

The Accidental Nonprofiteer

Chance Events and the Selection of a Nonprofit Career

Erin Nelson

University of Memphis

Abstract

Research on nonprofit careers has typically focused on motivations and preferences of those already in the nonprofit workforce. But how do individuals initially learn about the nonprofit sector as a place of employment? In this research, I focus on the effect of chance events on nonprofit career selection and seek to develop a theoretical framework from which to examine nonprofit career decision making. Using a retrospective study ($n = 337$), I found that the majority of respondents felt that an unplanned event affected their selection of a nonprofit career. Specifically, respondents noted that learning experiences rooted in unplanned events often led to careers with specific organizations, or in the nonprofit sector more generally. Implications include the need for more deliberate connection between a desire to help others and seeking paid employment in the nonprofit workforce, and highlight the important role of nonprofit management degree programs in facilitating that connection.

Keywords: *nonprofit career; nonprofit education; happenstance learning theory*

Research has provided a considerable amount of data about the nonprofit workforce globally and at the individual level. In 2010, nearly 13.7 million people were employed in the nonprofit workforce, with a 17% increase in employment between 2000 and 2010, and were paid wages of \$587.7 billion (Blackwood, Roeger, & Pettijohn, 2012). These numbers show that the nonprofit sector is the nation's third largest paid employer (Salamon, Sokolowski, & Geller, 2012), comprising 56 million full-time equivalent workers and 5.6% of the working population (Salamon, 2010).

At the individual level, researchers have found nonprofit employees to be more intrinsically motivated than their peers in the public and for-profit sectors. Nonprofit employees particularly enjoy the contribution their work makes in their communities (Benz, 2005; Leete, 2006; P. Light, 2002; Lyons, Duxbury, & Higgins, 2006; Mirvis & Hackett, 1983; Onyx & Maclean, 1996; Preston, 1990). Nonprofit employees volunteer more than their for-profit and public sector peers (Hansen, Huggins, & Ban, 2003; Lee, 2012; Lee & Wilkins, 2011; P. Light, 2002; Park & Word, 2009; Rotolo & Wilson, 2006; Wuthnow, 1994). These data show that those working within the nonprofit sector demonstrate a commitment to service not only in their professional lives, but also in their personal lives.

Much information is known about the nonprofit employee; however, researchers have yet to examine the contributing factors to an individual's overall selection of the nonprofit sector as a place of employment. In this study, I applied psychological and sociological theoretical frameworks of career choice to careers in the nonprofit sector specifically. This paper will not only add to the broader literature of career decision making, but also contribute to a greater understanding of antecedents to careers in the nonprofit sector specifically, as well as the perhaps unintentional nature of nonprofit career selection.

Literature Review

Several mechanisms can introduce individuals to the nonprofit sector, including volunteerism, service learning, and socialization (Aronson, 1999; Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 1999; Bekkers, 2004, 2007; Erikson, 1968; Hackett, Esposito, & O'Halloran, 1989; Janoski, Musick, & Wilson, 1998; Janoski & Wilson, 1995; Jones & Abes, 2004; Kelman, 1961). Each of these elements could affect an individual's awareness of careers in the nonprofit sector and perhaps professional entry into the sector as well. This research connects those mechanisms through the overarching framework of happenstance learning theory, which suggests careers are often the product of chance events.

Career Decision Making

Psychological theories of career decision making tend to look at the role of socialization in eventual career selection and are influenced greatly by Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, which asserts that individual action is explained by the interaction of personal and environmental determinants. Social learning theory of career decision making was developed through this theoretical model (Krumboltz, Mitchell, & Jones, 1976; Mitchell, Jones, & Krumboltz, 1979) and looks to the importance of environment and social context on eventual career decisions. However, as theories of career decision making have progressed and evolved, several researchers have begun to notice the importance and effect of chance on major life changes and decisions. Researchers have

utilized various terms to capture this concept: *happenstance* (Bandura, 1977); Hirschi, 2010; Krumboltz, 2009; Krumboltz & Levin, 2010; Miller, 1983), *chance* (Bright, Pryor, & Harpham, 2005; Bright, Pryor, Wilkenfeld, & Earl, 2005; Roe & Baruch, 1967), *serendipity* (Betsworth & Hanson, 1996; Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997; Krumboltz, 1998), and *synchronicity* (Guindon & Hanna, 2002), to name a few. All of these terms refer to the basic idea that there are “unplanned, accidental, or otherwise situational, unpredictable, or unintentional events or encounters that have an impact on career development and behavior” (Rojewski, 1999, p. 269). For example, a college student may volunteer for Up ‘Til Dawn, a collegiate fundraising event for St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital, and in the process learn about careers in development at ALSAC/St. Jude from a campus liaison. The student had intended to volunteer and, by chance, learned about a new passion and potential career in the nonprofit sector.

Happenstance learning theory (HLT), which stems from social learning theory of career decision making, suggests that human behavior and eventual career selection are the result of learning experiences that are created in planned and unplanned situations (Krumboltz, 2009, p. 135). Moreover, career selection is not a product of one of these influences at one time, but instead the result of accumulated experiences and influences that shape preferences over time. According to this theory, the following could influence career decisions: genetic influences, instrumental learning experiences (or learning the consequences of actions), associative learning experiences (or learning the consequences of actions from observing others), and environmental conditions (Krumboltz, 2009; Krumboltz & Levin, 2010). I discuss these influences in the next section.

