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# The Intersection of Nonprofit Roles and Public Policy Implementation

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## ABSTRACT

Many nonprofit organizations implement policy through service delivery. In addition, these nonprofits serve other roles in their communities. Policy implementation strategies that overlook the many roles nonprofits play may misunderstand implementation challenges or fail to maximize the benefits of public-nonprofits partnerships. We aim to inform policy implementation by presenting a narrative that explores the intersection of these nonprofit roles and policy implementation through nonprofit service delivery. We situate this focus on nonprofits as policy implementers within a framework of nonprofit roles. We present commentary that integrates policy implementation and nonprofit roles by focusing on four themes: nonprofit role simultaneity, service delivery/policy implementation perceptual asymmetry, nonprofit roles over time, and network participation. Accounting for this multidimensionality can help government actors facilitate partnerships that enable service delivery while also recognizing what nonprofits do independent of their formal arrangements with governments.

## KEYWORDS

Nonprofit roles; policy implementation; public service provision; public-nonprofit partnership

Long-established practices in government contracting enlist nonprofit organizations to implement public policy (Smith & Lipsky, 1993). In addition to delivering public services, nonprofits play other roles in their communities. Nonprofit roles refer to the different kinds of contributions or functions of nonprofits as they pursue their missions. While the boundaries, understanding, and influence of nonprofit roles continue to evolve (discussed more below), an early categorization defines these roles as service provision, advocacy, expression, community building, and “value guardian” of individual pro-social action (Salamon, 2003, pp. 11–14). The nonprofit roles framework serves to recognize and name the multidimensional motivators or ethos underlying nonprofit behavior. For example, a soup kitchen may use the process of serving food to those in need (service provision) as a way to foster an inclusive community (community building). Likewise, an after-school tutoring

nonprofit may view feedback to the local school board (advocacy) as fundamentally intertwined with its program activities (service provision). Regardless of the type of service or program a nonprofit provides, the nonprofit roles framework emphasizes the potential for each nonprofit to serve multiple roles while pursuing its mission (Moulton & Eckerd, 2012).

The nonprofit roles framework identifies service provision as one of the roles through which nonprofit organizations shape their communities, as well as broader civil society (Salamon, 2003). Nonprofit service provision may be funded by a variety of sources, including private donors, foundations, fees-for-service, and public sources. Situating publicly-funded nonprofit services within a policy process framework reveals another characterization for these organizations: policy implementers. In other words, public policy research classifies publicly funded nonprofit service providers as policy implementers. Acknowledging the intersection between the nonprofit service provision role and nonprofits as policy implementers offers one example of how two related literatures—nonprofit management and public policy—describe the same phenomenon in different terms.

The divergent framing between nonprofit and public policy research can have adverse consequences for public policy and public management scholars attempting to understand and predict nonprofit behavior. Government actors might view the process of defining public services as unidirectional: through the policy process, policymakers and public administrators determine the ideal mix of goods and services, and then use public resources to hire nonprofit organizations to meet local demand. This model views nonprofits as responsive partners, where government formulates policies and distributes resources to nonprofit organizations that customize service provision to meet local needs (Young, 1998). However, looking at nonprofits solely as policy implementers ignores the multitude of distinctive roles nonprofits play in democratic society. Accounting for this multidimensionality can help government actors facilitate partnerships that enable service delivery while also recognizing what nonprofits do independent of their formal arrangements with governments.

The purpose of this article is to highlight some of the intersections between the nonprofit roles framework and nonprofit policy implementation. We aim to inform policy implementation by presenting a narrative that articulates these intersections and some of their consequences. We start by offering a window into the multidimensionality of nonprofits using the nonprofit roles framework. We then provide a brief overview of the practice of policy implementation through nonprofit service delivery, including some of the most prominent theoretical foundations guiding scholarship on this topic. The main contribution of the article is the subsequent commentary that integrates nonprofit roles and policy implementation by focusing on

four themes: nonprofit role simultaneity, service delivery/policy implementation perceptual asymmetry, nonprofit roles over time, and network participation. We conclude with a discussion that offers avenues for future research.

### **Nonprofit roles: A framework for understanding nonprofit multidimensionality**

From the perspective of nonprofit scholarship and practice, nonprofit service provision—whether publicly funded or not—is just one of the many ways that nonprofits contribute to or shape their communities. The universe of nonprofits is large; the Internal Revenue Service’s typology of tax-exempt organizations includes thirty-seven classifications, including labor unions and chambers of commerce (Internal Revenue Service, 2018). Within the 501(c)(3) classification for charitable organizations, nonprofits range from universities to soup kitchens to recreational sports leagues. Even more notable, simple classifications based on a particular organizational attribute overlook important intraorganizational variation in missions, priorities, and values (Fyall & Levine Daniel, 2018; Fyall, Moore, & Gugerty, 2018). Recognizing this complexity, the framework of nonprofit roles offers one way to explore the multidimensionality of nonprofit organizations.

