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Elise L. Kieffer
Murray State University

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Feminist Pragmatism in the Nonprofit Sector

By Elise Lael Kieffer, PhD, Director - Nonprofit Resource Center, Murray State University

Overview: Many nonprofit organizations are founded with passion and energy, rather than with expertise. Meanwhile, theorists and researchers write about that sector with distance from the day-to-day practice. This article relies on the analogy of a bicycle wheel to understand the inter-workings of the nonprofit sector, as a whole. The analogy is understood and interpreted through the philosophical lens of Feminist Pragmatism and aims to begin a conversation among and between nonprofit researchers, practitioners, educators, and recipients of services. When all are in communion, the wheel functions perfectly.
About Author

Elise Lael Kieffer, PhD - Dr. Kieffer currently serves as Program Director and Assistant Professor of Nonprofit Leadership Studies at Murray State University in Murray, Kentucky. She is also Executive Director of the Nonprofit Resource Center which provides technical support for nonprofit organizations across Western Kentucky.

Introduction

I am a nonprofit professor and researcher. I began my professional career as a nonprofit practitioner. It is in the space of intersection between those two perspectives that I present this food for thought and contemplation. These roles are not disparate or incongruent. They are both necessary and reliant on one another. The recognition of the value both bring into the nonprofit conversation strengthens the sector.

My individual nonprofit journey began as a participant of services in nonprofit arts organizations. That progressed into a career in nonprofit management that continued to evolve into research and higher education. In every stage of my involvement within the sector, there was some level of awareness that the organization was a highly evolved organism, impacted by others and impacting still more. I do not suspect that my experience is unique. I rather think that my journey was the same or similar as many others who fluidly navigate the different channels within the nonprofit sector.

The different aspects of the nonprofit sector create tensions between researcher, practitioner, educator, and recipient and this article presents Feminist Pragmatism, understood through the analogy of a wheel with spokes, as an effective and useful philosophy for maneuvering that space of difference. The tensions are not obstacles. They are necessary for the whole sector to function optimally.

Methodology

This is a conceptual project, rooted in the desire to understand the intersections and interactions between the theories and practice of the nonprofit sector and their influences on nonprofit education. Relying on researcher experiences in the field of practice and interpreting those experiences through a review of literature from both nonprofit researchers and philosophers, this paper opens a philosophical discussion into the complexities of the nonprofit sphere and attempts to facilitate future conversations by providing a framework for discourse.

Spokes in the Wheel

I would like to present an analogy for the many inter-workings of the nonprofit sector. Consider the spokes of a bicycle wheel and how each bears part of the weight of the rider and the pressure of the motion. Spokes don’t push out toward the tire, rather, they all work together to pull the wheel in toward the center. That consistent exertion of tension around the whole wheel supports the rider and moves them forward (Wicks, 2010).

Just as enormous force is applied to the hub of the wheel, so external pressures affect the nonprofit sector, requiring regular adaptation and adjustment. Together, the spokes of the wheel move the power from the external force (the rider) to propel the bike forward. That application of force is even distributed around all spokes in the wheel such that none bears too much burden. They work together and all succeed (Wicks, 2010).

The nonprofit sector is the wheel itself (Figure 1). The spokes working to make the wheel work are theory, research, education, programming, and administration. For the sake of this illustration, spokes are defined as follows.

**Theory:** Reflection on past and current practice and the pursuit of future opportunities through abstract or theoretical understanding. Theory advises research and education.

**Research:** Study of past and current practice toward the development of future practice

**Education:** The formal preparation of the current or future nonprofit workforce as driven by higher education.

**Programming:** Includes the “boots on the ground” providing the specific services that serve the mission of each nonprofit organization.
Administration: In simplest terms, these are the people who work in the office. It includes but is not limited to management, resource development, finance, and technical support.

