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What's In a Name? Keeping the VA in ARNOVA

Roger A. Lohmann
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Introduction

First, I would like to thank the organizers of this session for the invitation to speak here today. It is an honor and a privilege to address this initial symposium of the newest section of ARNOVA. In particular, I would like to single out Felice Perlmutter for special acknowledgement for her role in proposing and bringing this section into being. As many of you know, Felice came up with the idea to create this section a couple of years ago, and she has now seen it through to realization. In the process, a lot of other people have been involved as well, as befits an organizer of Felice's accomplished skill. I say "good job" to all of you.

The focus of this new section on theory, issues and boundaries is a centrally important one for ARNOVA and I am confident that the section is poised to establish the basis for much of the most creative work in the field of philanthropology in the next generation. Under the game plan that Felice, Mark, Martha, Roseanne and I agreed to, my brief here is to engage you from the vantage point of the VA in ARNOVA – voluntary action – while Mark focuses on the NO. After trying to work in all three dimensions – theory, issues and boundaries – I decided it would be better to focus my comments on the first of those three. In particular, I want to highlight the role of voluntary action as an alternative to what I perceive to be the dominant paradigm in ARNOVA at the moment.

Definitions

To begin, however, I want to note I will use the term *philanthropology*, much as I suggested previously in *The Commons* (1992), as an umbrella term to describe the fullest Presented at the inaugural meeting of the Section on Theory, Issues and Boundaries, ARNOVA (Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action) Los Angeles, CA. Nov. 16, 2004.

range of nonprofit organization, voluntary action and philanthropy studies in mission-oriented organizations, as well as altruistic behavior, volunteering, donation, free-riding, and civic participation in civil societies.

My operational – and admittedly fuzzy – definition of philanthropology would be the sum total of what gets presented and talked about at ARNOVA, ISTR and kindred groups. My premise is that philanthropology is emerging as a distinctive contemporary academic discourse that arose out of at least two quite distinct streams of practice and academics, or paradigms. As I am using that much over-used word here, *paradigm refers to the common sense, or taken-for-granted view held by a group of scholars or practitioners of some slice of reality taken as the subject or focal point of more or less coherent theorizing efforts*. I should also note parenthetically that I assume theoretically informed or conceptually guided practice and scholarly research to be two sides of the same coin, or paradigm.

I have no quarrel with the notion that there may be additional paradigms in play here today – philanthropy and civil society come to mind – but I am concentrating on the two original, formative ones which I believe to be of greatest practical importance for ARNOVA at this time. I am not concerned at all in this paper with any overall or final assessments – which paradigm is the ‘right’ approach and which one is ‘wrong’ or even which is ‘right’ and which is ‘left.’ The issues involved in such judgments are much too complex for any such facile conclusions now. There is an abundance of smart, well-educated and dedicated people on all sides of the matter, and the issues involved are much too complex to sort into a single, neat summary judgment at present. History may

come down on the side of one paradigm or the other, but just now we need to be more ecumenical.

What's In a Name? The NO Paradigm

While there is a danger of overstating our present paradigm differences, the name ARNOVA memorializes the fact that contemporary philanthropy arose out of two distinctive and separate streams of theoretical and practical interests. Let me take them in the order in which they appear in the name.

The nonprofit organization paradigm, reflected in the NO in ARNOVA, first arose in the 1980s and has since that time signaled consistent interest in *nonprofit organizations, nonprofit management and the structure of the third sector* across a wide range of disciplines. The Filer Commission and the formation of Independent Sector are important formative events in this view. The 1987 reader, *The Nonprofit Sector*, edited by Woody Powell and published by Yale University Press, was largely the work of a group of authors associated with PONPO at Yale. It is still an excellent introduction to the parameters of this paradigm. Dennis Young, Lester Salamon, Virginia Hodgkinson, Kirsten Grønbjerg, Wolf Bielefeld and Joe Galaskiewicz are some of the names I would associate with this paradigm.

Failure theory, social origins theory, the neo-institutionalist theory of organizations, and the practices of nonprofit management and social enterprise define several of the key parameters of this paradigm. There may be no more clear-cut indicator of involvement in the nonprofit organization paradigm than agreement with the statement “Nonprofits exist to serve the public good.” (If your response is, “yes,” you are in. If your

response is, like mine, “well, at least some of them do”, you may be more oriented toward the voluntary action paradigm.)

