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THE IMPACT OF REPRESENTATION IN EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR POSITIONS IN
SOCIAL SERVICE NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract

This qualitative research project used a comparative analysis methodology to analyze and compare current executive directors in active social service nonprofit organizations in the Oklahoma City metropolitan area. This study was designed to investigate how their views on the importance of diverse representation within their own organizations' leadership and other social service nonprofit affect the services these organizations provide. Interviews were conducted with two executive directors of nonprofits that provided social services to the Oklahoma City community. This study highlights and discusses five major themes: representation of the people served was considered a strength for the organization, diverse representation in leadership was an aid to provide better services, lack of candidates for the board as a challenge to bring representation to the organization, lack of qualified diverse board member prospects, and having board members who represented the nonprofit well but did not represent the people served. A link between diverse representation in social service nonprofits in Oklahoma City and the type of programming that said nonprofits offered to the public was found.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Significance of the Research.....	2
Research Purpose and Questions	3
Definition of Terms	5
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature	7
Value of Diverse Representation in Nonprofit Leadership	8
Reality of Diverse Representation in Nonprofit Leadership.....	12
Challenges of Diverse Representation in Nonprofit Leadership	17
Integration of Diverse Representation in Nonprofit Leadership	20
Critique of the Current State of Diverse Representation in Nonprofit Leadership	22
Chapter 3: Methodology.....	29
Participants.....	30
Data Collection	32
Interview Process	32
Data Analysis	33
Emerging Codes and Themes	34
Limitations	37
Chapter 4: Findings	38
Representation as a Strength.....	39
Representation Encourages Better Offerings.....	41
Lack of Qualified Board Member Candidates	43
Merit Versus Representation	46

Low Board Member Turnover	47
Conclusion	48
Chapter 5: Implications.....	50
Discussion of Findings.....	50
Recommendations.....	53
References	55
Appendix A.....	61

Chapter 1: Introduction

Social service nonprofit organizations are nonprofits that focus on providing services directly to a certain group of people or communities to improve their quality of life in one way or another (Kelly & Lewis, 2009). Another focus of social service nonprofits is to represent the interests of certain groups of the population who might be underserved or marginalized (Nickels and Leach, 2021). In the United States, non-Caucasian groups are shown to be most of the individuals who benefit from social service nonprofits organizations (Kingston, Furneaux, Zwaan & Alderman, 2020). Beneficiaries of social service nonprofits in the United States tend to live under the state household income by 60% (Urban Institute, 2021).

Historically, nonprofit organizations in the United States have suffered disparities between the demographics of their leadership and the demographics of the communities they aim to serve (Taylor, 2022). Most nonprofit organizations have a Caucasian executive director and an exclusively Caucasian board, while the communities served by these organizations consist of mostly minority groups (Kingston, Furneaux, Zwaan & Alderman, 2020). As of 2021, only 13% of all nonprofit Executive Directors and 17% of board members were part of a minority group (BoardSource, 2021). This lack of representation within social service nonprofits can prevent these organizations from appropriately serving their targeted communities, due to a lack of understanding and connection to their target groups (Mumford, 2022). A social service nonprofit organization that does not possess a clear understanding of the customs and practices that their targeted communities show takes the risk of creating programming that is not useful for these communities (LeRoux, K. & Medina, A, 2023). Due to this risk, it can be of

importance to explore the correlation between leadership in social service in nonprofits and the demographics of those communities they seek to serve. Organizations that successfully bridge this gap are often considered more trustworthy amongst the individuals they serve because they are generally more in tune with the needs of said communities (Mumford, 2022). These organizations would also take more ownership of representing these communities thanks to the deeper connection nonprofit leadership will have with the mission and people served. Any organization that incorporates a representative governing body that closely resembles that of its target audience will be more invested in ensuring quality outcomes for that community. These are the premises behind this study.

Significance of the Research

This research targeted current leaders in active social service nonprofit organizations in the Oklahoma City metropolitan area to investigate how their views on the importance of diverse representation within their own organizations' leadership and other social service nonprofit organizations. Diverse representation in the leadership of nonprofit organizations provides a deeper understanding of the communities served (Azevedo, Gaynor & Shelby, 2020) and thus, encourages the creation of more prominent services and offerings (Capers & Smith, 2021, Buse & Bernstein, 2016). Ultimately, representation can be said to increase the quality and variety of services offered by social service nonprofits.

Social service nonprofit organizations seem to be aware of the benefits representation in leadership brings to their organizations, and if diverse representation becomes the norm in future leadership, this representation could become the framework

to dismantle existing biases within their organizations and create a more effective nonprofit landscape. At the same time, it could work to alleviate the barriers currently in place that prevent diversity in leadership.

Research Purpose and Questions

The purpose of this study is to find an association between representation of communities served in leadership personnel in social service nonprofits, and how this affects the services offered to said people. This research is a qualitative comparative analysis of two social service nonprofits. The data were captured through interviews with two participants serving as executive directors in two distinct social service nonprofit organizations in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. This data were collected to explore connections between diverse representation in the leadership positions in these nonprofits and the communities they aim to serve. The purpose of this study is to compare the leadership representation in two current social service nonprofits and its connections to the services provided. The aim of this research is to show the correlation, or lack thereof, between leadership personnel who share similarities with the people the nonprofit serves, and the services offered to said people. Ideally, this research shows that target communities that are better represented in the leadership of social service nonprofits receive better services and offerings from said nonprofits.

Currently, there are conflicting views in the literature as to what extent representation of the communities these nonprofits serve in their leadership's positions, executive and board positions alike, aids at making a difference on the quality of services these organizations provide to the public. This research aims to explore the importance that representation, in the form of board and leadership diversity, of the communities

served by two social service nonprofits in Oklahoma City might have on the programs that said nonprofits deliver to their target communities. The following questions assisted in guiding the research:

- Do executive directors and board members in small social service nonprofits located in Oklahoma City see a value of diverse representation in their leadership?
- If so, how can smaller Oklahoma City based social service nonprofits utilize representation in their leadership to better serve the communities they provide support to?
- What are the challenges when trying to diversify the leadership within social service nonprofit organizations in Oklahoma City?

This study will contribute to the body of knowledge on organizational behavior in social service nonprofit organizations and how representation, and the practices it brings, can potentially affect the services offered by said organizations to the public. This research will help address the current literature shortage in this area and provide real examples of the possible benefits representation can bring to nonprofit organizations and receiving communities.

This study is divided into five different chapters. In chapter one, there is a brief outline of what social service nonprofit organizations are, their purpose and current trends in the management of these organizations. This chapter also discusses this study's aim, its objectives and questions, and its limitations. Chapter two focuses on the existing literature relevant to the connection between the leadership of social service nonprofits and the people who benefit from said services. These topics are reviewed to provide context. Chapter three provides an outline of the methodology and collection methods

used by the primary investigator to gather data. Chapter four focusses on presenting the data gathered through the research outlined in chapter three. Chapter five discusses the findings and connects them to the literature previously discussed and the study's aim.

Definition of Terms

Diverse Representation – The inclusion of individuals from different backgrounds, ethnicities, races and religions with the purpose of ensuring community needs and preferences are properly regarded.

Diversity – The demographic differences shown in between two or more people that differentiate them from others (Ely and Thomas, 2001).

Diversity Perspectives – The common understandings that different groups of people have about diversity, its impact, and how people uniquely interpret the general understandings (Ely & Thomas, 2001).

Equity – The uniform and fair treatment of all individuals, no matter their characteristics or affiliations (Exec. Order No. 13,985, 2021).

Inclusion – The sense of belonging and value that a person perceives they possess in a work or social system (Bernstein & Bilmoria, 2013).

Leadership – The people who oversee, guide and conduct the operations in an organization. In nonprofit organizations, the leadership is most often composed of the Board of Director members and the Executive Director.

Representation – The inclusion of individuals who possess different identifying characteristics, like race, ethnicity, language, religion, sexual orientation and lived experiences, that align with those of the communities served (Cambridge, n.d.).

Social Service Nonprofit Organization – Nonprofit organizations that provide essential services and offerings to low-income communities, with the goal of improving their quality of life.