The nonprofit roles framework articulates the scope of functions and/or contributions nonprofits can make to society at large. Frumkin (2002) organizes the different nonprofit functions across two dimensions: rationale (instrumental versus expressive) and orientation (supply-side versus demand-side). The possible combinations of the rationale and orientation dimensions result in four functions of nonprofit and voluntary action: service delivery, social entrepreneurship, civic and political engagement, and values and faith. Salamon’s (2003) role categories differ slightly, and correspond more directly to nonprofit contributions to American society: the service role, the advocacy role, the expressive role, the community-building role, and the value guardian role.

Moulton and Eckerd (2012) further the nonprofit role framework using an empirical approach, developing a nonprofit sector public role index that more fully defines each role. Their index identifies six distinct roles: service provision, innovation, political advocacy, citizen engagement, social capital creation, and individual expression. We adopt the Moulton and Eckerd classification of nonprofit roles, since it offers the greatest specificity as well as future opportunities for empirical testing. Figure 1 offers a visual representation of each nonprofit role to accompany the descriptions.

From a policy perspective, service provision is the most intuitive of the roles, conveying the transmission of a program or service by the nonprofit to an identified set of clients or recipients (Figure 1a). Service delivery has

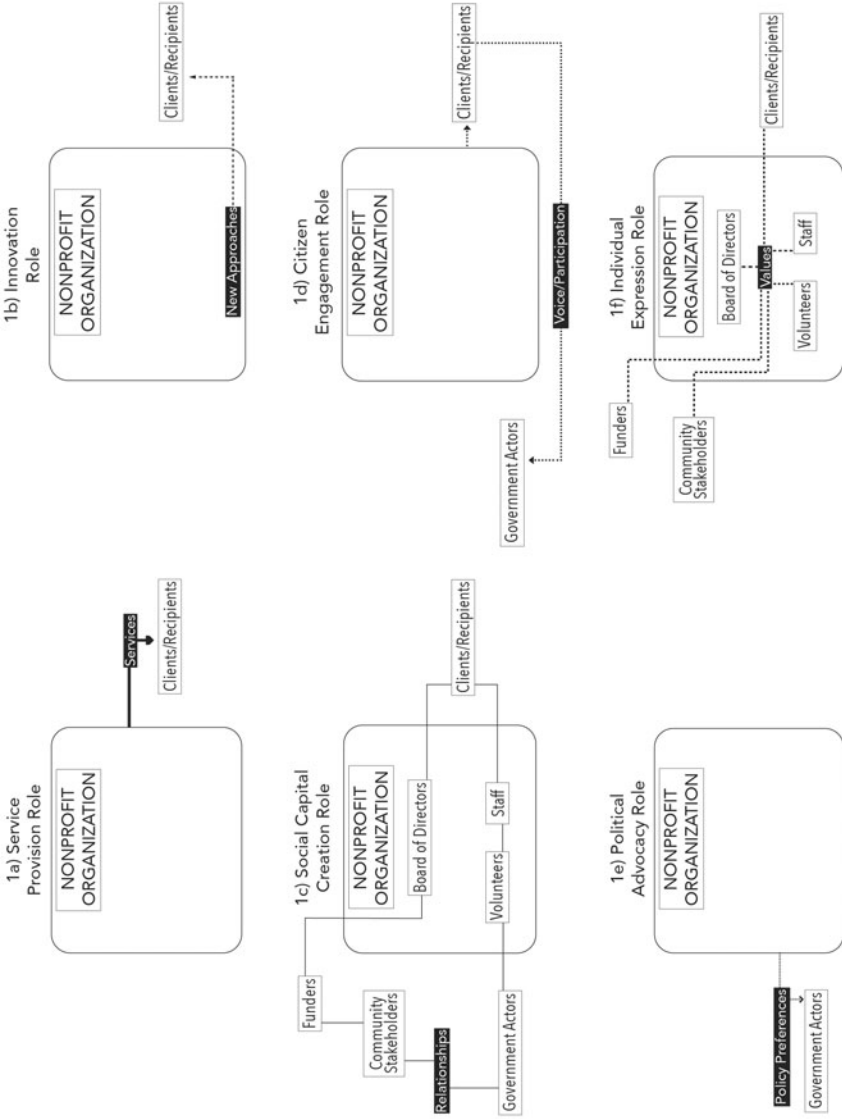


Figure 1. Nonprofit roles—key stakeholders and resource transfers.

an instrumental rationale and demand-side orientation, meaning that service delivery is outcome-focused and driven by the needs of a nonprofit's community. This role coincides well with the idea of nonprofits as policy implementers, so long as the policymaking entity and nonprofit provider share a similar perspective on their community's needs and intended program outcomes.