The VA Paradigm

A decade or so before the rise of the NO paradigm, a different group of sociologists, social workers, political scientists, voluntary action practitioners and others who formed AVAS knew little of these concerns. The antecedents of this perspective go back even earlier, particularly in the Midwest sociological tradition. The Minnesota sociologist Arnold Rose, for example, has a 1955 journal article and a 1965 chapter in his book *The Power Structure*, detailing a voluntary action perspective of the time. (Rose, 1965) This was the same year that corporate CEO and third way visionary Richard Cornuelle coined the term “independent sector” (Cornuelle, 1965) A smattering of other independent scholars, including legal scholar Howard Oleck, whose nonprofit law text first appeared in 1956, were also operating on what we now recognize as third sector issues in this period. (Oleck, 1956)

The first organized group was animated by *voluntary action as a group, community and civic/political phenomenon*. David Horton Smith, Jon Van Til, Thomasina Borkman, and David Mason are among those who have articulated different facets of the “VA” in the history of AVAS and ARNOVA. David Horton Smith’s *A History of ARNOVA: In Celebration of ARNOVA’s 30th Anniversary* tells much of the early history of the emergence of this paradigm. (Smith, 2001)

Grassroots associations, civil society, social capital, commons theory, as well as the practices of volunteerism, community organization, fundraising, and social movements are all associated with this viewpoint. Growing out of my current activities, I

would suggest that the practice and study of deliberation and dialogue belong there as well. For anyone who understands the VA paradigm, it is no accident that the AVAS/ARNOVA publication that was renamed ARNOVA Abstracts under my editorship had been known as *Citizen Participation and Voluntary Action Abstracts*.

Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action

In the best spirit of third sector collaboration representatives of these two distinct perspectives, which I firmly believe do represent distinct theoretical paradigms, came together in 1989 in the newly formed association. ARNOVA in its creation and since may also systematically embrace a wide variety of additional geographic, language, theoretical and professional perspectives. I've already mentioned philanthropy and civil society. For present purposes, we can leave open the issue of whether any of these additional perspectives rise to the level of distinct paradigms. I intend to concentrate for now only on one of the original two paradigms for which the association was named.

The Voluntary Action Paradigm

David Horton Smith, in his history of ARNOVA, says that the term *voluntary action* originated in Great Britain. A quick Google search will confirm that the term is still in relatively widespread use there. I don't pretend to be attempting to capture all the nuances this raises, or even to suggest that users of the term in Britain necessarily conform to the paradigm I am associating with the label in the U.S. Voluntary action is a topic that has many local ties and my treatment of it is necessarily local to the U.S. since the 1950s.

At the present time in ARNOVA, the section of Community and Grassroots Associations is probably the principal organizational locus of the voluntary action

paradigm. In his book, *Grassroots Association* (2000, 24) Smith defines voluntary action as “action that results in significant degree from the voluntary altruism of an entity aimed at a target of benefits beyond the entity’s own immediate household or family.” He goes on to identify two principal types of voluntary action: 1) volunteer action, is “significantly unremunerated voluntary action by an individual or a group and results significantly from volunteer altruism; 2) quasi-volunteer action is significantly under-remunerated voluntary action that results significantly from quasi-volunteer altruism.”

Even without exploring further the meaning or the adequacy of Smith’s concept of voluntary and quasi-volunteer altruism, one of the immediate points of apparent difference between the two paradigms pops into view: The Smithian voluntary action perspective tends to be more interested in social action apart from, or outside of, paid employment, careers and professions, while many adherents of the nonprofit organization perspective tend to concentrate on paid employment, careers and professions in nonprofit organizations.

The current refocusing of much of the field of public administration on the creation and advancement of public service professionals in the public and nonprofit sector brings this distinction into sharp focus. Comparable career development activities in schools of business, social work and many other disciplines and professions, combined with the general drift of higher education in the direction of vocationalism would seem to bias the matter in favor of the nonprofit organizations paradigm. Yet, a purely vocational take on the matter may be altogether too confining. Even professionals have some free time for voluntary action, and voluntary action concepts like “civic professionalism” are

nearly as frequent in the literature as references to donative and volunteering behavior by professionals.

Structure vs. Action Space?

Paid employment versus leisure pursuits certainly is one important marker of the differences between the two paradigms. An equally significant hallmark of the nonprofit organization paradigm is its strong commitment to a structural view that sees formal establishments – organizations, corporations (seemingly assumed by many structuralists to be the same thing) and sectors – as the central phenomenon to study. Another important marker of the voluntary action paradigm is, in fact, discomfort with the concept of sectors as a structural phenomenon. I could easily cite my own work on the commons and the ways in which it has been misunderstood as a structural notion. Let me instead introduce another voice.