Quality Services – Services that align both utility and variety to meet the specific needs of the communities served.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Diversity is defined as the demographic differences that can be used to distinguish a group of people from another (Ely & Thomas, 2001). These differences include, but are not limited to, race, ethnicity, gender, sex, sexual orientation, religion and political affiliations. Although diversity is not a new topic, it has become a part of the reality of every United States citizen due to the recognition of the importance of diversity in everyday life. The integration of diversity training and practices dates to 1964, when Equal Employment Opportunity Laws (EEO) and affirmative action were introduced in the United States (Dong, 2021). These laws were originally created to protect people from different races, colors, religions, sexes and national origins. Due to the initial roots EEO and affirmative action had on the racial equity movements of the 1960's, they were mostly used to protect specific races and ethnicities, rather than all groups of minorities (Meier, Pennington & Eller, 2005). This trend continued well into the early 2000's, when diversity was still focused on race and ethnicity, with only a small push towards cultural differences. As of 2023, there has been a push for broader diversity in the workforce to encompass groups beyond race and ethnicity, now including culture, sexual orientation, and gender. This broader focus has been made popular by social justice initiatives and has proven to bring benefits to organizations, such as higher employee and customer satisfaction (Nicholson-Crotty, Grissom & Nicholson-Crotty, 2011).

Not only is it advantageous for organizations to employ diverse individuals, but it is also of utmost importance to make an effort to propel these diverse employees into leadership positions within their organizations. By employing diverse leadership, organizations are actively dismantling the role they might have had in the past to

perpetuate social inequities (Pandey et al., 2022) and could better represent the people who subscribe to their products and services (Kinsley, 1944).

The importance of diversity in boards and executive positions of nonprofit organizations has been discussed and supported. The need for social justice nonprofit organizations in the United States and around the world instigated the debate of diversity and its role in leadership. New attention to the growing need for diverse nonprofit boards and executive positions has sparked an evaluation of current nonprofit leadership, potential alternatives, and the systems that perpetuate the status quo. The recent influx of discussion highlights the need to deviate from nonprofits' current standards for their leadership teams and replace it with a wide offering of diverse candidates with variable backgrounds and experiences who also have a stake in the mission of the nonprofit.

Value of Diverse Representation in Nonprofit Leadership

A push for representation of diverse individuals has been present in all industries, including nonprofit organizations. The diversity concept includes differentiators like ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation and ability levels. The inclusion of diverse individuals in the boards and executive positions of nonprofit organizations can be one of the organization's most valuable assets. The discussion of inclusivity of diversity has been discussed since the mid 1940's through the theory of representative bureaucracy (Kingsley, 1944), that emphasized that having board members and executives from minority backgrounds who represent the populations served could benefit the organization. The concept of representation in this theory ensures diversity in memberships and decision making. Moreover, it has been determined that representation of different diverse individuals does not negatively influence the experience and input of

Caucasian individuals, who have been the customary members of nonprofit leadership throughout history (Nicholson-Crotty, Grissom & Nicholson-Crotty, 2011). From the late 1990's to the early 2020's, diverse representation has been shown as a priority and strategy for nonprofit leadership, yet less than 20% of nonprofits in the US have taken this claim seriously (Azevedo, Gaynor & Shelby, 2020).

The value of diverse representation in nonprofit leadership positions positively correlates with enhancing the mission of the organization through the execution of different tasks. This is especially prominent in the need for fundraising. Nonprofit boards have the unique task of focusing on fundraising and other operational duties, like making sure the organization is well known and presenting information so possible sponsors and donors know how they can engage with the organization (O'Regan & Oster, 2005). By not having diverse board members and executives, nonprofit organizations potentially jeopardize the opportunity to better serve the communities they are trying to reach due to a disconnect in between what leaders think the communities need versus what they really need. Board members and executive directors can benefit from an unbiased understanding of the challenges their nonprofit's target communities face. This way, the services nonprofit organizations provide are relevant to the communities they serve (Azevedo, Gaynor & Shelby, 2020).

Another important value that diverse boards and executive positions provide is an understanding of the community the organization intends to serve and thus, adequate services for said community. If nonprofit leadership teams do not know or do not understand the needs and struggles that these communities are facing, the services provided are not going to be adequately received or utilized. This issue can be addressed

by ensuring that board members and executive directors have adequate, diverse representation that reflects the communities served. Historically marginalized groups are better heard and served by nonprofits organizations that employ someone who belongs to the same or similar social group as a part of the organization's leadership (Capers & Smith, 2021). In other words, the population served feels better understood by nonprofits if the board members or executive directors look like them or have similar backgrounds.

Nonprofit boards that have a greater number of diverse members representing different ethnicities, races, ability levels, genders, and sexual orientation in their boards tend to have higher performing programs and services, due to more accurately addressing the needs of their target communities (Buse, Bernstein & Bilmoria, 2016). This connection of programs and communities served has been shown to be correlated to higher meta-cultural competency, wide-ranging perspectives, and better problem-solving skills (Brown, 2002; Blitz & Kohl, 2012; Ely & Thomas, 2001; LeRoux & Medina, 2023). This association between diverse nonprofit leadership and more impactful programming can be connected to the concept of diversity perspectives. Diversity perspectives were first introduced by Ely and Thomas in 2001 and are defined as the common understandings that different groups of people (Caucasian, Black American, Hispanic, Jewish, Christian, LGBTQ+, ability levels, amongst others) have about diversity, its impact, and how people uniquely interpret the general understandings. These different understandings of diversity affect people's day-to-day actions when interacting with other groups or organizations that do not look or behave like them. They can vary from common behaviors associated with certain diverse groups, like quinceañera parties

to the Hispanic American community, to more harmful beliefs that could be classified as pre-conceived biases.

Another value that arises from including diverse members into nonprofit boards and executive positions is having diverse ideas, outlooks, and approaches. Ely and Thomas (2021) emphasize that diverse perspectives are significant and can be classified into three different types: the first one is integration and learning, which embraces the practice of taking into consideration the unique experiences, awareness, and skills each member of the nonprofit leadership team has developed as the result of their diverse background. These diverse backgrounds include, but are not limited to, different ethnicities, races, religions, political affiliations, gender, sexual orientation, and abilities. By considering this perspective of diversity at the time of leadership decisions, nonprofit board members and executives may be encouraged to rethink their practices and tactics to take into consideration the ideas diverse members bring to the discussion. By doing this, nonprofit leadership teams can ensure that the members of the target community are given the most wholistic and relevant services. The second perspective is access and legitimacy, which is the acknowledgement that each one of the nonprofits' board members and executives have a unique, diverse background that deserves to be celebrated and explored. This diversity perspective adds value to nonprofit organizations by establishing the common understanding that diversity within the organization ensures trust with the population the nonprofit hopes to positively impact. Lastly, the discrimination and fairness perspective are rooted in the belief that to achieve true social justice, organizations have the duty of staffing and maintaining a diverse workforce that represents all members of society. By operating with this diversity perspective in mind,

nonprofit organizations can be passively and actively working on any pre-conceived biases their board members and executives possess (Bernstein & Bilimoria, 2013; Ely & Thomas, 2001). These perspectives help create a framework to use diversity within nonprofit organizations to dismantle biases board members and executive directors could have brought to the organization due to their unique backgrounds.

It has been shown in several studies that nonprofit boards that have diverse board members show higher performance of leadership responsibilities, like financial planning, fundraising, effective organization and strategic planning (LeRoux & Medina, 2023, Bernstein & Bilimoria, 2013, Buse & Bernstein, 2016). The more types of diversity – age, gender, religion, sexual orientation, different abilities, race, ethnicity – members of a board have, the more impact diversity has in the organization's policies, practices, and advocacy (Buse, Bernstein & Bilimoria, 2016). Therefore, for a nonprofit organization to value and utilize the contributions of a diverse board, board members and executives must have a critical and objective understanding of the gap between those already represented and the groups still lacking adequate representation in the organization. This can help ensure that the communities served by the nonprofit are represented properly.

Reality of Diverse Representation in Nonprofit Leadership

Diverse representation in the boards and executive positions of nonprofit organizations has been evolving throughout history, with diversity being of utmost importance now more than ever. Although leadership teams in nonprofit organizations acknowledge the value that different types of diverse individuals can bring to their board, there has been a gap in between these claims and implementation efforts from these organizations. In other words, although nonprofit leadership claims to understand the

importance and value of diversity, there has not been a clear strategy established to achieve these goals.

The reality of why nonprofit leadership has not integrated more diverse individuals into leadership positions can lay in the bias they bring into their respective organizations. This bias is a prevalent issue in current nonprofits organizations, impacting the programs and services these organizations offer when serving their targeted communities (Nickels & Leach, 2021). To clarify, when nonprofit board members and executives do not properly represent those who they seek to help, the services provided by their respective nonprofits are not as effective due to their predetermined cultural, gender, and individual biases. What the United States' majority considers to be normal and common, may not match to what the minorities served consider normal and common. This lack of connection between the nonprofit leadership and the communities served due to preconceived biases could play a role in Caucasian leadership seeing beneficiaries and communities in a paternalistic way, with organizational leadership believing they know better how to meet the needs of the population than those within the community. This paternalistic way of leading nonprofits organizations comes from the combination of Caucasian practices seen as the norm, the stigma associated with being a person of color in the United States, and the viewing of minorities as people who need to be helped (Nickels & Leach, 2021). One could argue that a paternalistic way of leading nonprofit organizations can be based on institutionalized racism. This can, perhaps, be due to the historical biases that people who belong to minority groups need to be saved. Although organizations in the United States, including nonprofit organizations, have been fighting

against these beliefs and practices, the fight will not be over until diverse representation is implemented to achieve this goal.