Propositions of happenstance learning theory. Genetic endowment indicates that people tend to enter particular careers because qualities such as gender, age, and race or ethnicity expose them to one set of career opportunities instead of another (Krumboltz et al., 1976). People are inclined or disinclined to enter particular career fields because of attractive options available to them. Women, for example, might be more likely to seek or obtain employment in the “caring” professions because they feel more capable in that work (Betz, 1986; Betz & Hackett, 1981). Through this same lens but for issues of age, someone from the Silent Generation would have been unlikely to seek a career as a Web developer when they were younger, nor would someone from the Millennial Generation have sought a career as a switchboard operator, simply because those jobs did not exist when they were entering the workforce. Gender, ethnicity, and age are beyond an individual’s control and, as such, are unplanned events that affect careers available to them.

Learning experiences in particular nod to the idea that learning from planned and chance events certainly affects a person’s perceptions. Instrumental learning suggests that unplanned events can create opportunities to learn about different careers (Krumboltz, 2009; Krumboltz & Levin, 2010). For example, an individual may choose or be required to volunteer while in college—a planned event. However, that individual may have a particularly meaningful volunteer experience where he or she is able to work with nonprofit staff on a project related to mission delivery and, during that experience, see that the nonprofit sector is not only a place that helps others, but also a place for paid employment. Similarly, a student may enroll in a service-learning course dur-

ing college (a planned event) and see that his or her skills and interests are applicable in the nonprofit workforce (an unplanned event).

Associative learning gives credence to the idea that external sources lead to positive or negative attitudes about occupations (Palladino Schultheiss, Palma, & Manzi, 2005; Taylor, Harris, & Taylor, 2004). Social interactions with others such as informal networking, encouragement of others to pursue a particular field, or perhaps encouragement from others to pursue a particular academic field affect how people perceive career choices and affect the career choices available to them (Bright, Pryor, & Harpham, 2005). In other words, an individual may become aware of and form perceptions of nonprofit careers through informal conversations with friends, role models, or colleagues.

Environmental conditions can also affect career choice. Community, in terms of geography and ethos, has an important role in a person's environment. Community is an important factor not only in showing a young person the careers available to him or her, but also in accounting for the important effect that role models outside the family can have in decision making (Aronson, 1999; Erikson, 1968; Hackett et al., 1989; Kelman, 1961). If a youngster is raised in a community that has an active culture of service, that individual is more likely to have been afforded experiences with nonprofit organizations. Similarly, if a city has few active nonprofit organizations, citizens their have less opportunity to volunteer and engage with the nonprofit sector overall. An educational system that incorporates service learning, required service hours, and the like can also instill the value of civic engagement in students. However, these events may also be chance events, because a major change of residence affects the experiences available to an individual.

Bright, Pryor, and Harpham (2005) suggest that people do not view their career choices as intentional or rational. Rather than acting in a manner that produces a specific career goal, people tend to treat their career path as a product of external forces (Hirschi, 2010). In essence, the propositions of HLT include an inherent assumption that people are subject to unpredictable environmental events that shape not only their opportunities, but also the way they perceive and react to situations (Mitchell et al., 1979). Simply stated, people learn and make subsequent choices from their experiences with chance events.

HLT has been applied to private sector careers, but is likely also applicable to the study of nonprofit careers because the study of the nonprofit career and the professionalization of the nonprofit sector are relatively young. It is anecdotally known that many individuals working in the nonprofit sector do not intentionally seek careers in the sector—people rarely hear the phrase, “I want to be a program officer when I grow up,” largely because career opportunities in the nonprofit sector are widely unknown. As such, the issue of human agency might not be a relevant assumption among this particular population. Careers in the nonprofit sector seem to be more a product of a sequence of planned and chance events. This suggests that HLT, not one of the cognitive career theories (e.g., Lent, 2005; Lent & Brown, 1996, 2002; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994, 1996, 2002; Lent & Hackett, 1994), would be a more appropriate theoretical framework to examine employee entry into the nonprofit sector. In this research, I ex-

amine the appropriateness of HLT as a framework for nonprofit career awareness and eventual career selection. Specifically, I explore how people familiarize themselves and interact with the nonprofit sector prior to careers in the nonprofit workforce.

Method

Building on the work conducted in the career development literature, in this exploratory research I examine the nature of nonprofit career awareness and selection. Specifically, I determine whether HLT is an appropriate framework through which to view nonprofit career choice. I will do this by answering the following research questions:

- Do nonprofit employees feel as though their careers are a product of intentional choices?
- Do nonprofit employees feel as though their careers are a product of chance events?
- What combination of planned and unplanned events initially led to respondents' nonprofit career choices?

To examine these research questions, I utilized a cross-sectional survey design to assess the relationships between early-life and precareer experiences, nonprofit career awareness, and current employment in the nonprofit sector, among a sample of members of a national nonprofit association.

Participants

I randomly selected four chapters of the Young Nonprofit Professionals Network (YNPN) to participate in this research project. YNPN is a membership organization with 37 chapters and over 30,000 young professionals working in the nonprofit sector in a variety of capacities (volunteer coordination, development, programmatic, executive, etc.). Chapter leaders distributed an initial participation solicitation via e-mail, as well as two follow-up e-mails per chapter, to a total of 4,085 members over 3 months. Because of the variety of mission categories represented within the membership, the generations represented within YNPN, and the national scope of the organization and its chapters, they were an ideal population to be included in this research.

Procedure

A member of each YNPN chapter's leadership team, either the board chair or someone responsible for chapter communications, sent an e-mail solicitation including a link to the online survey. This resulted in 337 usable responses, for an overall response rate of 8.24%. Of the final 337 responses, 132 were from the San Diego chapter, 76 were from the Denver chapter, 40 were from the Research Triangle chapter, and 39, and 50 from other chapters across the country. were from the Kansas City area chapter. This response rate, although low, is relatively similar to the response rate for other survey research conducted with the YNPN membership, which has typically been low overall. These response rates range from 3.6% to 16.57% (Dobin & Tchume, 2011; Schwartz, Weinberg, Hagenbuch, & Scott, 2011; Solomon & Sandahl, 2007).