In his book, *Growing Civil Society: From Third Sector to Third Space* (2000), in a section entitled “An Alternative View: Action Rather than Sector”, Jon Van Til focuses on this precise question when he wrote:

An alternative approach tends not to begin with the identification of sectors, but rather with a distinction between public and private *action* [emphasis added] (c.f., Dewey, 1927). This dichotomous approach introduces tension between the two forms of action, implicitly introducing a relationship of power or exchange into the discussion. (25)

Later, in that same work, Van Til uses that same distinction to ground his characterization of ‘the third space’:

The concept of the ‘third space’ suggests that the third sector may not primarily be about organizational structures – nonprofits instead of [commercial] corporations or governments. Rather, the special contribution of this realm of human activity may rest in a particular combination of spirit and organization. And it may be that spirit comes first. If a human action is infused with voluntary spirit, it may take place within any type of organization be it nonprofit, business, governmental or family. (Van Til, 2000, 125)

These statements by Van Til, together with the earlier ones from David Horton Smith, and the work of others including myself highlight some of the essential characteristics of the voluntary action approach as it has evolved. I am not prepared here to lay out all of the principal differences. I am content only to suggest that in terms of historic development, the emphasis on altruism, the place of paid employment, the centrality of corporate organizations and the structural conception of sectors we have the basis of distinguishing the two paradigms.

The dualism of these two named paradigms of ARNOVA also mirrors a number of general dualisms important in the contemporary social sciences. One of these involves differences over the importance of structure. For example, Suchman (1995) in comparing approaches to recent research on organizational legitimacy identified two approaches that he termed *strategic* and *institutional*:

Work in the strategic tradition.... adopts a managerial perspective and emphasizes the ways in which organizations instrumentally manipulate and deploy evocative symbols in order to garner societal support. In contrast, work in the institutional

tradition... adopts a more detached stance and emphasizes the ways in which sector-wide *structuration dynamics* generate cultural pressures that transcend any single organization's purposive control. Although both bodies of literature offer extensive discussions of legitimacy, divergent assumptions about agency and cultural embeddedness often lead them to 'talk past one another.'

While Suchman (1995) employs the terms *strategic* and *institutional*, Anthony Giddens (1979, 1984) used a roughly similar distinction to speak more generally of 'agentic' approaches to social theory, and 'structural' ones in what may be the most celebrated effort at theoretical synthesis in recent decades. The nonprofit organization (NO) paradigm in philanthropy conforms more closely to the institutional/structural, while the voluntary action (VO) paradigm conforms more closely to the strategic/agentic. Recognition of important choice, decision-making and problem-solving variants as well as historical associations with small group sociology, points up an important individual or social behavioral dimension to VO.

Why should we care about such matters? Both Suchman and Giddens employ their respective dualisms dialectically in order to propose syntheses aimed at transcending the dualisms. *In terms of general theory, the single greatest challenge facing ARNOVA is actually two-fold: finding a theoretical synthesis of the NO and VA that will also serve to bridge the further dualism of theory and practice.*

Other theoretical issues and concerns may attract our attention but none is more central to the intellectual coherence of ARNOVA or to philanthropy as a distinct and unified set of concerns. Can this become a unified, coherent field of study, or will it remain a collection of superficially similar disciplinary and professional subtopics that

can be organized only into two distinct and separate paradigms? For those who come down on the side of singularity, a major continuing challenge facing ARNOVA, and one which TIBS in particular, will need to confront more or less continuously is what might be done to bridge the gap between its two formative paradigms?

We are dealing with some complex and difficult questions here. Is the unit of analysis organizations? Corporations? Associations? Sectors? Or is it choices? Social processes? Behavior? And if it is both, will it be based on any algorithms other than a preference for diversity and eclecticism?

We can be guided to some degree in this effort by Giddens' efforts to create a model he called *structuration*, even when it appears that he is most likely wrong. In the *Blackwell Companion to Social Theory*, Ira Cohen (1999) argues that Giddens' attempted general resolution sought to transcend two conceptual dualisms simultaneously: One is the division distinguishing the conscious subject from social collectivities, referred to as the subject/object dualism. The other is the division between agency (praxis, in classical social theory, or practice in ARNOVA discussions) and collective forms of social life, AKA the agency/structure dualism. Giddens' attempt at a synthesis was noble but unsuccessful, according to Cohen, because in the end he conflated the two:

Despite the appearance of collectivities as the second term in each couplet, these dualisms are not the same. To highlight the distinction in brief: the subject/object dualism presumes a conscious agent as the locus of action while the agency/structure dualism presumes enacted forms of conduct as the locus of action. (130)

There is a peculiar danger in all of this as well, pointed up by many different approaches to ‘post-modernism’ in the social sciences and humanities today and that is the danger that the whole theoretical enterprise will collapse into a paroxysm of relativism. While the view that all positions are correct will do much to smooth the group dynamics involved, it will do nothing to resolve any of the important theoretical issues that separate the paradigms. On the whole, theory will be better served by a few civilly conducted debates over fundamental issues than by a group hug.

