ORGANIZING A WEAK ANTI-PRISON MOVEMENT? SURROGATE REPRESENTATION AND POLITICAL PACIFICATION AT A NONPROFIT PRISON REENTRY ORGANIZATION

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ABSTRACT

The nonprofit sector has come to deliver the majority of state-funded social services in the United States. Citizens depend on nonprofit organizations for these services, and nonprofits depend on government for financial support. Scholars have begun to ask important questions about the political and civic implications of this new organizational configuration. These questions have direct ramifications for the anti-prison movement given the explosive growth of nonprofit prison reentry organizations in recent years. To see how such organizations may impact political engagement and social movements, this chapter turns its focus on the intricate dynamics of client-staff interactions. Leveraging a yearlong ethnography of a government-funded prison reentry organization, I describe how such organizations can be politically active and at the same time contribute to their clients' political pacification. Staff members engaged in political activities in surrogate representation of their clients. While staffers advocated on their behalf, clients learned to avoid politics and community life, accept injustices for what they are, and focus instead on individual rehabilitation. By closely studying what goes on within *a nonprofit service provider, I illustrate the nonprofit organization's dual political role and its implications for social movements and political change.*

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INTRODUCTION

Privatization and devolution have greatly altered the face of social provisions. Nonprofit organizations in the United States currently deliver the majority of state-funded direct services to citizens (Katz, 1996; Marwell, 2004; Smith & Lipsky, 1993; and see Russell, 2018). Consequently, citizens have come to depend on nonprofit organizations for these services, and nonprofits, in turn, depend on government to support their activities. Whereas the nonprofit sector has long been lauded for fostering social movements and civic engagement (de Tocqueville, 1835; Joslyn & Cigler, 2001; Piven & Cloward, 1988; Putnam, 2000; Verba et al., 1995), recent scholarship calls attention to their diminishing civic and political role as a result of their dependence on government funding (Chaves et al., 2004; INCITE!, 2017; Schmid et al., 2008; Wolch, 1990). Others claim that government funding has encouraged the political activities of nonprofits (Marwell, 2004; Mosley, 2011, 2012). The debate is empirically unresolved, with some studies reporting positive effects or no effects of government funding (Chaves et al., 2004; Donaldson, 2007; Leech, 2006), while others present evidence to suggest that government funding may indeed suppress the political activities of nonprofit organizations (Child & Gronbjerg, 2007, p. 273; Schmid et al., 2008).

This debate has direct ramifications for our understanding of the low levels of involvement of formerly incarcerated citizens in the contemporary anti-prison movement. Whereas prisons in the 1960s were powerful incubators for political engagement, among African Americans in particular (supported by such organizations as Nation of Islam), the more recent prison boom has not been met with large-scale political action involving currently or formerly incarcerated men and women. The well-documented burden that befalls the formerly incarcerated as they try to enter the labor market (Pager, 2007), apply for government services (Western, 2018), and the civil rights violations they face (Travis et al., 2001) provides ample reason for political action. Yet they have so far not materialized as a political force to be reckoned with.

I speak to this case, and to research on organizations, movements, and political change more broadly, by focusing on the role of the nonprofit prison reentry organization. As the carceral population grew by 35% between 1995 and 2010 and has since stabilized, the number of nonprofits reentry organizations increased by 240% (Mijs, 2016a). How do these organizations shape formerly incarcerated men and women's political engagement? I argue that we need to conceptually and empirically distinguish between the political activities of staff members and those of clients. Research describes how staffers of an organization can come to politically pacify their clients (Eliasoph, 1997, 2011), and how government-funded nonprofits sometimes struggle to express their political voice (Chaves et al., 2004; Clemens & Guthrie, 2011; Schmid et al., 2008). However, there is no necessary reason for the two to align. In fact, in this chapter I describe

how staffers may succeed in being politically active, while at the same time contributing to their clients' political passivity.