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics of the sample drawn from members of YNPN. The respondent pool was predominantly female (86.6%, $n = 292$) and Caucasian (78.9%, $n = 266$), which are similar to the nonprofit workforce demographics found in prior studies (P. Light, 2003; Solomon & Sandahl, 2007). The second most frequent ethnicities represented in the sample were Asian and Hispanic/Latino, the number of which was larger than that typically found in studies of the nonprofit workforce. This can be attributed in part to the percentage of respondents who claim San Diego chapter membership, with its larger proportion of Asian respondents. The respondents were 31 years old ($M = 30.77$, $SD = 5.71$) on average. These data were collapsed by generation, and I used Brinckerhoff and Hyman's (2007) and Kunreuther, Kim, and Rodriguez's (2009) suggested cutoff of 1980 as the separation of Generation X (or Gen X) and the Millennial Generation (or Gen Y). Because YNPN inherently caters to the young nonprofit professional, this is not surprising.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of YNPN Members by Chapter Membership

Descriptive statistic	YNPN chapter					Total ($n = 337$) %
	San Diego ($n = 132$) %	Denver ($n = 76$) %	Kansas City ($n = 39$) %	Research Triangle ($n = 40$) %	Other ($n = 50$) %	
Highest Level of Education						
Terminal Degree	2.20	2.60	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.30
Master's Degree	31.10	38.20	33.30	45.00	28.00	34.40
Bachelor's Degree	61.40	56.60	64.10	45.50	68.00	59.10
Less than Bachelor's	5.20	2.60	2.60	10.00	4.00	5.00
Gender						
Male	12.90	9.20	15.40	12.50	22.00	13.40
Female	87.10	90.80	84.60	87.50	78.00	86.60
Generation						
Gen X or Older	22.00	27.60	30.80	17.50	24.00	24.30
Gen Y	78.00	72.40	69.20	82.50	76.00	75.70
Ethnicity						
African American	1.50	0.00	2.60	5.00	0.00	1.50
AIAN	0.70	0.00	0.00	0.00	6.00	1.20
Asian	10.60	1.30	2.60	0.00	20.00	6.50
Caucasian	72.70	88.20	89.70	90.00	56.00	78.90
Hispanic	6.00	6.60	0.00	0.00	14.00	5.90
NHPI	1.50	11.30	0.00	0.00	4.00	1.50
Multi-Ethnic	6.80	2.60	5.10	5.00	0.00	4.50

Note. AIAN = American Indian and Alaska Native; NHPI = Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander.

Respondents were generally highly educated, with the majority achieving at least a bachelor's degree (94.8%, $n = 320$), and over one third achieving a master's or terminal degree (35.7%, $n = 120$). Of the 309 respondents who provided their undergraduate major, only 1% ($n = 3$) indicated nonprofit management as their major and 13.27% ($n = 41$) indicated majors in public-service-related fields. Relatively few nonprofit professionals from this sample selected public service majors (broadly defined) at the undergraduate level. These data demonstrate a possible disconnect between choice of undergraduate major and the nonprofit profession and indicate support for chance or happenstance leading respondents to nonprofit careers.

Of note, when asked whether they would consider a different major, of the 118 respondents who indicated they would, only 5.9% ($n = 7$) indicated a degree in nonprofit management and only 14.40% ($n = 17$) indicated a major in a public-service-related field more broadly. However, of the 110 respondents who provided data on their graduate education, 12.73% ($n = 14$) indicated an emphasis in nonprofit management specifically and 44.55% ($n = 49$) had a public service emphasis in their education. For the purposes of this study, "public-service-related fields" are defined as nonprofit management/leadership, public administration, public affairs, public health, and public policy. Table 2 shows the responses by degree type.

Table 2

Respondent Educational Levels and Interests

Educational level and interests	Participants	Participants	Participants
	in group ($n = 309$)	in group ($n = 118$)	in group ($n = 110$)
	%	%	%
YNPN Members' Undergraduate Education			
Major in nonprofit management	.9		
Major in public-service-related field	13.27		
YNPN Members Indicating Different Major			
Major in nonprofit management		5.93	
Major in public-service-related field		14.41	
YNPN Members' Graduate Education			
Major in nonprofit management			12.73
Major in public-service-related field			44.55

Table 3 summarizes respondent fidelity to one sector or another. Respondents have held positions in approximately four organizations since entering the workforce as an adult ($M = 3.74$, $SD = 2.201$) and applied for 23 jobs on average in their last job search ($M = 22.89$, $SD = 45.778$,¹ $Mdn = 10$). Further, survey participants were able to choose from two competing job offers on average in their last search ($M = 1.60$, $SD = 1.717$).

¹Four cases were substantial outliers, resulting in such a high mean and standard deviation. Because this variable was only included for descriptive purposes, I made no alterations to the outlier scores.

Over 80% (81.6%, $n = 275$) of the survey respondents were currently employed in the nonprofit sector in some capacity. Intuitively, these data make sense because the respondent population comprised predominantly those who currently work or who were seeking work in the nonprofit sector. Approximately 40% ($n = 142$) of the respondents have stayed employed consistently within the same sector. However, 43% ($n = 146$) of the respondents have transitioned from another sector into the nonprofit sector at some point in their career and nearly 10% ($n = 33$) transitioned out of the nonprofit sector. From these data, it is clear that nonprofit careers were not the initial sector of employment for nearly half of the respondents. Some event led these individuals to nonprofit careers and at least some proportion of this population was not aware of nonprofit careers early in life, which demonstrates support for chance contributing to career decision.