The reality is that most nonprofit organizations that have board members and executive leaders that are Caucasian individuals who do not represent the communities served through factors like race, ethnicity, religion, lived experiences and socio-economic background, show a disconnect with their target communities. These leaders provide services in the way they believe is best, even though the communities on the receiving end do not have similar beliefs or values (Azevedo, Gaynor & Shelby, 2020, Brown, 2002, Danley & Blessett, 2022). This is a clear example of how preconceived biases and paternalistic ways of operating within nonprofits perpetuate a disconnect that could be alleviated by including different types of diversity (Nickels & Leach, 2021). A good example of this phenomena is presented by Danley and Blessett (2022) when studying 123 social service nonprofit organizations based in Camden, New Jersey. Although Camden is a community almost exclusively Black and Hispanic, the researchers found that over 65% of the board members and executive directors serving these nonprofit organizations were wealthy Caucasians who commute from Cherry Hill, New Jersey. Cherry Hill is well known as the homogeneous, high income neighboring city of Camden. Due to this, the Camden community's wishes on how they could best be helped were not being heard by the nonprofits that allegedly have this community's best interest in mind. Moreover, due to these types of practices, grassroot nonprofit organizations created and staffed by Camden's citizens, were not getting the same opportunities to network and access funding, since most, if not all, of the resources were outside of the community at the time of the study and likely still today. Although it could be argued that

having board members and executive directors who are connected to outside resources might be a strength, it is of outmost importance to incorporate leaders from the communities to maintain the needs of the communities present in the decisions.

Although the reality of diversity in nonprofit leadership positions is behind, there is a current effort to continue including diverse representation into nonprofit boards and executive positions. Efforts of diverse inclusion in nonprofit leadership in the United States initially started with the inclusion of Caucasian women in leadership positions. Throughout the years, Caucasian women have managed to disrupt the preexisting trends in nonprofit leadership by capturing their own share of nonprofit leadership positions. As of 2021, an average of 65% of nonprofit board members and executive directors in the US were Caucasian, cisgender women (BoardSource, 2021). The inclusion of Caucasian women is the current dominant exercise of diversity in leadership positions across nonprofit organizations in the United States but has not eradicated the need for other types of diversity in these positions. Slowly, leaders of color have ascended into the leadership positions of nonprofit organizations, but many challenges remain. Nonprofit organizations with Caucasian boards and executive positions have over 44% higher budgets than nonprofit organizations led by Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) (LeRoux & Medina, 2023). This discrepancy is also demonstrated in the monetary benefits diverse individuals receive for the jobs they perform. Executive directors who belong to minority groups make smaller salaries than their Caucasian counterparts, despite a lack of evidence showing that they create fewer desirable outcomes for both the nonprofit organization and communities they serve (Russell & Putnam-Walkerly, 2013). These findings illuminate current representation inequities in

leadership positions in nonprofit organizations and emphasize the lack of structured and fair pathways for minorities who want to ascend into nonprofit leadership positions.

Although most leadership teams in nonprofit organizations are aware of the need for the representation of individuals who not only represent genders, but represent different religions, races, ethnicities, etc., few of these teams are satisfied with the current representation available in their boards and executive positions. In their study, Walker and Davidson (2010) discovered that out of 550 Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) individuals who served in social service nonprofit boards around the United States in 2010, only 28% were satisfied with the overall diversity in their respective boards, even though 71% of board members and executive directors believed that having a more diverse board would increase overall efficacy of the organization. The Center on Nonprofits and Philanthropy (2021) found that as of 2021, the average nonprofit board in the United States only had an 11% to 20% representation of BIPOC included in their board and executive positions. This study also showed that 18% of nonprofits that primarily served the BIPOC population had entirely white boards. Nonprofit executives who reported having a lack of diverse members in the board are also more likely to report that the board is having an overall negative impact on the organization (BoardSource, 2021). Even though the interest to increase diversity in boards has continued throughout the years, there has been minimal improvement in the diversity of nonprofit leadership teams.

The current reality of nonprofit organizations in the United States continues to be one of outsourcing leadership to wealthier communities to serve poorer ones. By continuing this trend, paternalistic leadership and biases continue to be the norm. Not

only do these nonprofits not have an “insider” voice that could express the communities’ concerns and needs, but they could perpetuate a feeling of disconnect from their target communities, resulting in mediocre assistance at best. If diversity is not given the platform it requires for securing success in serving targeted communities, it will continue to be a laborious undertaking if not an impossible task to provide correct, realistic assistance that these communities so deserve.

Challenges of Diverse Representation in Nonprofit Leadership

There are three main sections of challenges that help explain difficulties when recruiting diverse individuals for leadership positions in nonprofit organizations. The first section of challenges is the lack of a consistent career path and network opportunities for diverse individuals who are interested in nonprofit leadership work (LeRoux & Medina, 2023; Russell & Putnam-Walkerly, 2013). Social sectors, including nonprofit organizations, do not have a clear pathway that is easily accessible and visible for minorities to advance into leadership roles within their desired nonprofits. Although new generations of professionals tend to value the meaning of their work more than previous generations (Russell & Putnam-Walkerly, 2013), this desire for value that could easily be met by working at nonprofit organizations is diminished by different recruiting practices between corporations and nonprofits, sign-in bonuses, student loan forgiveness programs, and lack of representation of nonprofit organizations in job fairs. Moreover, the prevalence of Caucasian leadership in nonprofits ensures that opportunities go to their peers, rather than to individuals outside of their social circle (Danley & Blessett, 2022; Nickels & Leach, 2021). For a professional pathway to succeed amongst minorities, it must include equitable access to networking opportunities, mentor-mentee opportunities,

amongst others. This continues to be a challenge due to the historical prevalence of opportunities in majority circles over minority ones. Without access to many of the same opportunities that their Caucasian peers benefit from, thanks to status or connections, it becomes difficult for diverse leaders to emerge and advocate for others who share their lived experiences.

The second section of challenges are the negative experiences suffered by minorities that could diminish overall attractiveness of leadership positions in nonprofits. Leadership positions in nonprofit organizations are not set for minorities to succeed (LeRoux & Medina, 2023). The pre-established model of paternalistic leadership in nonprofit organizations not only affects the relevance of services provided, but also limits the opportunities of diverse employees from different backgrounds to ascend into leadership positions within the nonprofit (Byrd, 2018; LeRoux & Medina, 2023). By maintaining the status quo of mostly majority individuals in the leadership of nonprofit organizations, low mobility is perpetuated. An explanation of why this challenge is still prevalent is that people feel obligated or inclined to help those who look like them over individuals who may look or behave in different manners (Byrd, 2018). By subconsciously ensuring that people who look and act like them ascend to leadership positions, Caucasian leaders are sending the message to capable minority employees that they are not fit to lead. Another common situation minority individuals are forced to face is ascending to middle management or lower leadership positions that predispose them to fail, which is called a glass cliff (LeRoux & Medina, 2023). By consciously or subconsciously placing minority individuals in positions that are meant to fail, current nonprofit leaders are placing minorities at a disadvantage to advance in their nonprofit

careers. Nonprofit organizations which possess diverse leadership could help alleviating this status quo by bringing a sense of justice to the leadership succession in the organization and ensuring that minorities have a path to opt into leadership opportunities (Pandey et al., 2022).

The third section of challenges for why there continues to be difficulties when recruiting diverse individuals into nonprofit leadership positions is the persistence of preexisting biases in organizations and individuals who fund nonprofit efforts (Danley & Blessett, 2022; LeRoux & Medina, 2023). By relying on funding from government organizations and foundations alike, nonprofit organizations are forced to operate in a metric-driven manner. This is done to provide their founders with relevant impact reports that they can later use to show commitment to the nonprofit sector or specific cause. Through their research, LeRoux and Medina (2023) found that this metric-driven model sets grassroots organizations lead by minorities at a disadvantage when it comes to securing funding. This is due to the different services provided by these organizations in comparison to services provided by their more established counterparts. By providing relevant services that cannot be measured and those provided by more established nonprofit organizations, grassroots organizations lose the opportunity to receive funding from governmental and foundation organizations. This challenge perpetuates nonprofits organizations focusing on changing the behaviors of the people they serve, rather than changing the inequitable systems these communities are trapped in through relevant, though maybe less attractive, programming.