Based on 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork at *Safe*, a nonprofit prison reentry service provider, I describe the dual political role of the organization. Through their efforts, staffers engaged in political activism while at the same time contributing to their clients' political passivity. Political activities at *Safe* were confined to acts of "surrogate advocacy" by staffers on behalf of their clients. Clients were kept out of public activities and urged to stay away from their old community and family, while they worked on their individual rehabilitation. They were encouraged to accept, for what is, and avoid rather than address, the judiciary system. Their incarceration was understood to be the result of a host of factors outside of their direct control, whereas their future was presented as something of their own making. The resulting stress on personal responsibility solidified their disengagement from politics and community life. This puts the purported trade-off between "social service" and "social change" (Kivel, 2017) in a different light; whereas staffers engage in both, the nature of the social service provided to clients may inadvertently suppress social change.

The next session reviews the relevant literature and makes clear how this chapter aims to push forward scholarship on the topic. I then describe my field work setting and analytical strategy, before turning to the presentation of findings.

BACKGROUND

The rise of the nonprofit sector has been endorsed by conservatives and liberals alike as the formation of "mediating structures" between citizens and government: the vessels through which citizens participate in the democratic process (Berger & Neuhaus, 1977). Such a view expresses nonprofit organizations as the cornerstone of democracy; the birthplace of collective action and organizational origin of social movements. President George Bush in 1988 called upon nonprofits – "a 1000 point of light" – to play their role in addressing the country's social problems (Smith & Lipsky, 1993, pp. 3–4). Former President's *Clinton Global Initiative* similarly sees a crucial role for nonprofit organizations in solving problems ranging from climate change and global health to economic stability, and poverty alleviation.

Academics too have written favorably about nonprofit organizations. Putnam's and other scholars' work on voluntary participation and democracy is the modern exponent of a line of research dating back to Alexis de Tocqueville's (1835) study of democracy in America: voluntary associations are deemed to contribute to political engagement (Boli & Thomas, 1997; Putnam, 1995, 2000) and political efficacy (Joslyn & Cigler, 2001; Verba et al., 1995).[1] Piven and Cloward (1988, p. 87) ascribe to nonprofits involved in welfare services the power to organize citizens, to "promote new identities and solidarities," and to "make possible collective political action."

More recently however nonprofits have come under scrutiny. McKnight's *Careless Society* (1995) presents an especially critical perspective, following the "crowding out" hypothesis (Etzioni, 1995; Milward, 1994; Offe, 1984): nonprofits have weakened citizens' resilience and have eroded community organization – "professionals cut through the social fabric of community and sow clienthood where citizenship once grew" (McKnight, 1995, p. 10). Wolch (1990) alerts us to another worrying process by presenting the concept of a "shadow state," highlighting the fact that nonprofits provide support services under the purview of state control. She argues that the dependence on government support has shackled nonprofit organizations' potential to create progressive political change. The authors of *The Revolution Will Not Be Funded* (2017) take the scrutiny a step further, drawing on and extending Piven and Cloward's (1993) analysis of social programs contracting and expanding with the economic tide to keep low-income workers sufficiently motivated to work and insufficiently motivated to engage in (revolutionary) political action. With the devolution and privatization of welfare and support services, they argue, nonprofits have come to constitute a *nonprofit industrial complex*, "keeping in place the status quos of state-sponsored and supported forms of inequality and disenfranchisement" (INCITE!, 2017, p. xvi). As Kivel (2017, p. 130) succinctly puts it, nonprofits increasingly must choose between "social service or social change."

There are three mechanisms through which nonprofits' dependence on government limits their potential for social change. First, government-funded nonprofits may avoid dissent so as not to jeopardize their funding (Piven & Cloward, 1977; Schmid et al., 2008; Wolch, 1990). Second, while government contracts provide nonprofits with considerable resources, the management of the contracted services is complex, time consuming, and precarious: annual budget cycles create yearly rounds of uncertainty, as do different, changing, and sometimes conflicting funding and service regulations imposed by different government agencies. Consequently, the dependency on government support has caused some nonprofits to become less effective in assisting their clientele (Bernstein, 1991). The third mechanism through which the political character of nonprofit organizations may be suppressed is through the complex legal environment an organization enters once it receives government funding, the consequence of which is "enhanced caution about political activity …" (Chaves et al., 2004, p. 298).