The innovation role also has an instrumental rationale, but with a supply-side orientation ([Figure 1b](#)). Nonprofits prioritizing innovation focus on new approaches to programs or activities that often represent responses to external pressures or attempts to manage resource dependencies (Hillman, Withers, & Collins, 2009; Levine Daniel & Moulton, 2017; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978; Porter, 1979; Vining, 2011). The innovation role encompasses the concept of social entrepreneurship, emphasizing the (often) individualistic impulse to pursue new solutions for social problems (Dempsey & Sanders, 2010).

The social capital creation, citizen engagement, and political advocacy roles are all demand-oriented with expressive rationales. Unlike the outcome-focused instrumental rationale, the expressive rationale emphasizes values, meaning, and process. The social capital creation role refers to nonprofits promoting a sense of community and providing a place for people to feel a sense of belonging. As [Figure 1c](#) illustrates, nonprofits prioritizing their social capital creation roles facilitate relationship development among their various stakeholders. A focus on social capital can also reflect an effort to build relationships among those feeling excluded from broader civil society (Schneider, 2007).

Nonprofits prioritizing the citizen engagement role foster their clients' direct participation in democratic processes such as promotion of public education campaigns, voter education and participation, and community organizing, rather than pursuing specific policy outcomes ([Figure 1d](#)). Here, the nonprofits may not have unified policy preferences but instead work to amplify the political voices of their clients. The citizen engagement role embodies de Tocqueville's observation of voluntary associations as a crucial training ground for a thriving democracy (Baggetta, 2009; Tocqueville, 1835). This participation in public life is often viewed as an expression of social capital (e.g., Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti (1994)); however, this linkage is not visible in all nonprofits emphasizing these roles. As such, the two roles deserve separate consideration.

The political advocacy role emphasizes nonprofits as policy advocates, engaging in and attempting to influence the policy process toward a particular goal ([Figure 1e](#)). Political science scholarship tends to focus on the advocacy role as carried out primarily by nonprofits without a robust service delivery component, such as 501(c)(4) and 527 organizations, but

nonprofit scholarship illuminates the policy advocacy activities of 501(c)(3) service providers (Bushouse, 2017). Nonprofit advocacy activities may include days of action, public comment at city council meetings, public education events, encouraging supporters to contact their legislators about an upcoming vote, or employing a lobbyist to represent the nonprofits' interests (Bass, Arons, Guinane, Carter, & Rees, 2007; Prentice, 2018).

The individual expression role recognizes how nonprofit organizations reflect the values of their stakeholders, often serving as the “organizational expression” of stakeholders' views (Rothschild & Milofsky, 2006, p. 137). For example, volunteers and donors express their values through the choices they make in committing time or money, as well as any conditions they attach to these contributions. Service recipients may also see their program involvement as an expression of values—a case that is especially clear in congregations and other faith-based institutions. The voluntary nature of nonprofit participation means that each interaction between a stakeholder and a nonprofit offers the potential opportunity for values expression, resulting in the circulation of values throughout and across a nonprofit (Figure 1f).

### **Nonprofits as policy implementers**

As demonstrated in various roles within the nonprofit roles framework, nonprofit activity frequently intersects with government actors and institutions. Here, we focus on the public sector's long history of relying on nonprofits to implement public policy. As far back as 1980, Salamon asserts, “over 40% of the funds spent by federal, state, and local governments in the United States for a broad range of human service activities supported delivery by nonprofit organizations” (1993, p. 19). Estimates from 2007 purport that, among local governments, nonprofit organizations account for approximately 8% of public service delivery overall with significant variation by service area—nonprofits provide at least 35% of local public services in the areas of day care, substance abuse, mental health, homeless shelters, and arts and culture (Warner & Hefetz, 2008). As for state governments, a 1998 survey with state executives revealed that 71% of state administrative agencies contract with the nonprofit sector (Choi, Cho, Wright, & Brudney, 2005). Recent analyses confirm the longevity of this arrangement: an estimated \$137 billion in public money went to nonprofits in 2012 (Pettijohn, Boris, De Vita, & Fyffe, 2013).