The challenges experienced by minorities in leadership positions in nonprofit organizations are a result of these positions being held historically by Caucasian,

cisgender, able men. To this day, these positions continue to be structured and promoted in a way that secures access to the majority group over any other minority group in the United States. Research conducted by Heckler (2019) indicates that jobs tend to be classified as masculine or feminine, and that once a job position is seen as a job mostly performed by men, it is paid more. Although this notion only explores jobs being classified as male and female, jobs that are classified as masculine or male-held maintain the status quo presented by society: this is a job better performed by a Caucasian, cisgender, Christian and able male. Challenges will continue arising as long as positions that take care of basic nonprofit leadership tasks, like fund development and strategic planning, are given to Caucasian, cisgender, Christian, able men over their underrepresented minority counterparts (BoardSource, 2021; Center on Nonprofits and Philanthropy, 2021).

Integration of Diverse Representation in Nonprofit Leadership

Integration of diverse representation in leadership positions in nonprofit organizations has slowly evolved through the years. The current trends and incorporation of Diversity into the now popular concept of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DE&I) has propelled integration efforts from barely incorporating Caucasian women and ethnic minorities to incorporating gender fluid individuals, individuals from different faiths, and individuals with varying ability, amongst others. This integration trends have been seen from governmental organizations like the United States Homeland Security to national for-profit organizations like Deloitte. The values of integrating diverse individuals into different organizations remain the same: to better represent the people these organizations serve. Nonprofit organizations are not an exception to this. Integrating different types of

diverse individuals into nonprofit leadership roles increases the overall representation of individuals served. This results in higher connection and more appropriate responses to the needs and requests of the individuals served by these nonprofits (Capers & Smith, 2021).

As proven by Kinsley in his concept of representative bureaucracy (1944), organizations that specialize in serving others have more success if the people who lead them look and behave like the people they serve. Mosher (1968) expanded on this concept by dividing classifying the ways integration of diversity could happen into two: passive and active representation. Passive representation is the inclusion of diverse individuals into leadership positions. Active representation takes this concept a step further, and it requires these individuals to engage in advocacy practices for those diverse groups they represent in their leadership position (Mosher, 1968).

Throughout history, scholars have believed that passive representation should suffice, and that active representation might promote favoritism for those minorities that diverse leadership members are advocating for (Hong-Hai, 2006). However, Pandey et al. (2022) suggest that passive representation alone will not move the scale towards a more equitable and diverse nonprofit sector because a certain degree of advocacy is necessary from diverse individuals to truly make a difference in their leadership positions. It is important to keep in mind the main function of active representation: to advocate for those who have not had a voice in the past. Several studies concluded that passive representation in organizations can be the carrier of diversity, while active representation can be the motion that pushes it forward (Hindera, 1993; Hindera and Young, 1998; Hong-Hai, 2006; Meier, 1993; Nickels & Leach, 2021). As expressed by Nickels and

Leach (2021), “who is in the room matters; but it is not enough to have more people if their voices are minimized, muted, or later erased. The conditions - values, norms and processes - also matter.” (p. 516).

For the integration of different races, ethnicities, faiths, genders, sexual preferences, and ability levels to work in nonprofit boards and executive positions, it is important to incorporate passive representation, as well as active representation. Board members and executive directors who look like the communities served by the nonprofit have a better understanding of the beliefs and needs of the people served, even if some specific characteristics were never shared or are no longer shared (Danley & Blessett, 2022; Hong-Hai, 2006). For example, a Mestizo Latino man has a better understanding of the societal rules and expectations an Afro Latina woman might have thanks to their shared cultural heritage. Although this man is not able to speak from experience, he, perhaps, has witnessed through their shared culture the role women like her play in their communities. It would be a different situation if a Caucasian man were to weigh on this woman’s experiences and needs, since he is not connected to the same culture and customs.

Critique of the Current State of Diverse Representation in Nonprofit Leadership

Nonprofit boards that have a wider range of diversity tend to have more effective overall policies and practices, as well as incorporated diversity and inclusion objectives across the organization (Buse, Bernstein & Bilmoria 2016). Policies and practices that take into consideration the inclusion of diverse workforces and communities are of utmost importance, considering that by 2042, what are currently considered minority groups in the United States will account for the majority of the country’s population and

workforce (Russell & Putnam-Walkerly, 2013). This future diverse population not only includes people of color, but also includes gender, sexual orientation, ability, and others.

To properly serve the citizens of the future United States, it is important for organizations to comprehend and embody what diversity really means, which is more than just race and ethnicity, but goes as far as to consider lived experiences. Although common knowledge in racial and ethnic hierarchies is required, it should not be the only focus when discussing diversity in nonprofit organizations (Pandey et al., 2022).

Even though concepts of diversity and inclusion are a part of the vocabulary of nonprofit leadership, nonprofit leadership tends to be disconnected from theoretical definitions of diversity (Azevedo, Gaynor & Shelby, 2020). In other words, nonprofit board members and executive directors currently think of diversity only as it pertains to race and ethnicity.

Critique one: Are minorities in boards and ED positions overwhelmed?

Representation of all served people in nonprofit leadership is crucial for its success, but how are these diverse nonprofit leaders managing the expectation of always advocating for the communities they represent or belong to? Some of these diverse board members and executive directors felt like they were offered a leadership position in their respective nonprofits with the underlying purpose of bringing passive representation to the organization and not because of their skills and expertise in the cause (Walker & Davidson, 2010).

Most of these diverse leaders are willing to leverage their experiences to make a more just process for the communities their nonprofits serve, but to be effective, the responsibility to bring positive change into their nonprofit organization must be shared

amongst all leadership. When inclusion of diversity is not a shared leadership goal, diverse leaders can believe their input is not taken into consideration or it is not propelling the organization forward (BoardSource, 2021). By perpetuating these practices, nonprofit leadership teams are hindering the true value of diversity to manifest in their boards and executive positions. Not truly taking into consideration the points of view of the minority members involved could result in a continuous lack of connection with the communities served.

In 2010, only 15% of nonprofit leadership developed a detailed plan of action for the board to become more inclusive and only 6.4% of boards discussed past events that occurred in board meetings that could be considered offensive by minorities (Walker & Davidson, 2010).

Statistics show that over 85% of BIPOC are serving in more than two nonprofit boards with the main purpose of bringing diversity into said nonprofits' leadership (Fredette & Sessler Bernstein, 2019; Walker & Davidson, 2010). This can easily lead to an overload of responsibilities, causing these board members not to perform as high as they would like to or as well as their less taxed Caucasian counterparts.

Although it is of utmost importance for diverse board members and executive directors who represent the communities served to advocate for their minorities, they are not the only ones in these nonprofits in charge of propelling diversity and organizational change forward. All the nonprofit employees, leadership in particular, must be open-minded and ready to take ownership of their diversity commitments. This can not only bring as a result true organizational diversity, but overall organizational resiliency (Buse, Bernstein & Bilmoria, 2016).

Studies like the one conducted by Fredette and Sessler Bernstein (2019) argue that the difficulty of integrating minorities into nonprofit leadership positions is higher than the benefits received by the sole act of including these individuals. When considering these stands, it is important to also consider that the majority of diverse nonprofit board members feel more welcomed at the beginning of their tenure as board members, than as the years pass (McGill, Bryan & Miller, 2009; Walker & Davidson, 2010). It is also important to explore whether these diverse board members are given the psychological safety to voice their opinions and help create lasting change from day one.

Critique two: Lack of Access and Infrastructure for Diverse Leadership in Nonprofits

To fill the gap between performance and delivery in nonprofit leadership, it is important for all individuals who currently serve in leadership positions, especially those who already represent different diverse groups and the communities served, to be involved in the process to actively decrease this gap by helping identify current or past practices that might have been a result of unconscious bias and practices that could be implemented in the future to recruit more diverse talent (Blitz & Kohl, 2021).

Unconscious bias is the reflection of the negative beliefs a person has about other people who do not look like them or do not belong to the same social groups as them (Noon, 2018). If the unconscious biases that board members and executives show are not addressed and challenged, nonprofit leadership teams cannot take full advantage of the benefits diversity members bring to their organizations.