Other scholars have suggested mechanisms through which government funding may instead bolster the political activities of nonprofits. First, it is in the nonprofit organizations' financial self-interest to find political support for its activities for such ensures the organization's continued existence. Dependent as they are on government funding, it is in the interest especially of these nonprofits to lobby for government policies that support their clients, for such policies create a better funding environment for the organization (Marwell, 2004; Mosley, 2010, 2011). Second, dependency may work both ways: given a limited number of nonprofit organizations, and taken that expertise is concentrated in such organizations, government is dependent on nonprofits for providing the services it contracts out. Government-funded nonprofits may leverage the government's

dependence on them to bolster their political claims, which gives such organizations more reason to engage in political activities than nonprofits not funded by government (Bernstein, 1991; Milward, 1994, p. 75).

Perhaps the most rigorous empirical assessment of these arguments to date is Chaves, Stephens, and Galaskiewicz's (2004) study which finds that government-funded nonprofits are as active politically as nonprofits without government funding – or more, depending on which measures of political activity one considers. Studies since have found evidence supporting Chaves, Stephens and Galaskiewicz's findings (Donaldson, 2007; Leech, 2006; Mosley, 2010, 2011), while others have found evidence to suggest that government funding suppresses the political activities of nonprofits (Child & Gronbjerg, 2007, p. 273; Schmid et al., 2008).

Despite the laudable variety of setting and data sources explored, none of these studies has studied the receiving end of the services provided: the clients of the nonprofit organization. This chapter contributes to understanding the political role of nonprofits by stepping inside the organization. I argue that the treatment clients receive from nonprofits is much richer than the services received as such: in dealing with, and becoming dependent on a nonprofit organization, clients are confronted also with a particular service approach or "organizational logic" (Binder, 2007). Their interaction with staff members is embedded in this particular organizational approach: in receiving services, clients receive also their service provider's diagnosis of their problems, and a prescription for a course of action (Mijs, 2016a). It is here rather than in the activities it employs that the organization plays its part in shaping clients' civic lives. This chapter aims to get a grasp of the full extent of the sea change from government provision to the "contracting regime" under which "the welfare state has been extended through thousands of nonprofit providers" (Smith & Lipsky, 1993, p. 98), by zooming in on what goes on between staff and clients within the nonprofit organization.

CASE AND METHODS

My study builds on ethnographic research at *Safe*, which is a 501(c)3 nonprofit, tax-exempt corporation, in the Northeast, that provides direct support services to men and women released from prison. *Safe* was founded in the 1980s by Sarah Miller who still serves as its director.[2] The organization is funded by local, state, and federal government, and employs a racially diverse staff of 35 who see between 1,300 and 1,600 clients annually. About 85% of its clients are male, four out of ten are African American, six out of ten are white, a fifth of which is Hispanic. The demographic composition of *Safe's* client base is virtually identical to that of the national population of released prisoners (Travis et al., 2001, p. 6).

Safe is a major hub of government programs: it provides services through 12 such programs, ranging from a city-funded job-training program to Federal Department of Labor programs, and state-sponsored substance abuse and health services for persons living with HIV. Government funding is either provided through *Safe* to clients, or pays for staff members to provide counseling, support

groups, and individual case management. The floor on which *Safe* is housed has a drop-in center where clients can spend their day (8.00 a.m.–8.30 p.m.), watch television, listen to music, and where they have access to a phone, to computers with Internet access, and to free lunch and coffee.