Table 3*Fidelity Within Individual Sectors of Employment*

Sector of prior employment	Sector of current employment			
	Nonprofit ($n = 275$) %	Public ($n = 23$) %	Private ($n = 25$) %	Unemployed ($n = 14$) %
Has not worked in different sector	46.9	13.0	36.0	7.1
Nonprofit sector previously	--	60.9	56.0	35.7
Public sector previously	18.5	--	8.0	28.6
Private sector previously	34.5	26.1	--	28.6

The Impact of Serendipity

The majority of the respondents (82.49%, $n = 278$) indicated that when they were younger they were interested in a career in which they were helping people. However, over two thirds of those respondents (67.60%, $n = 228$) also reported that when they were younger they were unaware of careers in the nonprofit sector. These data signify a potential lack of career awareness and perhaps no “typical” path to entry into the nonprofit workforce for these respondents, suggesting a path of planned and unplanned events leading them to the nonprofit sector.

Respondents were asked about the effect of chance events on their career in two ways. First, the critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954) was used and respondents were asked whether an unplanned event affected their career. For those who responded affirmatively, an open-ended question to describe that event was asked. For the second element of examining chance events, Bright, Pryor, Wilkenfeld, and Earl’s (2005) measure of unplanned events was used to determine what types of unplanned events were most common among nonprofit employees. Respondents were shown a series of unplanned events and asked whether the events influenced their career choice *not at all, some, or a great deal*. Respondents could indicate multiple unplanned events that may have affected their nonprofit careers.

Of the respondents, 74.78% ($n = 252$) reported that an unplanned event has affected their career. Table 4 shows the proportion of respondents who felt that various

unexpected events affected their careers. The most commonly reported chance event that affected respondent careers *some* or *a great deal* was the influence of professional or personal connections that led to information about jobs (88.89%, $n = 300$). Simply being in the right place at the right time (87.25%, $n = 294$) had a substantial effect on respondents' nonprofit career selection. Similarly, respondents nearly as frequently reported unintended exposure to work that the respondent found interesting and the encouragement of others to acquire education and experience, set higher goals, or pursue a new field (86.93%, $n = 293$ and 81.10%, $n = 273$, respectively). The chance events that respondents less commonly reported were unintended exposure to work that the respondent did not find interesting and a major change of residence (59.61%, $n = 201$, and 23.78%, $n = 80$, respectively).

Table 4*Impact of Unplanned Events on Respondents' Careers*

Unplanned influence	No influence %	Some influence %	A great deal of influence %
Professional or personal connections	11.11	32.03	56.86
Right place/right time	12.75	40.85	46.41
Exposure to work did find interesting	13.07	41.83	45.10
Encouragement of others	18.89	50.16	30.94
Exposure to work did not find interesting	40.39	40.07	19.54
Major change of residence	76.22	13.68	10.10

The data point to the idea that events, mostly unplanned, in some way affect people's understanding of the nonprofit sector as a career option and as their eventual career choice. HLT indicates that learning, specifically genetics, instrumental learning, associative learning, and environmental conditions, from planned and unplanned events leads to eventual career selection. Eighty-six percent of the respondents were female (as is the bulk of the nonprofit workforce), indicating gender is an element of career selection. As researchers have already noted, women are more likely to seek employment in "caring" professions (Betz, 1986; Betz & Hackett, 1981).

There is also support for the HLT components of instrumental and associative learning. The majority of the respondents indicated learning about and applying for nonprofit careers after exposure to a type of work they found to be interesting. This directly supports the idea that instrumental learning during unplanned events creates opportunities to learn about careers (Krumboltz, 2009; Krumboltz & Levin, 2010). Further, the data show support for associative learning, the idea that individuals learn about career opportunities through social interactions with others (Bright, Pryor, & Harpham, 2005; Palladino Schultheiss et al., 2005; Taylor et al., 2004). Respondents most frequently learned about nonprofit careers through personal or professional connections or through the encouragement of others. In both cases, respondents were able

to better direct their careers toward nonprofit work from this new information. In the next section, I further examine the roles of the more commonly cited chance events in career selection through an analysis of qualitative responses to open-ended questions.

Digging deeper: What were the unplanned influences? I conducted a content analysis on 201 open-ended responses to determine what specific unplanned events had a significant influence on the respondents' careers. I adopted codes from Bright, Pryor, Wilkenfeld, and Earl's (2005b) unplanned events scale and applied it to the qualitative responses. Two individuals coded the responses and resolved discrepancies on 13 of the cases. These results mirrored those in the quantitative component of this question, with professional or personal connections, exposure to interesting work, and being at the right place at the right time most commonly represented. However, unlike the quantitative responses, which were very close in number, exposure to work that the respondent found interesting (23.38%) and being in the right place at the right time (10.45%) changed place in frequency.

Personal or professional connections. The most commonly cited unplanned incident was learning about a position or learning about the nonprofit workforce through personal or professional connections. Some of the unplanned connections were personal connections who told respondents of open positions within their own organizations. These respondents were mostly influenced by friends or friends of relatives:

I only worked at that summer camp because when I moved to a new town, someone who I did not know from my old hometown also moved there at the same time and lived on my street. Our mothers became friends. She worked at that same camp for one summer and randomly called me to interest me in working there the following summer. I had no desire to work with children at that time, but because of a line from a Ralph Waldo Emerson quote, I decided to apply, got the job, and proceeded to work there every summer throughout college and graduate school.

This respondent not only learned about the nonprofit sector as a place of employment, but also became interested in a particular mission category (youth services) because of this unplanned experience and continued in a nonprofit career after completing her education.

Others learned of positions through connections made through informal professional networking. In the following quote, the informal networking not only led the respondent to a nonprofit career, but also reconnected her to an organization that had served her family earlier in her life.