Nonprofits organizations that have historically been led by Caucasian board members and executives have had higher budgets to work with due to more established networking and opportunities that have not been given to their minority counterparts

(Danley & Blessett, 2022). However, the occurrence of diverse individuals in nonprofit boards and executive positions has been proven to bring positive fiduciary benefits that can possibly offset the previous model of nonprofit financing. Diversity in nonprofit leadership positions influences the way that nonprofit organizations use the funds they are given, showing a correlation between diversity and higher understanding of legal obligations with better monitoring of the organization's financial health (Fredette & Sessler Bernstein, 2019). Because of this, although nonprofit organizations led by diverse board members and executives have been operating with less money than nonprofit organizations led by majority groups, they have proven more capable of properly budgeting and distributing their organization's finances. Including more diverse board members also presents an opportunity for more detailed assessments of past fiduciary practices through different lenses. This allows leadership to assess past, present, and future financial practices from a broader lens, while considering those communities they seek to represent and serve.

Not only is it important for nonprofit board members and executive directors to represent the communities served by looking and acting like them, but it would be even more impactful if these representatives came directly from said communities. Nonprofit organizations that have board members and executives who came directly from the communities served by the organization receive higher donations, have higher satisfaction ratings amongst leadership and staff, and spend more time engaging in organizational activities that benefit the people they serve (O'Regan & Oster, 2005).

By not adding diversity, that being in race, religion, gender, ethnicity, amongst others, in the boards and executive positions of nonprofit organizations, these

organizations are eliminating any possibility of receiving the value diversity could bring to them. Functional diversity was a term first used by Daley and Angulo (1994) to describe the act of incorporating diverse voices into leadership positions and practices, like the ones found in nonprofit boards. Although functional diversity is casually defined as including as many professions or life experiences into an organization as possible, it is important to bring all aspects of diversity (race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, political affiliations, ability levels, amongst others) for a more wholesome understanding. A good example of a functional diverse board could be one that is composed of members with not only varying backgrounds and lived experiences, but also different races, ethnicities, religions, genders, abilities and sexual orientations.

Critique three: Lack of Accurate Diverse Representation in Nonprofit Leadership

The last critique of current trends of diversity in the nonprofit sector addresses the gap between the characteristics of nonprofit leadership teams and the characteristics their target communities possess. Although the nonprofit sector has started to see more diverse leadership that represents the demographics served, there is still a lack of accurate representation of the communities served (BoardSource, 2021). In 2021, the Center on Nonprofits and Philanthropy conducted a study of over 115,000 nonprofit organizations in the United States and found that 45% of the nonprofits surveyed assisted communities that were below the federal poverty lines. From the nonprofit organizations polled, over 55% of them served minority populations including but not limited to, race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and sexual orientation (Center on Nonprofit and Philanthropy, 2021). This research also found that over 60% of nonprofit board members and executive directors were Caucasian, cisgender individuals.

For programs provided by nonprofits to be relevant and well received in target communities, it can be important for recipients to know that their best interests are kept in mind. When the executive director or some of the board members represent the diverse characteristics of the people they serve, their programs have better reception and overall outcomes (Capers & Smith, 2021; Nicholson-Crotty, Grissom & Nicholson-Crotty, 2011; Russell & Putnam-Walkerly, 2013). Even though most scholars agree on this, the inclusion of diverse individuals in nonprofit leadership teams is still poor. Although these leaders who might not necessarily have the same characteristics as the communities served provide services that are pertinent to help these communities, the aid provided may not be perceived this way by the target communities. If this trend is continued in nonprofit organizations, proper representation of communities served will continue to be an obstacle at the time of providing relevant and well received programming to target communities.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The methodology of this study was built using a qualitative research model.

Qualitative research is the type of research that collects and uses non-numerical data that focuses on individual's experiences and views (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Qualitative studies are exploratory in nature and help provide a deeper understanding of a situation as a whole (Yauch & Steudel, 2003).

Due to this exploratory nature that qualitative studies inherently provide, qualitative data collection was the only method selected to collect data, making this study a mono-method model. A mono-method model utilizes research obtained from only one type of data, whether it is qualitative or quantitative (Sanders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2007). In the instance of this study, the data collected were exclusively qualitative. By choosing to collect qualitative data, a deeper understanding of the role representation plays in leadership positions in social service nonprofit organizations based in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma can be explored freely and extensively. This research is based on the participants's experiences and preconceptions of their workplace and their preconceived beliefs about diversity, inclusion and better service practices (Azungah, 2018; Creswell, 2013). By using qualitative data in this study, there is a more direct opportunity to explore preconceived beliefs and values relevant to the research that the participants might have used as guidance when leading in their respective social service nonprofits (Azungah, 2018; Kadyschuk, 2023). Moreover, to maintain the results of the study as transparent and accurate as possible, it is important to give the participants a voice in the findings of the study (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott & Davidson, 2002).

Through inductive research, patterns and common themes that could be linked to social service nonprofit organizations in the Oklahoma City Metropolitan area are found. Inductive research can be properly utilized to explore and apply a theory that has not been investigated within a field or geographic area (Woo, O'Boyle & Spector, 2017). Since there are currently no previous studies conducted about leadership representation in Oklahoma City social service nonprofits, inductive research methodology is being used to answer whether representation in the leadership positions in these organizations makes a difference in the service offered to the communities these nonprofits serve (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott & Davidson, 2002).

To maintain as much detail and focus during the research, a comparative analysis approach was selected. A comparative analysis strategy for conducting research involves creating a specific criterion to compare, collect the data and finally, compare the data to find differences and similarities (Saunders, 2009).

Since tracking changes was not necessary for this study and there was a time limitation to complete it, a cross-sectional approach was the best option for this study. Cross-sectional studies allow a researcher to collect data from a set of participants in a specific point in time, without any further follow-ups (Olsen & St. George, 2004). In this study, a cross-sectional approach was implemented by collecting data from an initial interview with the participants via Zoom, and then by reaching out via email to clarify any concerns.

Participants

The sampling strategy selected for this study was purposive sampling, which then turned into convenience sampling. Nine prospect social service nonprofit organizations in

Oklahoma City were found via a Google search and contacted via email by the primary investigator. Because of the nature of the research, not all prospect participants who were approached wished to participate, and willingness to participate could be associated with the accuracy of the responses given by the participants (Creswell, 2013). Selection bias was avoided by contacting a large pool of possible participants and interviewing the participants who agreed to be interviewed for this study.

Out of the nine nonprofit leaders contacted, there were two participants who agreed to be interviewed for this study: they were both executive directors at nonprofits that provide social services in the Oklahoma City Metropolitan Area. Both participants started in the organization volunteering, moving into a staff position and later ascending to the executive director position. **Participant 1** was a Caucasian cisgender female in her mid-50s who worked for a social service nonprofit which focus was to protect and advocate for children in the welfare system. This organization sees a diverse population, with about 33.3% Caucasian, 33.3% Hispanic or Latino and 33.3% African American children. At the time of the interview, she had been a part of this nonprofit for over 30 years as an employee and had been the executive director of said organization for 15 years. This executive director did not have any direct experience of being in the child welfare system herself. Although she showed mild interest in the study, Participant 1 was not overly interested in the topic of this research. **Participant 2** was a Hispanic/Latino male in his mid-30s who worked for a social service nonprofit that focused on providing food pantry services and after school programs for children from low-income families. This organization sees a diverse population, with the vast majority (about 75%) of their beneficiaries being Hispanic. At the time of the interview, this executive director had

been a part of his respective social service nonprofit for 12 years and had been the executive director for 2 years. This executive director and his family had used similar services to the ones offered by the nonprofit he represented during his childhood.

Participant 2 showed interest in this research's topic from the initial contact and continued expressing his passion for it throughout the interview and other communications. The primary researcher had no previous ties or connections to the participants interviewed for this study.

Data Collection

The data were collected through an hour long Zoom video interview with each respective participant. The open-ended questions asked to the participants were crafted with the goal of gaining deeper understanding of the effect diversity in leadership, or lack thereof, has in the services provided to the communities they serve. Open-ended questions were chosen to promote a two-way conversation that could aid at building rapport with the participants and to promote open and more in-depth responses (Creswell, 2013). Both interviews were conducted on February 29th, 2024, and the responses were recorded on Zoom audio recordings.