Given the prevalence of nonprofit providers as policy implementers, the public policy and public management scholarship draws from its own set of theories and frameworks in an attempt to unpack the policy implementation function of nonprofits. We offer a brief review of three of the most

**Table 1.** Nonprofits and Policy Implementation: Theoretical Frames.

<i>Select frames</i>	<i>Key concepts</i>	<i>Overlooked aspects</i>
Nonprofits as contractors (Eisenhardt, 1989; Williamson, 1981; Witesman & Fernandez, 2013; Van Slyke, 2006)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Government needs prompt the relationship.</li> <li>• Focus is on government-nonprofit (as contractor) dyad.</li> <li>• Government is principal; nonprofit is agent or steward.</li> <li>• Goal alignment between public agency and nonprofit provider can be achieved through contracting process, given appropriate management and incentives.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relationships in public-nonprofit partnerships often are less hierarchical than are traditional principal-agent arrangements.</li> <li>• As agents, nonprofits often have multiple principals.</li> </ul>
Nonprofits as network partners (Agranoff & McGuire, 2001; Millward & Provan, 2003)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nonprofits participate in policy implementation as network members.</li> <li>• Network arrangements can accommodate complex interorganizational dynamics.</li> <li>• Network management strategies help foster intended program outcomes.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on organization overlooks influence of individual actors.</li> </ul>
Nonprofits as street-level bureaucrats (Barnes & Henly, 2018; Lipsky, 2010; Maynard-Moody et al., 1990)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Like all frontline providers, nonprofits also influence policy as they implement it.</li> <li>• Frontline providers shape public services through their daily decisions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus remains on service delivery, without accounting for other nonprofit behaviors.</li> </ul>

prominent theoretical frames here: nonprofits as contractors, nonprofits as network partners, and nonprofits as street-level bureaucrats. We also identify how each frame rests on assumptions that fail to recognize essential aspects of nonprofit behavior. Table 1 summarizes each frame, key assumptions, and overlooked aspects relevant to nonprofits in policy implementation.

Contracting theories are often applied to third-party policy implementers, regardless of which sectors are involved (Fernandez, 2009). The contracting frame originates with the government entity, which may use transaction costs to inform whether it should contract out, based on factors like the specificity of the product or service and market availability (Brown & Potoski, 2003; Williamson, 1981). Once the decision to contract out has been made, agency theory envisions the contracting relationship as between a resource-rich principal and a skilled agent (Eisenhardt, 1989). Self-interest motivates both the principal and the agent, making monitoring and incentive alignment essential for effective contracting.

While agency theory is often applied to public sector contracting, presuming nonprofits are motivated primarily by self-interest is an awkward fit. Acknowledging the public benefit missions of charitable nonprofits, public managers may have more success treating nonprofit contractors as “stewards” rather than “agents” (Van Slyke, 2006). Stewardship theory maintains the expectation of a resourceful principal but expects greater goal alignment between public agency and nonprofit provider (Witesman & Fernandez, 2013). This expected goal alignment favors nonprofit contractors under certain market conditions, though assumed goal alignment can



also be a detriment if it tempts public managers to underinvest in contract oversight responsibilities (Brown, Potoski, & Van Slyke, 2006).

Contracting theories speak to the practicalities of structuring defined partnership agreements, but this frame clearly situates the government as the “principal” actor, thereby downplaying nonprofit complexity. Contracting theory emphasizes the contract itself, leaving less room to consider the contracting organizations more broadly. Extensions of the competitive contracting model, such as relational contracting, acknowledge the importance of the contracting organization beyond a single contract (Bertelli & Smith, 2010; Dehoog, 1990), but the focus remains on the government-contractor dyad to the exclusion of potentially relevant stakeholders and motivations outside of this relationship.

The concept of resource interdependence is less hierarchical than contracting theories, noting that public-nonprofit partnerships demonstrate “a simultaneous two-way flow of resources,” such as funds, information, service delivery capacity, and/or political legitimacy (Saidel, 1991, p. 550). Some proponents of an interdependence perspective argue, “it is critical that the balance of power [in public-nonprofit partnerships] be approximately equal,” thus recommending the strengthening of nonprofit capacity and leverage in government negotiations (Cho & Gillespie, 2006, p. 505). In addition, given the multiple stakeholders whose preferences nonprofits must address, nonprofits are agents with multiple principals whose preferences reflect varying degrees of power, legitimacy, and urgency (Mitchell, Wood, & Agle, 1997; Van Puyvelde, Caers, Du Bois, & Jegers, 2012).