Toward a Unified Paradigm

At the very least, the terms of this pair of dualisms allow us to differentiate the nonprofit organization and the voluntary action paradigms more clearly, and to pose the theoretical problem they constitute for philanthropology as a whole. Conscious agents or actors engaged in deciding, giving, volunteering, advocating, speaking, listening and worshipping do, indeed, appear most prominently as the central figures in voluntary action approaches. And in typically structural approaches, these same individual agents do largely disappear into the taken-for-granted background of their ‘enacted forms of conduct’ while pride of place is afforded to institutionalized structures like organizations and sectors.

I am reminding myself as much as anyone when I note that Giddens, Cohen and the many structuralist critics of the pragmatist approach to practice of Mead, Dewey, et. al., and other agentic perspectives must be heeded in their calls for reconciling practice to the persistent properties of collective life. This issue affects many voluntary action practice problems, from volunteering to civil society and the practice of philanthropy.

Many of the most important questions to keep in mind here are rather neatly symbolized in my view by the metaphor of the tragedy of the commons, with its focus on free-riding behavior. Indeed, as I argued in *The Commons* (1992) and elsewhere whatever rational imperatives may be imputed to free ride in philanthropic institutions, the actual practice of philanthropy is not unavoidably tragic and the reasons it is not are directly at issue here. Donors certainly grumble and complain or silently resent free riders, and they may trim their own donations as a result. But the fact remains that donative institutions continue to exist; freeriding may be toxic, but it is not consistently or unavoidably fatal to the practice of the commons.

It is important here to simultaneously avoid the agentic fallacy that all forms of social action are at all moments the singular results of deliberate choice, and the structuralist fallacy that all choices are epiphenomenal, the ineluctable imperatives of institutional scripts. We need instead to find suitable places for habit, ritual, routine and the unconscious alongside rational choice as forms of action. While social philosophers like John Dewey long ago, and Pierre Bourdieu more recently offered ingenious general philosophical formulations of the role of the habitual in practice, it is by no means clear that either the voluntary action and nonprofit organization paradigms make adequate provision for this dimension. (Dewey, 1927; Bourdieu, 1990) Because of the importance of trust and networks in social capital, this issue also figures importantly there.

At the same time, structure without conscious agents all too frequently strives to make the practice of nonprofit organization or voluntary action little more than the enactment of ritualized ‘practice principles’ The many ramifications of this are, in my view, wrecking untold damage in third sector institutions and practices in our time. The

objectivism behind the notion that it makes sense to single out certain aspects of complex action sequences and label them definitively as ‘outcomes’, for example, contributes directly to a false sense of certainty about the degree to which the implications of structured behavior – including intent, consequences and causation – can be known to contemporary observers.

This same structuralist urge lurks behind the willingness to group together what may be highly diverse forms of voluntary action under broad headings like ‘coordination’ and then attempt to generalize about the ‘best practice’ of them. And, it must be noted, to do so all too frequently on the basis of non-randomly drawn samples of insufficient size to statistically support any conclusions whatsoever. Such approaches tend to wash out entirely any prospect of uniqueness, individuality and singularity in human events, and discount the genuine artistry involved in philanthropic practice.

It is truly difficult to comprehend which of these weaknesses in the practice implications of voluntary action and structural paradigms are the most misleading and dangerous in practice. If Giddens and Cohen are correct, both ought to receive our attentions as theoretical concerns.

Conclusion

Practice in the NO paradigm consists primarily of creating and maintaining nonprofit organizations along with generalizable rules (policies and procedures) for managing the routines of organizational life. This is task of considerable complexity and subtlety it must be noted.

In its more robust sense the practice of voluntary action embraces many distinct forms of social action, from ‘rational choice’ or decision-making, to voluntary

association, fund raising, and religious, charitable, and other forms of prosocial behavior. There is a danger that by simple analogy with the nonprofit organizations paradigm voluntary action theorists will strive to define what Smith calls ‘altruism’ and Van Til calls ‘the third space’ primarily in terms of groups, communities, social movements and other forms of structured social organization.

Instead, voluntary action theory needs to continue striving to ground a sense of the third sector completely beyond this organizational frame. A third sector as a distinct space outside of households and beyond markets and states is not necessarily constituted by organizations. The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution and a relatively small number of other provisions in federal and state law, together with their justifications in normative political and social theory simultaneously locate and define the U.S. third sector as a protected space for voluntary action. Viewed thus, the third sector is not a structure, but a third space for voluntary collective action, a domain of rights protecting association, public speech, the exercise of religion, what media scholars following J.S. Mill still term ‘the marketplace of ideas’, the relations between citizens and their government and the ways in which people associate with one another as citizens. This space is deserving of our continued scholarly attentions.

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