I grew up in a Habitat for Humanity home but never really understood what that meant. I never thought about it or about other Habitat families. By chance, I made friends with a coworker who volunteered with Habitat for Humanity of [my city]. I shared my history with him and he roped me into taking his place on the committee when he moved away. That was when I met the Habitat staff and learned that the Volunteer Manager role was opening up. Shortly after that I was hired on and have been here, in my dream job, for a year and a half now.

Other professional connections led respondents to their nonprofit career via mentoring, through personal introductions at work events, and through participation in YNPN events.

Right place, right time. The third most commonly cited unplanned incident was being in the right place at the right time. In many of these cases, being in the right place at the right time introduced current nonprofit employees to the work of the sector. One respondent noted, “I just happened to get a receptionist job at a nonprofit and decided to stay in the sector.” Another respondent stated that she met “the CEO and founder of an NGO while I was in undergrad working as a waitress. She gave me her card and I ended up having my first internship there.”

In other instances, individuals were interested in nonprofit work, but were introduced to positions in a particular organization through chance occurrence:

I went hiking with my husband in the mountains and saw a sign for the organization I now work for. I had never heard of it before and checked out their website later on a whim when I remembered it. I applied for a job and 2 months later interviewed for my current position.

Perhaps surprisingly, in several similar cases respondents have been out and about and simply saw a sign for their current organization. The signs sparked an interest in the organization and follow-up research led them to applying for positions.

Exposure to interesting work. The second most commonly cited unplanned event was being exposed to work that they found to be interesting. Again, for several respondents, this provided an introduction to paid employment in the nonprofit sector altogether. In many instances, this introduction was through unplanned internships, volunteer work, and sometimes through college coursework. Themes among these respondents indicate that the unplanned events provide either an introduction to the paid work of the sector (broadly) or an introduction to specific mission areas (e.g., the respondent learning that they wanted to work with refugees).

Of those who were exposed to the nonprofit workforce more broadly, one respondent noted,

First . . . I had an internship in a nonprofit organization that I had not planned on, which gave me the initial desire to work in this sector. Second, I completed a year of post-grad volunteer service with a nonprofit and was offered a job upon completion of my volunteer contract. I still work for that same organization.

Another respondent noted the influence of unplanned volunteering, in terms of career awareness and mission awareness:

I was looking for a volunteer opportunity in college and decided to accompany my roommate to an event for a local counseling center. I really liked the people there and applied to be a volunteer. I became very involved in the center throughout my tenure as a volunteer. I was too close to completing my degree in education to change my major at that time, but my experience volunteering at the center steered me toward a career in nonprofit organizations.

Others noted that unplanned events introduced them to specific mission interests. Of note, nearly 20% of the respondents in this cluster ($n = 11$) noted that the influence of their AmeriCorps or other year of service experience introduced them to particular mission areas of interest. One respondent wrote,

I was an AmeriCorps NCCC member for two years and my life path completely changed while doing so. I knew I always wanted to help people and thought that my path would be through education as a special ed teacher, but after my two years of service I felt like social work was more of my calling.

Another respondent became interested in a particular mission because of an increased awareness of problems the mission was trying to address:

I joined Teach for America and never intended to stay within the education realm, yet after seeing the atrocities that existed in the public school system, in the inner city in which I was placed, and the “failing” school that I worked in for two years, it completely altered the trajectory of my life.

In each of these cases, which are representative of the larger pool of qualitative responses, unplanned exposure to the work of the sector piqued their interest in nonprofit careers. These responses, alongside the descriptive data, support HLT as an appropriate framework for nonprofit career selection, indicating a presence of chance or unplanned events as a catalyst for career selection. Additionally, the research uncovered some of the more commonly occurring chance events that led to nonprofit careers.

Discussion

The data show a general lack of knowledge about nonprofit careers among the respondent pool. The respondents, who are mostly nonprofit employees or are familiar with the nonprofit sector as a place of employment, indicate that they were largely unaware of careers in the nonprofit sector when they were younger. This lack of awareness, combined with a reported desire to have a career in which they are helping people, indicates a substantial gap in knowledge between wanting a career in the nonprofit sector and knowing what one is or how to obtain one.

Additionally, the data support the idea of planned situations leading to unplanned careers (e.g., volunteer or year of service opportunities leading to jobs) and of unplanned situations (e.g., going for a hike) leading to nonprofit careers. Because of the general lack of knowledge of nonprofit careers among respondents and the data supporting that less intentional choices led to respondents' nonprofit careers, it seems as though less rational models, and perhaps more behavioral models such as HLT, may be appropriate theoretical frameworks from which to examine nonprofit career decision making. Rather than acting in a deliberate manner to pursue a particular field or occupation, as some of the more rational career theories would suggest (e.g., see Lent, 2005; Lent & Brown, 1996, 2002; Lent et al., 1994, 1996, 2002; Lent & Hackett, 1994), these respondents tended to learn of their current positions, if not the nonprofit workforce more broadly, by chance learning experiences.

Through an analysis of qualitative responses, three primary types of events emerged that commonly influence respondents' career choices: associative learning experiences, instrumental learning experiences, and chance encounters. These reflect the propositions of HLT. I summarize the effects of these events in the following sections.

Associative Learning

Personal and professional connections tended to lead respondents to nonprofit careers in specific organizations (either as an original point of entry to the nonprofit workforce or, more commonly, as a point of career change or career advancement from one organization within the nonprofit sector to another within the nonprofit sector) or to pique their interest in a specific mission category. In this regard, the personal and professional connections are providing the respondents with associative learning experiences about a particular organizational function (program staff, development, etc.), organization, mission category, or field, as a career option. The respondents were made aware of those career options and based on those learning experiences made assumptions about whether the opportunities would be appealing to them.