In place of an exclusive focus on the relationship between a government entity and a single nonprofit contractor, scholars frequently use the frame of networks and collaboration to examine nonprofit policy implementation among many actors. Rather than a simple “make or buy” decision, emphasizing the network considers “multiorganizational arrangements for solving problems that cannot be achieved, or achieved easily, by single organizations” (Agranoff & McGuire, 2001, p. 296). As compared to contracting and resource-related theories, a primary strength of the network frame is the ability to incorporate the influence of complex interorganizational dynamics, such as the effects of the stability of network relationships on service delivery, political power and social capital across relationships, and multisectoral interactions across many actors (Agranoff & McGuire, 2001; Herranz, 2006; Milward & Provan, 2003; Negoita, 2018).

Although resource dependency and network concepts are able to incorporate the complexity of the nonprofit environment, these organizational- and network-level frames leave little room for the values and behaviors of the individual actors comprising nonprofit service organizations. In contrast, street-level bureaucracy theory explains the behaviors of frontline

public service providers in certain conditions (Lipsky, 2010). Research on street-level bureaucracy tends to include the nonprofit employees within contracting agencies, often examining nonprofit and public employees jointly (e.g., Barnes & Henly, 2018; Maynard-Moody, Musheno, & Palumbo, 1990). This theory and related research help convey similarities of frontline workers regardless of their sector of employment, highlighting the individual-level coping decisions made by frontline workers and the aggregate effects of such decisions. The tradeoff of the street-level bureaucracy frame, however, is the de-emphasis of organizational and sectoral effects, such as the unique function of nonprofits in policy implementation (Fyall, 2017).

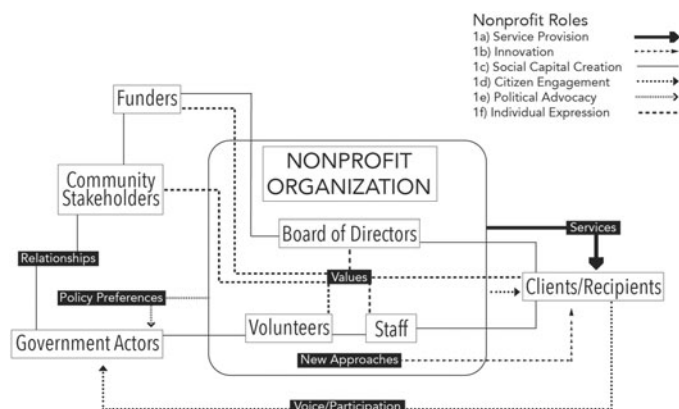
Each of these frames differs in their perspectives on the relationship between public agencies and their nonprofit partners, but they share a focus on service delivery. Underscoring this point, network literature usually specifies if the particular network of interest is a formal service delivery network, rather than an informal or information-sharing network (Kilduff & Tsai, 2003)—implying that these network functions can and should be considered separately. Other nonprofit behaviors may seem irrelevant or unrelated to policy implementation, but nonprofits may not neatly distinguish between “policy-implementing” activities and other organizational priorities. Indeed, understanding how the multidimensionality of nonprofit organizations also applies to policy-implementing nonprofits is essential for facilitating positive public-nonprofit partnerships.

### **Integrating nonprofit roles and policy implementation**

The nonprofit roles framework articulates the diverse contributions and functions of nonprofit organizations. Policy implementation investigates the specific function of publicly funded nonprofit service delivery. Policy implementation fits neatly within the service provision role; however, nonprofits that implement policy also play other nonprofit roles. Theories and practices that focus exclusively on nonprofits as policy agents through the service delivery role overlook other roles that can influence policy implementation and public-nonprofit partnerships. To facilitate a more nuanced understanding of the intersection between nonprofit roles and policy implementation, we present four themes that demonstrate how nonprofit multidimensionality can influence nonprofit policy implementation.

#### ***Nonprofit role simultaneity***

Nonprofit policy implementers simultaneously serve other roles in their communities. The service provision role indicates a nonprofit policy implementer’s commitment to addressing unmet needs, yet responding to unmet



**Figure 2.** Roles as an example of nonprofit multidimensionality.

community needs is just one of many priorities for nonprofits. [Figure 2](#) illustrates the multidimensionality of nonprofit organizations who serve multiple roles, and why policy implementation through service delivery may not be the nonprofit's sole focus.

A single action or process may fulfill multiple nonprofit roles, necessitating the qualification of organizational effectiveness “by adding and providing evidence for ‘according to (whom)’” (Herman & Renz, [1997](#), p. 202). Policymakers and those managing contracts with nonprofit providers appropriately capitalize on the nonprofit role of service provision, yet this is likely to be just one of many roles realized by the nonprofit, and alignment between service provision and other roles is not guaranteed. Nonprofits may have priorities that are more expressive than instrumental, such as building social capital among and between stakeholder groups and offering outlets for individual values. A nonprofit with dual roles of service provision and individual expression may be reluctant to change its service delivery mode in order to serve more people if the change would diminish the volunteer experience.