Figure 1 The nonprofit sector as spokes in a wheel

The philosophy of Feminist Pragmatism was developed through Jane Addams’ years of work in the social sector. Perhaps it should go without saying that the philosophy might still hold value today within the nonprofit arena. This article serves to make explicit the existing application of feminist pragmatism to the relationship between the theory, practice, and research arms of the nonprofit sector.

Jane Addams utilized her version of Pragmatism to effect change and to encourage participation from beneficiaries of the social services she facilitated. The social sector in which she worked strived to meet needs that government agencies either could not, or would not, meet. The “wicked problems” that persisted despite efforts to solve them, became the targets of her philosophy at work. According to Hookway (2013), Addams keen understanding and integration of experience and research enabled by Pragmatism provided an avenue for evaluation and reflection of existing institutions and practices.

William James utilized Pragmatism as a mediating philosophy that had the potential to settle disputes that other philosophical approaches might perpetuate. Conflicts with no apparent solution could, in fact, be solved with a Pragmatic approach. It is the Pragmatic emphasis on cooperation, communication, and context make it uniquely adaptable to reassessment, reevaluation, and reappraisal (Hookway, 2013). Pragmatism is not static but ever-changing, just like our society.

Dewey challenged the dichotomy between the theoretical and practical by promoting the idea that our lived experiences are the very processes by which we gather information that then advises future decisions and experiences, including research and education (Hookway, 2013; Garrison, 2008). We approach our methods as devices to then be evaluated on how successfully they achieved the desired objective. Perhaps administrative success and effective organization facilitates financial freedom for the program director and innovation for the researcher.

Jane Addams and John Dewey worked together at the Hull House in Chicago, Illinois to improve immigrant neighborhoods. They changed their local society in important ways through social activism, policy making, and direct service. As pragmatic activists, Addams and Dewey developed an active theory of participatory democracy, which emphasized community involvement in the assessment and solution to identified challenges. This multi-stakeholder approach was never intended to create theories for pontification. It was directly applied to problem-solving and resolution (Shields, 2008). In that diverse atmosphere, Addams sculpted the philosophy of feminist pragmatism to be effective and efficient, and willing to challenge the status quo. Her shift to functional problem-solving was the greatest change from its classical pragmatism roots.

Conclusion

Feminist Pragmatism is, by design, philosophy in action. It is misapplied if it is only a group of theorists or scholars pontificating. The function of this philosophy is that it fluidly moves from theory into practice into evaluation and then back for reevaluation and new theory development. Too often in nonprofit practice we put out fires as they start. Perhaps with an integrated approach to the broad sector as one organism, theorists, researchers, practitioners, and recipients could all confront the “wicked problems” that continue to affect our society.
Pragmatists of all varieties reject abstract and strictly epistemological applications and instead endorse fallibilism, recognizing that our beliefs are shaped by our own limited knowledge, experiences, and social histories. In this way, they are better able to confront the dangers and pitfalls of mere subjectivity or blatant objectivity, rather, encouraging a functioning working balance between lived experience and acquired wisdom (Dieleman, 2017). Feminist pragmatism in application requires listening and mediating among a diverse community of inquiry coming to the conversation with different backgrounds, educations, and experiences all working together toward a beneficial common goal (Lake, 2017; Shields, 2005).

The practical nature of pragmatism requires that we do not just conjecture and hypothesize, but that we come to a conclusion and act. These actions must be based on many perspectives and inputs and subject to regular review for desired outcomes that make a difference in society (Lake, 2014; Shields, 2008). No matter where you work in or around the nonprofit sector, I implore you to ask this question: How is your organization, your research, your curriculum inviting all voices into the conversation? How are you evaluating past endeavors and improving them for the future? The goal of this inquiry is to facilitate and improve conversations between and among practitioners, researchers, educators, and recipients of services—the spokes of our wheel, to ensure that the wheel of our nonprofit sector is functioning for everyone. Feminist pragmatism is uniquely situated to enable us to do just that.

References