Interview Process

During the interviews, each participant started by introducing themselves and their respective social service nonprofits. They also stated how long they have worked in the social service nonprofit they represent and how long they have been the executive director. The questions asked were divided by the different themes found in the literature review of the study, and each section had anywhere between one and two questions. An exact list of questions asked is presented below:

1. Value of Diversity in Nonprofit Leadership
 - a. What role does diversity play in your organization and why?
 - b. Do you believe diversity is considered in how your board operates?
2. Reality of Diversity in Nonprofit Leadership
 - a. How does diversity manifest in the leadership of your organization?
 - b. How does your organization's leadership connect with the communities it serves?
3. Challenges of Diversity in Nonprofit Leadership
 - a. Does the board have any challenges, or do you anticipate any challenges when recruiting diverse individuals?
4. Integration of Diversity in Nonprofit Leadership
 - a. In your opinion, what are some best practices in nonprofit leadership to represent the communities served?
 - b. In your opinion, what are the best practices for nonprofit boards to connect to the communities they serve?
5. Critique of Current Trends of Diversity in Nonprofit Leadership
 - a. What do you think people in leadership positions should do to prepare the future generation of nonprofit leaders?
 - b. In your opinion, are the people currently appointed in different nonprofit boards in Oklahoma a reflection of the Oklahomans they serve?

Data Analysis

After the interviews were finished, the audio files collected via Zoom audio recording were stored in a secured Microsoft 365 account, provided by the University of

Oklahoma. These audio files were then transferred by the primary investigator using a qualitative study analysis tool provided to students by the University of Oklahoma called NVivo. After transferring the audios, the primary investigator transcribed the interviews in NVivo. Although time consuming, the transcription of the interview audio recordings allowed for clearer data by removing filler words and personal information that would identify the participants. The transcriptions of the audio files were coded by reading the transcription multiple times and finding the most relevant topics. These topics were then analyzed over three weeks using NVivo, which allowed for a seamless coding process by ranking these common themes and occurrences in both interviews and making them codes. To identify codes and commonalities found in both interviews, each interview was examined multiple times by reading the transcripts and selecting common themes then used as codes to reference. After the data was properly analyzed and coded, 16 common codes were found in between both participants. These codes were cross-referenced between each participant and between both participants.

Emerging Codes and Themes

After analyzing and coding the interview transcripts, sixteen codes were identified in the data:

- Representation of the people served as a strength for the organization.
- External DEI training was sometimes required for leadership.
- Underrepresentation in both leadership and staff of populations served.
- Convenience over diversity when choosing a board member.
- Diversity as a tool to aid in providing better services
- Meeting diversity standards and quotas.

- Diverse representation as more than just race and ethnicity.
- Lack of candidates for the board.
- Lack of qualified and diverse board member prospects.
- Biases leadership members might have brought into the organization.
- Choosing board members because of merit versus choosing them because of race.
- Lack of board members' turnover.
- Lack of adaptability from the board to offer services that will benefit communities served.
- Importance of board members' involvement in the nonprofit daily operations.
- Having board members who represent the nonprofit mission well, but not the people they serve.
- Not enough representation in the leadership of other Oklahoma City social service nonprofits.

After further categorizing the commonalities in these sixteen codes, five themes were dominant throughout both interviews: representation of the people served as a strength for the organization, diverse representation in leadership as an aid to provide better services, lack of candidates for the board, lack of qualified diverse board member prospects, and having board members who represent the nonprofit well but not the people served. These themes were found by measuring how many times they came up in the interviews.

The first theme is that in social service nonprofits, representation in the executive positions and boards is viewed as a strength and it should be prioritized for

these nonprofits to provide the best service possible to the communities they strive to help. Both participants stressed the importance of representation in the quality of services their nonprofits provide. **The second theme**, both participants agreed that representation of communities served in their leadership and staff aided in providing better programs and offerings to their communities. According to participant two, there is a difference in the way that board members and staff interact with the communities served if they share characteristics like language or background. **The third theme**, despite extensive efforts to include individuals who represent the populations served by social service nonprofits in leadership positions, there is a clear lack of candidates. Both participants agree that prospective board members do not come “knocking at their doors” and that extensive convincing is needed. Participant one mentioned that in rural pockets of the state, it is a challenge to find diverse individuals qualified and interested to serve on their board. Participant two mentioned that sometimes serving in nonprofit boards is seen as a social status for prospective board members, and if the organization is not “big enough” for the prospects, they might not be interested in joining. Both participants agreed that convenience plays a big role in how they select their board members: they need certain expertise and willingness from their members. **The fourth theme** found was that even though sometimes a social service nonprofit board member may not represent characteristics in the individuals served, they do represent the organization’s mission well and donate their money and time to the cause. Both participants seemed conflicted about how they felt about this situation. Lastly, the **fifth theme** was the lack of turnover in the nonprofit boards is an issue when it comes to looking for new, diverse individuals to fill the roles. Both participants find it almost impossible to encourage board members who

have been a part of the board for a long time to move on, to fill their spot with an individual that better represents the population served by their respective nonprofits.

Limitations

This small cross-sectional comparative analysis presents some limitations. To start, the sample is quite small, considering data was collected from two participants. A larger number of possible participants could have been reached to have a bigger pool of interviewers. Due to time restraints, this was not possible. Another limitation was that although this study considers executive directors and board members, the participants were exclusively executive directors. None of the participants held a board member position within a social service nonprofit. Lastly, the interviews were only one hour each, and since the questions asked to the participants were open-ended, sometimes the conversation would trail off from the topics at hand, spending valuable time on information that was not relevant to the study.

Chapter 4: Findings

This study focuses on exploring the disparate representation between leadership personnel and target communities amongst Oklahoma City social services nonprofits. This chapter explores and compares the findings from two social service nonprofit leaders in the Oklahoma City metropolitan area. Participant 1 was about a Caucasian cisgender female in her mid-50s, who has been a part of her respective social service nonprofit for over 30 years and has been the executive director for 15 years. Participant 2 was about a Hispanic/Latino cisgender man in his mid-30s, who has been a part of his respective social service nonprofit for 12 years and has been the executive director for 2 years.

The study revealed five relevant themes when it came to these leaders' views on representation and the importance placed on it by them and their organization. First, representation within the leadership of their respective organizations was considered a strength for both participants, with both citing better understanding of the community and being able to qualify for better funding as major benefits. Second, representation of the people served within the leadership structure of the organizations helps with creating more relevant programming and impactful initiatives to serve the target community. Third, there is a palpable lack of qualified board member prospects in the area. This could be either due to the organization not being "big" enough for some prospects, or lack of candidates in general. Fourth, it is difficult to get active board members who have been on the board for years to give their spot to a new candidate. Board members get complacent in their positions and do not want to resign to create space for new candidates. Fifth, some board members do not represent the communities they serve but

are passionate about the organization's mission and are able to donate their time and money to it. They also represent the organization to the public in a positive light. In this instance, these nonprofit leaders struggled to determine if representation of the people served was more valuable than the prosperity of their organization.

Representation as a Strength

The first relevant theme found through the interviews was the viewing of representation in leadership as a strength for the organization. Representation in an organization is the inclusion and involvement diverse individuals including leadership, staff and volunteers, have across all levels of the organization (Mannix & Neale, 2005). Representation was viewed by both participants as the common characteristics their leadership and staff shared with the communities their organizations served. The executive director from Participant 2 referred to diverse representation as "having a deep-rooted consciousness of how the culture you represent views different things" and added that representation of the communities served in their leadership "plays a significant role in the success of [their] programming and offerings". The female executive director from Participant 1 believed that "the representation of the people [they] serve within the organization is crucial to the success of [the organization's] mission". When it came to the benefits of representation, Participant 1 added:

I think [representation] is definitely a strength because of the challenges that we deal with on a daily basis. How we present the organization matters because it is a conscious message we are sending to the people we serve. We are telling them that we see them for who they are and that we are here to provide the best service we can.

Participant 1 also discussed that it was crucial for their organization's success to have as much diverse representation as possible. This executive director stressed that the types of representation she was referring to were not just factors like diverse race and ethnicity, but other crucial aspects like financial backgrounds, religious beliefs and sexual orientation. She believed these types of representation also play a key role in a candidate's unique qualifications. Participant 2 offered an example of how diverse representation in his leadership has proven beneficial for his organization: due to the nature of the services his organization provided, his organization worked closely with a lot of immigrants and refugees. After an influx of Afghan and Irani refugees started coming to his organization for assistance, he noticed how helpful it was that one of his board members, who spoke Farsi, volunteered on a regular basis. The board member was able to communicate with the Afghan families in need of assistance, and, thanks to this board member, his organization was able to provide more effective assistance to these families. Participant 2 explained:

Although I recruited this board member, I did not go out of my way to find someone who spoke Farsi. Seeing how helpful this has been for the organization has made me realize even more the huge importance diversity and representation play in leadership.

He continued to explain that not only was it helpful that this board member spoke the language, but it was also helpful to understand the cultural background and preferences of these families. He stressed this value by saying, "This board member took it upon themselves to prepare other leadership members and our staff to better understand and serve these families. I am very proud of how much we have evolved in this area."