Safe constitutes a particularly suitable theoretical case to understand the experience of persons receiving direct support services from a nonprofit organization. Formerly incarcerated persons have to undergo a radical change of setting, and are dependent to such extent, that here we can expect the impact of the nonprofit organization to be particularly visible. Andrews and Edwards' (2004) review of the literature on advocacy organizations in the US political process highlights that advocacy, if more broadly defined than lobbying activities, "is common across nonprofit organizations" with a 501(c)3 tax code (Andrews & Edwards, 2004, p. 484). Indeed, Child and Gronberg's (2007) quantitative study of organizational characteristics and political activities found among those organizations most active in political advocacy those which, like *Safe*, represent racial and ethnic minorities, and persons with an HIV infection. The fact that the organization has been around for more than three decades, and that it asks a long-term commitment from its clients, further adds to the factors associated with higher political activity (Child & Gronbjerg, 2007). That said, the case of *Safe* translates well to other nonprofit organizations such as those providing housing and employment services, healthcare and mental care – in fact, *Safe* is located in a building complex that houses all such organizations. These organizations share many of their clients, and staff members regularly work together with those of other organizations.

The data for this study were collected in 12 months of fieldwork at *Safe* in 2011 and 2012. I spent between 12 and 20 hours at the organization, every week, for a period of 46 weeks, in addition to six fulltime weeks over the summer. I gained access to the organization through a meeting with the founder and director, Sarah. I told her of my interest in mass incarceration in the United States and the role of nonprofit reentry organizations where, in other countries, the state provides. I explained that I would like to learn how her organization works; observe how staff members interact with clients, interview staff, talk to clients, and participate in programming where possible. The day after our meeting, I received an e-mail from Sarah saying that she had talked it over with her staff and that she thought it would be "wonderful" for me to carry out my research. From that moment on, I could come and go as I pleased.

I draw on three types of data in order to combine talk and observation. First and foremost, I draw on observations: spending long days in the drop-in center, having coffee, lunch, and conversation, allowed me to hear people's stories and observe conversations and interactions between clients, as well as those between them and staff members. Second, I draw on my own participation in weekly mandatory in-take with new clients, group services to clients such as "emotional management" and "transitioning to work," and I sat in on therapeutic and peer support groups throughout my research. Third, I conducted a series of formal, sit-down, tape-recorded interviews with 20 clients and with the 15 staffers and 5 alumni volunteers who run the group services (alumni are clients who have

"graduated" from the program by having participated in two or more groups for a set period of time).

In interactions with clients and staffers, I stood out as a foreigner by appearance and my use of the English language, which, especially in early encounters was a frequent topic of conversation. To both clients and staffers, I introduced myself as a graduate student trying to better understand the reentry process from their perspective. Whereas some staffers, at first, may have worked a little harder to make a good impression and some clients may have been wary of my attention, over time I became an accepted and, often, welcomed presence in group services and the drop-in center.[3] At times, I deliberate drew on my outsider status as a foreigner to ask people to explain things they may have expected someone born and raised in the United States to know already.

This is an organizational ethnography; my main objective was to understand how the organization works, how staffers combined social service and social change, how they developed and deployed their approach to programming in group services and interactions with clients, and what it was like to be a client at *Safe* (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Neyland, 2008; Van Maanen, 1998). I entered the field armed with sensitizing concepts (Blumer, 1954) but without a deductive theory or delineated set of expectations. Instead, I operated with a working definition of civic and political participation as those activities, such as petitioning, picketing, voter registration, lobbying, advocacy, and the production and dissemination of publications, that were intended to advance the organizations' political goals (Chaves et al., 2004, p. 302; Coddou, 2016; Noy, 2009, pp. 227–228). I looked for instances of politicization in interactions between clients and staffers (1) where the latter involved the former in political action or (2) where staffers provided clients with tools or encouragement to (a) know their rights, (b) recognize and act on violations of those rights, (c) think and speak about societal and political reform, or (d) participate in the US political process, however broadly defined (Bellah, 1985; Eliasoph, 1996, p. 269; Lichterman, 1996).