Government agencies are often aware of the multiple roles of nonprofit organizations, but these roles tend to be considered in silos—sometimes intentionally. For example, nonprofits with a strong political advocacy role use a variety of tactics to communicate their policy preferences to government representatives (Fyall, [2016](#)). Public hearings and other venues for feedback on potential policies are expected outlets for nonprofits' political advocacy. Contracting processes for selecting partners tend to focus on a formal proposal or application; a nonprofit's priorities outside of the application are largely irrelevant to the decision-making process.

Contracting can address some of the potential challenges posed by the intersection between simultaneous roles and service delivery; however, the interaction of roles and service delivery can happen outside the contracts.

For example, contracts may specify one type of service but a nonprofit's integrated service model may offer unexpected or uncontracted benefits for clients. In these cases, contract specificity is not a fix because the relevant activities are external to the contract. In addition, the roles nonprofits prioritize may change midcontract. For example, many nonprofits experienced increased financial support and engagement from advocacy-oriented stakeholders following the 2016 Presidential election (Kaplan, 2017). This external shock has likely led to changes in role identification and prioritization that cannot be captured in a contract unless they affect the nonprofit's ability to fulfill the contract as promised. More likely, a new role prioritization influences the character or values espoused by providers without triggering contract adjustments.

Food pantries run by churches as a venue for the mission-fulfillment of their congregation provide an example where simultaneous roles can detract from nonprofit-provided public services. Congregation-affiliated food pantries are important frontline providers in the emergency food policy field. National-level policies support and subsidize a substantial portion of the food commodities provided by food pantries. Yet, many food pantries serve an important role in their congregations as venues for volunteer service in addition to the benefits to service recipients. Pantries intending to fulfill an individual expression role in concert with service delivery may not pursue opportunities to streamline services if they diminish volunteer autonomy or engagement. This can be a detriment to public policy implementation in that service quality or quantity may suffer because of the joint role of individual expression.

### ***Nonprofit service provision/public policy implementation perceptual asymmetry***

Finding nonprofit partners with a strong service provision role does necessarily guarantee successful or effective policy implementation. From a policy perspective, finding the ideal nonprofit partner(s) relies on two assumptions: (1) the community in question has nonprofit organizations with the capacity and willingness to partner; and (2) public and nonprofit organizations share the same conceptualization of service delivery. In many communities, however, governments have limited choices about potential nonprofit partners. Factors related to supply and social structures tend to explain a community's nonprofit composition, rather than demand (Grønbjerg & Paarlberg, 2001), thus affecting the composition and nature of available partners.

Once a partnership is established, public and nonprofit actors in existing contractual relationships may both assume a static definition of service

delivery. However, nonprofits demonstrate philanthropic particularism, the tendency of nonprofit organizations to serve niche communities rather than the general public (Salamon, 1995). Policy implementation by nonprofits amplifies their particularistic behavior since the aggregate preferences of nonprofit providers constitute the public service environment (Fyall, 2016). Particularism influences the expression of the service delivery role, since nonprofits aim to orient the services they provide toward the priorities of their organizational stakeholders. The varying ways in which nonprofits carry out the service delivery role has implications for the equity and distribution of public programs and services.

Contract compliance and evaluation often rely on output measures. While these measures are likely appropriate for examining the aggregate effects of policy implementation, they may gloss over other service delivery details, such as program recruitment strategies or service intensity (“the amount of time committed to individual clients” (Alter, 1990, p. 484)). By overlooking the breadth of a nonprofit’s service delivery objectives, and by not being aware of the effects on service delivery they may be inadvertently shaping, government reporting requirements can frustrate nonprofit partners who feel that their true contributions are not recognized. Sowa, Selden, and Sandfort (2004) acknowledge the need for both objective and perceptual measures of effectiveness that allow for organizational and programmatic variation. Nonprofit roles and the validated nonprofit role index (Moulton & Eckerd, 2012) can provide some common language for some perceptual measures.

Nonprofit childcare services exemplify the ways in which goal alignment between public and nonprofit partners can be challenged by the larger nonprofit context. Many nonprofit childcare centers focus exclusively on their service delivery role as a childcare provider. The skill and quality of childcare providers, however, can vary substantially. In thin (generally rural) markets, nonprofit providers often lack the resources, incentives, and culture of quality needed to deliver high quality care. As Cleveland & Krashinsky (2009, p. 459) observe, “If governments are using nonprofit agencies to deliver service quality, special programs or subsidies directed at quality improvement are likely to be required for agencies in thin markets.” In other words, the effectiveness of nonprofit policy implementation requires more than finding nonprofit partners with a dedication to service delivery.