Instrumental Learning

Instrumental learning experiences were illustrated by the prevalence of chance events that led to learning about types of work that the respondent found to be interesting. Many of these instrumental learning experiences occurred during year of service programs, volunteering, coursework, service trips, and other unplanned interactions with the nonprofit sector. These experiences led to an awareness of nonprofit careers broadly, but also helped respondents to gain a better understanding of the variety of missions that nonprofit organizations serve and to determine causes that were meaningful for them to work toward. Further, some types of learning experiences allowed respondents to develop new skills that led to an interest in a particular type of occupation. For example, one respondent noted that learning Raiser's Edge led to an interest in development work and another who was an AmeriCorps worker who recruited volunteers for a project became interested in a career as a volunteer manager. Learning about various aspects of nonprofit work has allowed these respondents to determine what occupational choices would appeal to them.

The "Accidental" Nonprofiteer?

This research also demonstrates the effect of random events on eventual career choice. Specifically, for several of the respondents, simply being in the right place at the right time led to a career in the nonprofit sector or led the respondent to a particular organization within the nonprofit sector. Some learned about their "dream organization" while on a walk, some learned about a particular type of organization while on vacation in a different city, and some had a chance encounter with someone within the nonprofit sector who was hiring, simply because of where they were at a particular time.

Although anecdotally nonprofit careers seem random, it appears as though the more prevalent chance occurrences are ones in which an individual learns about the types of work of the nonprofit sector or is introduced to an opportunity within the nonprofit workforce by a personal or professional connection and then modifies or refines career choices accordingly. In this regard, yes, chance events led these respondents to a particular job, but these careers are typically less haphazard than simply calling to volunteer at a new organization and being hired on the spot for a position within that organization.

Conclusions

The bulk of respondents, most of whom were already working in the nonprofit sector, agreed to having a lack of awareness of nonprofit careers at a young age (67.60%, $n = 228$). Yet they remember wanting to find a career in which they were helping someone, when they were younger (82.49%, $n = 278$). There seems to be a disconnect between having a desired occupation that involves helping people and knowing that those types of careers, in other words paid employment, can be found in the nonprofit sector. In this section, I identify implications of this research and avenues for future inquiry.

Implications for Nonprofit Managers

The first implication is related to the work of nonprofit managers. How can those in the nonprofit sector introduce people more intentionally to nonprofit careers? As the sector grows and the Boomer generation retires, it will require more professionals to help maintain service provision. Perry and Wise (1990) indicate that individuals with certain qualities and motivations are more likely to seek out employment actively in organizations that complement those qualities. However, these individuals are not aware of how to find work within the nonprofit sector (M. Light & Light, 2006). When individuals interact with nonprofit organizations or talk with friends and colleagues, they may gain an awareness of the sector and how it operates and perhaps a greater understanding of the work of nonprofit employees. Specifically, it is important to uncover which of these unplanned experiences may happen earlier in life and lead to an intentional choice to enter the nonprofit workforce. As researchers uncover the patterns and events that introduce young people to nonprofit careers, nonprofit managers can then begin to better target those types of individuals in their recruitment practices.

Implications for Colleges and Universities

Because chance experiences and encounters with nonprofit organizations help students realize yet another possible career path, it is important for career services departments at colleges and universities to help foster those interactions. When holding internship and career fairs, colleges and universities can invite several local nonprofit agencies to participate and offer them a reduced rate so they *can* participate. When forming panels on résumé preparation, colleges and universities might also include participants who are able to help students create a résumé that highlights that they have the skills needed in third sector organizations specifically. If young people are provided opportunities to engage with and learn about the nonprofit workforce in a way that connects service and career, they may be likely candidates for careers in helping fields such as social work or nonprofit management.

Implications for Nonprofit Management Education

This topic is also important to nonprofit management education more specifically. By and large, respondents to this project did not receive an undergraduate degree in nonprofit management or a public-service-related major nor did they indicate a wish to have changed their major. However, a substantial proportion of the respondents who completed graduate work had an emphasis in nonprofit management or public service. Perhaps those who “happened upon” the nonprofit sector as a place of employment realized that they needed specialized education to be more effective in their practice. Attracting those potentially interested individuals into formalized degree programs

earlier in their academic careers might also better professionalize the nonprofit sector, with an increasing number of those new to the working world being better trained and prepared at the onset of their careers to handle the day-to-day challenges of working in the nonprofit sector.

Future Research

This exploratory study begins to answer questions surrounding nonprofit career awareness. However, because of the early nature of inquiry in this area, subsequent work needs to be done to further identify and perhaps model predictors of nonprofit career awareness. In addition, some questions were left unanswered and several new questions have formed in light of these findings. With what is known about growth in the nonprofit sector and the nonprofit workforce, what can nonprofit organizations do to help make career opportunities known among those who are likely to be interested in that particular career trajectory? Also, with the recruitment process in nonprofit and other organizations already labor intensive and difficult, how can organizations proactively recruit the right people into the nonprofit workforce?

One question that arose from the high report of unplanned influences is that of “job shock.” In other words, did perceptions of “nonprofit work” meet reality for those who perhaps did not intend to work in the nonprofit sector from a young age or even for those who are considered “sector-switchers”? What are the differences in experience and expectation among those who are introduced to the sector by various means, who have volunteered from a young age, or who have had a formalized nonprofit management education? Tangentially related to the issue of job shock, another avenue for future research would be to determine whether those who had early exposure to the nonprofit sector were more likely to pursue an undergraduate degree in nonprofit management. Or do those who have less socialization to the nonprofit sector and perhaps unintentional careers in the sector tend to pursue graduate education to fill a gap in knowledge?

