The authors wish to thank Thomas J. Catlaw for his important contributions to the development of this study and with early data collection and analysis efforts.

Conflict of interest
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

References