Key characteristics of service delivery may also vary substantially within service-focused nonprofits, as illustrated by different approaches to housing for those experiencing homelessness. Requests for proposals (RFPs) to “house the homeless” can yield responses from providers willing to house the same number from the same target population (such as single adults)

for the same cost in the same timeframe. However, the philosophical approach to housing individuals diverges. A “housing first” strategy places individuals in housing without requiring participation in treatment or social services. This approach is supported by rigorous research, which indicates better long-term outcomes when housing is not conditional on other behaviors. In contrast, a “housing ready” approach maintains that individuals should earn their access to housing by proving their “readiness”—often through the adoption of a “clean and sober” lifestyle. This older strategy uses permanent housing as a carrot to induce prosocial behaviors, and individuals who do not maintain these behaviors are at risk of losing their housing. The “housing ready” approach is not supported by research, meaning that making housing access contingent on service participation or other behaviors does not reduce the likelihood of homelessness nor encourage long-term behavioral improvements. While nonprofits pursuing either strategy may offer competitive proposals, the long-term implications for policy are likely to differ substantially.

### ***Nonprofit roles over time***

Current or past experiences with particular nonprofit providers or provider arrangements may not guarantee future nonprofit behaviors, in part because the role(s) nonprofits serve can change over time. Contracting practices may assume that past performance predicts future behavior, and that increasing resources from government to the nonprofit will lead to increases in service delivery. However, unless the mission of the nonprofit is to execute a single contract, the organization exists outside of this contract. In addition, nonprofit organizations are impacted by changes in the sociopolitical environments in which they operate (Neal, 2008; Wicker & Breuer, 2015). Government actors at all levels shape the direction of public policies. Changes in administration can upset the balance of current arrangements, as can changes in donor preferences and support levels.

Emergency food provision provides an example of changing roles over time. As utilization trends change, food pantries have changed their own interpretation of their role(s). For example, food pantry stakeholders frustrated at seeing increasingly chronic need among clients (Berner & O’Brien, 2004) may choose to engage more in political advocacy to address root issues. Since some nonprofits believe that reliance on public funding has “a negative impact on the organizational autonomy to take strategic decisions such as defining the NPOs’ mission, the working procedures, the results to be achieved, and the target groups to be reached” (Verschuere & De Corte, 2014, p. 304), these organizations may: (a) not to enter into contracts; or (b) have to accept identity conflicts between the service delivery role and

the political advocacy that could negatively impact both service provision and advocacy efforts.

### ***Nonprofit roles and network participation***

Roles help explain why nonprofit providers of public services may not be interested in participating in larger networks. Public service delivery networks are now the norm in many policy areas. In fact, funding stipulations often mandate partnerships among agencies (Doerfel, Atouba, & Harris, 2017). However, factors that affect one-to-one partnerships (role simultaneity, perceptions of service delivery, the influence of time), as well as supply and social structures, also affect network composition and may take on greater importance in a network setting. Just as organizational identity can be dynamic, so can networks, which has implications for contract specification and formalization (De Corte, Verschuere, & De Bie, 2017). Similarly, just as nonprofit roles can affect contracts on a dyadic level (e.g., nonprofit-public entity), so too can roles affect membership in and performance of networks. Nonprofits emphasizing individual expression may not want to join a community coalition if the nature of other members presents a conflict. For example, nonprofits involved with reproductive services nearly always have strong ideological, faith, and/or political foundations that inform an individual nonprofit's service decisions. Coalition work across such ideologically diverse nonprofits may be futile, even if the proposed network goal would benefit all organizations.

In addition, network members bring "differently defined communities and notions of public interest, which could align, conflict, or co-exist while not interacting with one another" (Hundley, Brock, & Jensen, 2016, p. 95). The degree to which these differences matter may reflect the roles nonprofits prioritize. Nonprofit organizations emphasizing individual expression may not see the need to join these networks, especially if their key stakeholders do not see the need to so (van Raaij, 2006). Similarly, nonprofits focusing on the creation of social capital may be reluctant to join networks if they perceive potential negative effects on their ability to focus on relationship development, especially if the organizations and/or their stakeholders feel excluded from broader civil society. If the networks exhibit values or goals that do not align with the roles nonprofits choose to emphasize, network participation may be a nonstarter.