In conclusion, this research is the first step in exploring nonprofit career awareness and nonprofit career decision making. Although this is a new line of inquiry, a foundation now exists for additional research projects. Additionally, an opportunity exists to begin building a testable model that can help determine the paths individuals take prior to their entry into the nonprofit workforce, and I look forward to pursuing these avenues of inquiry.

References

- Aronson, E. (1999). *The social animal*. New York, NY: Worth.
- Astin, A. W., Sax, L. J., & Avalos, J. (1999). Long-term effects of volunteerism during the undergraduate years. *The Review of Higher Education*, 22, 187–202.
- Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Bekkers, R. (2004). *Giving and volunteering in the Netherlands: Sociological and psychological perspectives* (Doctoral dissertation, Universiteit Utrecht, Utrecht). Retrieved from <http://igitur-archive.library.uu.nl/dissertations/2006-0329-200032/index.htm>
- Bekkers, R. (2007). Intergenerational transmission of volunteering. *Acta Sociologica*, 50, 99–114. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0001699307077653>

- Benz, M. (2005). Not for the profit, but for the satisfaction? Evidence on worker well-being in non-profit firms. *KYKLOS*, 58, 155–176. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0023-5962.2005.00283.x>
- Betsworth, D. G., & Hanson, J.-I. C. (1996). The categorization of serendipitous career development events. *Journal of Career Assessment*, 4(1), 91–98. <https://doi.org/10.1177/106907279600400106>
- Betz, N. E. (1986). Applications of self-efficacy theory to understanding career choice behavior. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 4, 279–289. <https://doi.org/10.1521/jscp.1986.4.3.279>
- Betz, N. E., & Hackett, G. (1981). The relationship of career-related self-efficacy expectations to perceived career options in college women and men. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 28, 399–410. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.28.5.399>
- Blackwood, A. S., Roeger, K. L., & Pettijohn, S. L. (2012). *The nonprofit sector in brief: Public charities, giving, and volunteering, 2012*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.
- Bright, J. E. H., Pryor, R. G. L., & Harpham, L. (2005). The role of chance events in career decision making. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 66, 561–576. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2004.05.001>
- Bright, J. E. H., Pryor, R. G. L., Wilkenfeld, S., & Earl, J. (2005). The role of social context and serendipitous events in career decision making. *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance*, 5(1), 19–36. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10775-005-2123-6>
- Brinckerhoff, P. C., & Hyman, V. L. (2007). *Generations: The challenge of a lifetime for your nonprofit*. Saint Paul, MN: Fieldstone Alliance.
- Dobin, D., & Tchume, T. (2011). *Good in theory, problems in practice*. New York, NY: Young Nonprofit Professionals Network.
- Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity: Youth and crises*. New York, NY: Norton.
- Flanagan, J. C. (1954). The critical incident technique. *Psychological Bulletin*, 51, 327–358. <https://doi.org/10.1037/h0061470>
- Guindon, M. H., & Hanna, F. J. (2002). Coincidence, happenstance, serendipity, fate, or the hand of God: Case studies in synchronicity. *Career Development Quarterly*, 50, 195–208. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-0045.2002.tb00894.x>
- Hackett, G., Esposito, D., & O'Halloran, M. S. (1989). The relationship of role model influences to the career salience and educational and career plans of college women. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 35, 164–180. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0001-8791\(89\)90038-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/0001-8791(89)90038-9)
- Hansen, S. B., Huggins, L., & Ban, C. (2003). *Explaining employee recruitment and retention by non-profit organizations: A survey of Pittsburgh area university graduates*. Pittsburgh, PA: The Forbes Funds.
- Hirschi, A. (2010). The role of chance events in the school-to-work transition: The influence of demographic, personality, and career development variables. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 77(1), 39–49. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2010.02.002>

- Hodkinson, P., & Sparkes, A. C. (1997). Careership: A sociological theory of career decision making. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 18(1), 29–44. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0142569970180102>
- Janoski, T., Musick, M., & Wilson, J. (1998). Being volunteered? The impact of social participation and pro-social attitudes on volunteering. *Sociological Forum*, 13, 495–519. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1022131525828>
- Janoski, T., & Wilson, J. (1995). Pathways to voluntarism: Family socialization and status transmission models. *Social Forces*, 74(1), 271–292. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2580632>
- Jones, S. R., & Abes, E. S. (2004). Enduring influences of service-learning on college students' identity development. *Journal of College Student Development*, 45, 149–166. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2004.0023>
- Kelman, H. C. (1961). Processes of opinion change. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 25, 57–78. <https://doi.org/10.1086/266996>
- Krumboltz, J. D. (1998). Serendipity is not serendipitous. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 45, 390–392. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.45.4.390>
- Krumboltz, J. D. (2009). The happenstance learning theory. *Journal of Career Assessment*, 17, 135–154. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1069072708328861>
- Krumboltz, J. D., Mitchell, A. M., & Jones, G. B. (1976). A social learning theory of career selection. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 6(1), 71–81. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001100007600600117>
- Krumboltz, J. D., & Levin, A. S. (2010). *Luck is no accident: Making the most of happenstance in your life and career*. San Luis Obispo, CA: Impact Publishers Group UK.
- Kunreuther, F., Kim, H., & Rodriguez, R. (2009). *Working across generations: Defining the future of nonprofit leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Lee, Y.-j. (2012). Behavioral implications of public service motivation: Volunteering by public and nonprofit employees. *The American Review of Public Administration*, 42(1), 104–121. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0275074011398120>
- Lee, Y.-j., & Wilkins, V. M. (2011). More similarities or more differences? Comparing public and nonprofit managers' job motivations. *Public Administration Review*, 71(1), 45–56. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6210.2010.02305.x>
- Leete, L. (2006). Work in the nonprofit sector. In W. W. Powell & R. Steinberg (Eds.), *The nonprofit sector: A research handbook* (2nd ed., pp. 159–179). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Lent, R. W. (2005). A social cognitive view of career development and counseling. In S. D. Brown & R. W. Lent (Eds.), *Career development and counseling: Putting theory and research to work* (pp. 101–127). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Lent, R. W., & Brown, S. D. (1996). Applying social cognitive theory to career counseling [Special section]. *The Career Development Quarterly*, 44, 307–309. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-0045.1996.tb00447.x>