Both participants also discussed that having diverse leadership within their organization helped their organizations qualify for better funding opportunities through private and public grants. “When you apply for grants, they are looking for the diversity of your board, not just race, but profession, gender and stuff” (Participant 2). For both participants, the importance and strength of representation in their organizations was highly rated. This was mainly to the value diverse representation brought into the offerings they gave their respective communities. When a nonprofit organization tries to reach out to their target communities, their services are more appropriately crafted and better received when these outreach campaigns or programs are created by employee who belongs to the same or similar social groups than those who are at the receiving end (Capers & Smith, 2021), which leads to the next theme found.

Representation Encourages Better Offerings

The second emerging theme found was that representation of communities served in their leadership and staff aided in providing better programs and offerings to their communities. It has been shown that Nonprofit organizations that possess a greater number of diverse members representing different ethnicities, races, ability levels, genders, and sexual orientation in their leadership positions tend to have higher performing programs and services thanks to a deeper understanding of the communities served (Buse, Bernstein & Bilmoria, 2016).

After representation was established as a strength to their respective organizations, both participants discussed how representation aided in their respective nonprofit’s programming and offerings to their communities. Participant 1 stated that “We gravitate to people that look like us. I mean, it is a defense mechanism”. She then

went on to discuss that one of the greatest advantages given by leadership and staff that represent the families served was the deeper understanding they showed to the issues they saw their families face every day:

We work with children who are in the system, and although we are all here because we love the mission and want to do better, there is a distinction in the way employees who have been in similar positions act versus employees who have not been through it themselves.

On a similar note, Participant 2 shared:

As a person of color who had to use services like this, my family had to use these services so [being] in this position, I am very conscious of the people we serve because they reflect me and they are another image of myself, really.

He went on to say that most of the people they served were women and that having leadership and staff that was mostly composed of women helped in providing more offerings that were tailored to women.

Besides the contextual understandings that leadership and staff who went through similar situations than the communities served brought to their organizations, cultural similarities amongst leadership/staff and families served was also brought up as a tool to offer better programming. Nonprofit leaders benefit from a deeply rooted understanding of the challenges their program recipients face. This understanding translates into higher quality and more relevant services and programming offered to the communities said nonprofits serve (Azevedo, Gaynor & Shelby, 2020). Participant 2 anecdotally mentioned that one of the advantages of being Latino was the fact that he understood that there is a

cultural tendency of Hispanic and Latino culture to not arrive at a destination at the specified time:

I hate to go with the "Latinos are always late" stereotype or something like that, but there are little nuances like that that me as a Hispanic person know about other cultures and my own culture and can adjust to that. Having this knowledge allows me to make a better case for the families we serve and helps me explain leadership and staff where this might be coming from.

Both participants mentioned that this did not mean that leaders and employees within their organizations who did not meet the same qualities than the communities served did not do their best to contribute to providing apt services and offerings, but that these employees needed a “nonprofit mindset”, as Participant 1 coined it, to better understand the people and put themselves in the positions their communities were in. This mindset, as discussed by Participant 1, was characterized by the ability of leadership to self-analyze themselves and not let their biases influence the type of offerings provided by the nonprofit. The lack of willingness to do this and lack of connection to the mission was manifested in a lack of qualified candidates for the board. This nonprofit mindset is equal to a common understanding of diversity perspectives, which are defined as the knowledge of how different groups of people operate, their values and different interpretation of the world around them (Ely and Thomas, 2001).

Lack of Qualified Board Member Candidates

The third most relevant theme was the lack of possible board members who were qualified to serve the organizations. Both participants expressed their frustrations when it came to recruiting board members for their organizations and explained that possible

candidates are not “lined up” to fill a role. They both believed that having an “homogeneous” board was an issue they were seeing in their organizations to one degree or another but had found it difficult to resolve. Adding to the stress of not having a broad pool of candidates to be board members, both participants highlighted that their nonprofit boards needed people with certain skills that were willing to put them to use for the organization. Participant 1 gave the example that:

...You need CPAs, you need all these things and if you live in an area where there is not a lot of people who have these skills plus represent the community you serve, everybody is going after the same few people who represent the people you serve have the skillset for your board.

Participant 2 explained that another one of his biggest obstacles when trying to recruit board members was that the organization was not big enough for the possible members who had these skills and properly represented the communities served:

We do not have people fighting to get on our board. As of now, we do not have a Hispanic person in our board. We are looking for someone to fill up that role in our board, we just have not found someone willing yet. We are just not big enough for some people.

This participant also discussed that the organization’s lack of stature or prestige, for some people, also meant that if these possible candidates were approached by several nonprofit organizations, the person was going to choose the one which was most recognized in their circle or community. Similarly, the executive director in Participant 1 discussed that many people she would have liked to see as members of her organization’s

board were approached by many nonprofit organizations or were already serving on other nonprofit boards.

Furthermore, the participants expressed a desire to recruit board members connected in prominent Oklahoma City circles or who were well known in the state so they could raise awareness for their organizations. An obstacle Participant 2 mentioned was that, even though there is plenty of diversity in the Oklahoma City Metropolitan area, most people who are recognized as important or promising members of the community are Caucasian. He pointed out:

You see all the 40 under 40 in Oklahoma and it is all white people. It is all older white men or older white women, so there also needs to be a lot of diversity in terms of these positions in order to provide a fair pool of candidates for nonprofits like ours.

This brought up the issue for Participant 2 of having to choose on whether to pursue a possible board member who represented the community served or going for someone who did not necessarily represent the community served by the nonprofit, but had the skills and status needed by the organization. It is worth considering that the prevalence of Caucasian leadership, which often do not represent the populations they serve, is linked to higher budgets due to these board members' community connections and personal wealth (LeRoux and Medina, 2023). By choosing a board member that does not represent the communities served, these nonprofits might also be choosing longevity (Walker and Davidson, 2010). This leads into the fourth most prevalent theme in representation disparities in these nonprofits.

Merit Versus Representation

The fourth theme was that, even though a social service nonprofit board member may not share characteristics with the individuals served, these board members do represent the organization's mission well through generous financial contributions or through acts of service. When it was time for both participants to try to fill a board position in their organizations, they found that they often had to choose in between someone who has more of the qualifications to serve, like a certain professional career or local connections, versus choosing someone who could have represented and understood the communities served by these organizations better. Some of the characteristics mentioned by both participants as important when it came to representation were coming from a similar social background than some of the families served, speaking the same language than some of the served communities or dealing with similar challenges, like immigration or unemployment, at one point in their lives.

However, since board members and executive directors are crucial in ensuring that the organization's goals are met, and that the organization is well connected to opportunities that might be beneficial for it to continue growing (An, 2021), there was a need for both participants to continue "selling" the mission in external circles. "As executive directors, the most important part of our job is to ensure that we have the means and personnel necessary to operate", said Participant 1, adding that "sometimes representation comes second to other qualities a board member or director can offer for the organization". An example on this given by the executive director of Participant 2 was that at one point in his career as executive director, he had to recruit a board member

who could help with the finances of the organization, and how, at that time, that needed to be more of a priority than representation in the search of said board member.

Both participants expressed their reservations when it came to choosing a board member only because they are diverse. Participant 1 stated that “you don't want to recruit a board member just because of their race, because that is not right anyways.” Participant 2 mentioned that since serving on a nonprofit board is a volunteer position, finding people willing to do the work without a pay made it more difficult to approach certain members who might have represented the community properly, but who did not have the means to allow them to take a volunteering position such as serving on a nonprofit board. Both participants have found that in the rare instances when someone reaches out with interest in joining the organizations’ boards, they are usually Caucasian. Participant 1 stated that “when somebody comes to your organization, you are like “yes! thank you!”, most of them are going to be Caucasian. You cannot get picky”.

When discussing the search for board members, both participants brought up that even though this was an issue they had to deal with, it was not as common, since their boards had very low turnover.

Low Board Member Turnover

The fifth theme found in the interviews was the lack of a normal board member turnover rate. Although having a well-established and secure board of directors in their positions is seen as a success (An, 2021), turnover throughout the years is necessary to bring new ideas and perspectives on how the organization can be better run. It also shows that the board members are committed to the mission beyond their individual

involvement (Thomas, 2024). Participant 1 mentioned that she had not seen the amount of board turnover one would expect since she became the executive director 15 years ago:

[board members] do not want to leave their position on the board. It is hard on them. Most of our board members are retired, and they love being a part of the board. I do not believe they see the need for new people to become members when in their minds they are more than capable to do the job.