Policy actors may want to reconsider funding requirements tied to networking or partnering within the community if this requirement would alienate otherwise essential partners that do not value network activities. Recognizing the difference between voluntary and mandated networks, and the appropriate evaluation criteria for each, may help defuse perceived



conflict within a network (Willem & Lucidarme, 2014). One criterion deserving attention is the network's managing structure. As Piatak, Romzek, LeRoux, and Johnston (2018, p.170) note, informal management mechanism help address goal conflict through "shared norms and facilitative behaviors." Understanding the roles nonprofits play can help service network coordinators develop targeted strategies that speak to the diversity of agencies within the network.

## Discussion and conclusion

We set out to explore how the multidimensionality of nonprofits affects the provision of public service as implemented by nonprofit organizations. We summarize nonprofit roles as an organizing structure for nonprofit complexity. We synthesize common literature relevant to the intersection of nonprofits and policy implementation (nonprofits as contractors, network partners, and street-level bureaucrats), highlighting key assumptions as well as what these frames miss about nonprofits as policy implementers. We integrate nonprofit roles and policy implementation to explore some of the challenges presented in using nonprofits as policy implementers, emphasizing what shapes nonprofit actors' choices related to service delivery.

Studying nonprofits solely through the lens of implementation fails to tell the whole story of how and why nonprofits may or may not make ideal policy implementation partners. As Bushouse (2017, p. 60) notes, "[G]overnment's reliance on nonprofit organizations to deliver the services created opportunities for collaboration but also tensions within nonprofit organizations . . ." She specifically points to "professionalization and advocacy"; we illustrate how these tensions extend beyond advocacy to policy implementation. We build on the work of Moulton and Eckerd (2012) and others to offer a visual representation of nonprofit roles, and apply the framework to questions of policy implementation.

From a theoretical perspective, we aim to build a bridge between scholarship on public policy, public management, and nonprofit organizations by specifically focusing on the intersection between nonprofit roles and policy implementation. While public policy and management scholarships rarely engage with the complexity of the nonprofit landscape, nonprofit research too often overlooks the potential influence of nonprofit behavior on policy outcomes (Fyall, 2017). Our larger goal in integrating policy implementation concepts with the nonprofit roles framework is to showcase how existing research silos inhibit our collective knowledge on the public-nonprofit dynamic—a finding that others have also asserted (Mitchell & Schmitz, 2019; Pandey & McGinnis Johnson, 2019).



Future researchers can delve further into the themes identified here to answer questions about the intersection of nonprofit roles and public policy, as well as to explore other aspects of nonprofit multidimensionality. Within the frame of nonprofit roles, we suggest empirical evaluation of concepts within each theme. Some of this has been done within specific mission types. For example, Kim (2017) used Moulton and Eckerd's (2012) nonprofit roles scale to examine how arts and culture organizations balance commitment to civic engagement with market-based pressures.

New research *within* each role can propel related research that looks *across* roles. MacIndoe and Beaton (2019) find that nonprofit political advocacy responds to perceptions of the policy environment. Do these perceptions also influence the relationships between nonprofits and their government funders? Deslatte, Schatteman, & Stokan (2019) conclude that, among local economic development organizations, divergent nonprofit forms are associated with different types of land use policies. Can comparing the priorities of other nonprofit roles among these two nonprofit forms help explain these policy differences?

In addition, we have treated policy implementation as a uniform concept, but policies can be distributive, constituent, regulative, or redistributive (Lowi, 1972). Policy type might affect application of our commentary. For example, policy type might help predict the extent to which roles may enhance or detract from implementation. Policy type may predict the likelihood of nonprofit roles changing over time, or nonprofit willingness to join service delivery networks. Future research could explore how variation in policy type interacts with nonprofit roles. Our narrative also opens up avenues to explore implementation interventions; for example, the best way(s) to educate public managers about nonprofit dimensionality and to evaluate their incorporation into their work with particular nonprofits. Along these lines, we also suggest there is room to develop heuristics for incorporating nonprofit roles into contracts and other partnering activities.

Our commentary extends into the network literature and offers opportunities to explore the interaction of networking mechanisms and specific nonprofit roles. For example, what is the relationship between nonprofit roles and formal participation requirements for public service networks? How does this relationship affect service-related outcomes? For nonprofits emphasizing a social capital role, how does the composition of the network affect a nonprofit's willingness to join the network (formally or informally) or pursue spinoff projects (Shrestha, 2019)?

Our goal was to highlight some of the intersections between nonprofit roles and public policy implementation. The nonprofit roles framework offers a window into how the multidimensionality of nonprofits intersects with this policy implementation. Understanding the four key themes of

nonprofit role simultaneity, service delivery/policy perceptual implementation asymmetry, nonprofit roles over time, and network participation can help maximize the benefits and mitigate the risks of using nonprofits to implement public policy.

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