- Lent, R. W., & Brown, S. D. (2002). Social cognitive career theory and adult development. In S. G. Niles (Ed.), *Adult career development: Concepts, issues, and practices* (3rd ed., pp. 76–97). Alexandria, VA: National Career Development Association.
- Lent, R. W., Brown, S. D., & Hackett, G. (1994). Toward a unifying sociocognitive theory of career and academic interest, choice, and performance. *Journal of Vocational Behavior, 45*, 79–122. <https://doi.org/10.1006/jvbe.1994.1027>
- Lent, R. W., Brown, S. D., & Hackett, G. (1996). Career development from a sociocognitive perspective. In D. Brown & L. Brooks (Eds.), *Career choice and development* (3rd ed., pp. 373–422). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Lent, R. W., Brown, S. D., & Hackett, G. (2002). Social cognitive career theory. In D. B. Associates (Ed.), *Career choice and development* (4th ed., pp. 255–311). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Lent, R. W., & Hackett, G. (1994). Sociocognitive mechanisms of personal agency in career development: Pantheoretical aspects. In M. L. Savickas & R. W. Lent (Eds.), *Convergence in career development theories* (pp. 77–101). Palo Alto, CA: CPP Books.
- Light, M., & Light, P. (2006, Fall). Which Light is right? The impending leadership deficit crisis. *Nonprofit Quarterly, 13*(3), 70–72.
- Light, P. C. (2002, May 16). Rebuilding trust into charity. *Christian Science Monitor, 16*, 9.
- Light, P. C. (2003). *In search of public service*. Washington, DC: Center for Public Service, The Brookings Institution.
- Lyons, S. T., Duxbury, L. E., & Higgins, C. A. (2006). A comparison of the values and commitment of private sector, public sector, and parapublic sector employees. *Public Administration Review, 66*, 605–618. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-6210.2006.00620.x>
- Miller, M. J. (1983). The role of happenstance in career choice. *The Vocational Guidance Quarterly, 32*, 16–20. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2164-585X.1983.tb01552.x>
- Mirvis, P. H., & Hackett, E. J. (1983). Work and work force characteristics in the nonprofit sector. *Monthly Labor Review, 106*(4), 3–12.
- Mitchell, A. M., Jones, G. B., & Krumboltz, J. D. (1979). *Social learning and career decision making*. Cranston, RI: Carroll Press.
- Onyx, J., & Maclean, M. (1996). Careers in the third sector. *Nonprofit Management and Leadership, 6*, 331–345. <https://doi.org/10.1002/nml.4130060404>
- Palladino Schultheiss, D. E., Palma, T. V., & Manzi, A. J. (2005). Career development in middle childhood: A qualitative inquiry. *Career Development Quarterly, 53*, 246–262. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.2161-0045.2005.tb00994.x>
- Park, S. M., & Word, J. (2009, June). *Motivated to serve: Constructs and consequences of work motivation for public and nonprofit managers*. Paper presented at the International Public Service Motivation Research Conference, Bloomington, IN.
- Perry, J. L., & Wise, L. R. (1990). The motivational bases of public service. *Public Administration Review, 50*, 367–373. <https://doi.org/10.2307/976618>

- Preston, A. E. (1990). Changing labor market patterns in the nonprofit and for-profit sectors: Implications for nonprofit management. *Nonprofit Management & Leadership, 1*(1), 15–28. <https://doi.org/10.1002/nml.4130010104>
- Roe, A., & Baruch, R. (1967). Occupational changes in the adult years. *Personnel Administration, 30*(4), 26–32.
- Rojewski, J. W. (1999). The role of chance in the career development of individuals with learning disabilities. *Learning Disability Quarterly, 22*, 267–278. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1511261>
- Rotolo, T., & Wilson, J. (2006). Employment sector and volunteering: The contribution of nonprofit and public sector workers to the volunteer labor force. *The Sociological Quarterly, 47*(1), 21–40. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-8525.2006.00036.x>
- Salamon, L. M. (2010). Putting the civil society sector on the economic map of the world. *Annals of Public & Cooperative Economics, 81*, 167–210. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8292.2010.00409.x>
- Salamon, L. M., Sokolowski, S. W., & Geller, S. L. (2012). *Holding the fort: Nonprofit employment during a decade of turmoil* (Nonprofit Employment Bulletin 39). Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Center for Civil Society Studies.
- Schwartz, R., Weinberg, J., Hagenbuch, D., & Scott, A. (2011). *The voice of nonprofit talent: Perceptions of diversity in the workplace*. Boston, MA: Commongood Careers and Level Playing Field Institute.
- Solomon, J., & Sandahl, Y. (2007). *Stepping up or stepping out: A report on the readiness of next generation nonprofit leaders*. New York, NY: Young Nonprofit Professionals Network.
- Taylor, J., Harris, M. B., & Taylor, S. (2004, Winter). Parents have their say...about their college-age children's career decisions. *National Association of Colleges and Employers Journal, 2004*, 1–5.
- Wuthnow, R. (1994). *Sharing the journey: Support groups and America's new quest for community*. New York, NY: Free Press.

Reproduced with permission of copyright owner.
Further reproduction prohibited without permission.