In Participant 2, it was pointed out that the lack of turnover has made the leadership in the organization more homogeneous, creating a challenge to adapt to current trends in the industry:

The previous executive director was the executive director for 44 years. She was here for a long time and recruited most of the board members we have from her church. They all represent the organization well, but most of them have been on the board for over ten years. Board members who have served that long on a board get too comfortable in their positions.

Participant 2 also noted that this inability to adapt was manifested in the lack of desire to recruit board members in general, or those who do not subscribe to their same beliefs.

Conclusion

This chapter introduced the five major themes that emerged from the two participants studied for this research. First, representation of the communities served in leadership positions was found valuable for the organization to relate to the people they serve. Second, proper representation in leadership positions helped facilitating better programming and offering for the communities. This theme included better understating small cultural differences to being able to better communicate with community members

thanks to a shared language other than English. Third, finding candidates for the board was a challenge, especially when trying to find candidates that were both professionally qualified and were representative of the people the nonprofit served. Connected to the hardship of finding board member candidates is the fourth theme. Since board member candidates are scares, sometimes the nonprofit organizations were forced to choose in between trying to find someone who met the professional qualifications needed for the board at the time, versus trying to find someone who represented the community served. In these instances, both organizations had to sacrifice representation to find the skills their boards needed. Lastly, both organizations experienced low board turnover rates. Although a well-established board is seen as a strength generally, nonprofit boards need to experience turnover in their leadership to bring innovation rejuvenation to their organizations.

Chapter 5: Implications

This research was a qualitative comparative analysis that analyzed and compared two executive directors of social service nonprofit organizations located in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. The purpose of this study was to find any correlations between representation of communities served in leadership personnel in social service nonprofits, and how this affects the services offered to said people. Therefore, qualitative methodology helped better understand the nuances and challenges in representation within social service nonprofit leadership. This chapter focuses on findings and will discuss suggestions, interpretations, and recommendations.

It is important to include personnel who represent the communities served in the leadership of social service nonprofit organizations to provide better, more tailored services to the targeted communities. This not only ensures a better understanding and connection to the communities served (Azevedo, Gaynor & Shelby, 2020), but gives the nonprofit organization a better chance of qualifying for grants and funding opportunities (Buse and Bernstein, 2016). The need for representation in social service nonprofit leadership was reinforced throughout both participants analyzed in this research.

Discussion of Findings

Five major themes were found after analyzing the participants: representation of the people served was considered a strength for the organization, diverse representation in leadership was an aid to provide better services, lack of candidates for the board as a challenge to bring representation to the organization, lack of qualified diverse board member prospects, and having board members who represented the nonprofit well but did

not represent the people served. The data supported the importance of representation in leadership in these two social service nonprofit organizations.

Representation of the communities served was found to be a strength for both participants interviewed. Both participants viewed representation as one of the best ways to connect with the communities they served. As stated by Azevedo, Gaynor and Shelby (2020), The deeper understanding of the communities served that diverse representation in leadership brings to a nonprofit organization provides the organization with the tools to craft programming and services that are relevant to the communities served. Moreover, nonprofit organizations that have higher representation of the communities served tend to have higher performing and better received programming (Buse and Bernstein, 2016). This is directly correlated to the second theme found, which was representation in leadership as a way of providing better services to the communities. The executive director in Participant 2, a Hispanic man in his 30s, explained that as a child, he and his family received the same services the nonprofit he currently led did, and that having that deeper understanding engrained a passion to do better and deliver more relevant programming to the community his nonprofit served: “I am very conscious of the people we serve because they reflect me and they are another image of myself” (Participant 2). In this case, the theory argued by Capers and Smith (2021) that some groups of people are better heard and served by nonprofits organizations if employ someone who belongs to the same or similar social group as a part of the organization’s leadership was proven true.

The last three themes found through the interviews were: a lack of candidates for the board as a challenge to bring representation to the organization, a lack of qualified

diverse board member prospects, and having board members who represented the nonprofit well but did not represent the people served. These themes can be described as challenges these organizations experienced to bring diverse representation into their leadership teams. Azevedo, Gaynor and Shelby (2020) argued that diverse representation has been shown as a priority and strategy for nonprofit leadership, yet less than 20% of nonprofits in the US have taken this claim seriously. Rather than not taking this claim seriously, perhaps it is the challenges experienced in said organizations to bring diverse leadership that is the real culprit in the lack of diverse representation in nonprofit organizations.

When it comes to the third and fourth themes, the lack of qualified candidates for the board as a challenge to bring diverse representation to the board and the lack of qualified diverse board members, both executive directors used the phrase “we don’t have people lined up to be on our board” to express their frustration in the matter. Although several challenges to incorporating diversity in nonprofit organizations were identified in previous literature, there was a lack of mention of the difficulties experienced by nonprofit organizations in finding board members willing to commit their time and efforts to their organizations. As discussed in previous literature, leadership positions in social service nonprofit organizations have usually been outsourced to wealthier communities or Caucasian leaders (BoardSource, 2021; Walker & Davidson, 2021; LeRoux & Medina, 2023; Danley & Blessett, 2022). Perhaps a significant difference between the literature and the themes obtained from the interviews was that, although still struggling to find diverse members for their leadership positions, the executive directors acknowledged the importance of representation in their leadership

rather than deny its importance. So, while both executive directors agree that representation matters, they both expressed frustrations at not being able to find qualified, representative candidates who were willing to join their boards.

The fifth and last theme found, having board members who represented the nonprofit well but did not represent the people served was, perhaps, the most conflicting of all. This theme showed that there is more to good service than just representation of the people served and that, at the end of the day, the main job of leadership in nonprofit organizations is to ensure that the organization continues existing and providing services. As Kinsley (1944) discussed in his representative bureaucracy theory, organizations that provide services to a community have more success if the people who lead these organizations share commonalities with the people they serve. Although striving to give the best service possible should be a top priority for all social service nonprofit organizations, it could be a hard task when the organization is experiencing a lack of leadership or inconsistent funding opportunities (Jeong & Cui, 2020). While not representative of the communities that these nonprofits serve, one explanation is that these less diverse leaders offer a level of financial stability that favors a broader program offering and more predictable long-term success.

Recommendations

The importance of diverse representation in the communities served in Oklahoma City social service nonprofit organizations can help these organizations and the city better understand and serve the diverse populations that call Oklahoma City their home. Although this comparative analysis worked with a very small sample, representation of the communities served and the desire of providing relevant programming to these

communities are positively correlated. Further research in what motivates community members to become board members in social service nonprofit organizations in Oklahoma City is recommended to give these organizations and academia alike a better understanding of how people can be better motivated to serve the communities they belong to via leadership in nonprofit organizations.

For further research in this area, a bigger participant sample might be beneficial to give more inclusive results of the geographic area studied. Furthermore, expanding this study into a mixed methods research project including qualitative and quantitative data can be beneficial. Quantitative data could be collected by gathering demographic data from different social service nonprofit organizations and qualitative data could be gathered through interviews. This data can then be analyzed through a convergent parallel research method (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2007). This mixed method design allows for both types of data, qualitative and quantitative, to be equally as important, as they are analyzed together and not exclusively as support of the other method.

Based on this research, it is fair to say that there is a link between diverse representation in social service nonprofits in Oklahoma City and the quality of programming that said nonprofits offered to the public.

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Appendix A



Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects
Approval of Initial Submission – Exempt from IRB Review – AP01

Date: June 21, 2023

IRB#: 16045

Principal Investigator: Ana G Reynolds

Approval Date: 06/21/2023

Exempt Category: 2

Study Title: The Impact of Representation in Board and Leadership Positions in Social Service Nonprofit Organizations

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I have reviewed the above-referenced research study and determined that it meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review. **Please note: the IRB made a minor revision to the consent form. Please ensure that you are using the IRB stamped and approved version of the form when data collection begins.** To view the documents approved for this submission, open this study from the *My Studies* option, go to *Submission History*, go to *Completed Submissions* tab and then click the *Details* icon.

As principal investigator of this research study, you are responsible to:

- Conduct the research study in a manner consistent with the requirements of the IRB and federal regulations 45 CFR 46.
- Request approval from the IRB prior to implementing any/all modifications as changes could affect the exempt status determination.
- Maintain accurate and complete study records for evaluation by the HRPP Quality Improvement Program and, if applicable, inspection by regulatory agencies and/or the study sponsor.
- Notify the IRB at the completion of the project.

If you have questions about this notification or using iRIS, contact the IRB @ 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu.

Cordially,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ioana A. Cionea'.

Ioana Cionea, Ph.D.
Vice Chair, Institutional Review Board