I took a flexible coding approach to organize and analyze my data (Deterding & Waters, 2021). I tape-recorded and transcribed all formal interviews. On other conversations and observations, I took field notes which I then expanded from memory, and systematically organized, off site. During the 52-weeks fieldwork period, I made time each week for analyzing my notes to make tentative observations and formulate new questions. I then explored those questions in the weeks following and revised my observations according to what I learned. I left the field when my analysis had reached theoretical saturation, meaning I had reached a point of sufficient confidence in my observations and no unanswered questions to explore.

FINDINGS

I organize the presentation of findings around four themes. The first two sections describe *Safe's* approach to reentry: its emphasis on personal reform, taking

responsibility, and the avoidance of risk factors. I describe how staffers' treatment of clients is rooted in a particular road to reentry which leads them away from community life and politics. The sections that follow the first two describe the political activism of staffers and contrast staffers' political activism to clients' political passivity.

When I present descriptions, these are taken from my field notes. Text in quotes draws directly from my notes or is transcribed from an audio-recording in the case of an interview.

A "Selfish Program"

The process of becoming a client at *Safe* is best described as embarking on a "road to reentry," where advancement requires taking "positive steps," and avoiding the risk factors that may lure a person off the path (Mijs, 2016a). Advancement on the road to reentry is based on the idea that by making the right choices clients can stay out of jail. Clients learned about the positive steps required of them and of the risks to be avoided, starting with mandatory orientation on the day they come in and followed through in one-on-one meetings with a case manager, in informal interactions in the common room, and in the various group services they participate in.

Throughout my fieldwork, I was a regular participant in one of such group services – a program which focused on the transition from prison to work, funded through a Department of Labor grant. Participants received help building their curriculum vitae and learned how to talk about their prison record in a job interview. If time allowed for it, a staffer would do a mock interview to help prepare for the actual event, and sometimes the grant was used to pay for shoes or a suit.

Most of clients' time however would go into participating in four mandatory group sessions and additional one-on-one meetings with a mentor, Deval Martin. Deval is 53 years old, although his tall and muscular body, clean-shaven head and generous smile easily make him look 10 years younger. He has served 12 years in prison, the last two of which he chose to spend in prison rather than going on parole (as he explained in one session: "You may think I is crazy, but I just wasn't ready"). The four sessions can be completed within the month, but clients would often miss a session, in which case Deval made sure they would come back and retake that session. This means clients would often sit through almost two cycles of the program, sometimes more, before graduating.

In Deval's words, the program consists of "four sessions that talk about the individual and about keeping the focus on yourself." Sessions took place in groups of 8 to 15 people, gathered around a large table. Through individual exercises and group discussion, clients were invited to talk about differences between life in prison and life outside; set realistic goals for themselves, in the short-run and in the long term; think about family and social relationships and identify "major life stressors."

In one exercise, participants were asked to, individually, identify and prioritize "major life stressors." Having allowed us about five minutes to write some things

down, Deval poses the question: "What makes you stressed?" Joey is first to answer: "If there were any *one* thing… Women!" Everyone laughs. Even the two female participants join in, nodding expressively with loud hums of approval. When everyone has stopped laughing, one of the two women, Susan, says: "My girls," referring to her grandchildren. She recounts a moment when she nearly threw them out of the kitchen because she was annoyed with their constant talking. Susan: "I have to step back and say I'm irritated. It's not you." After a couple more contributions by participants, Deval wraps up: "We can stress over things we have no control over. But stress can also make it seem we lost control over the things we *do* have control over. Remember," he says, "you is responsible for you," using his right fist to knock on the table with each utterance of the word You.

Another exercise Deval made us do involves a sheet of paper with six concentric circles printed in the middle of the page. The figure is accompanied by the following prompt: "List the people, places and things on their level of importance to you. The center of the circle is the most important to you and the outer layer is the least important to you." This time Deval speaks up within a minute of setting us on the assignment: "When I look at this [in your file], I want to see you in number 1 or at least somewhere in the circle. If I don't see you in there, it's a reason for concern." After a moment he repeats, "If you are not in the center, it's wrong." Five minutes later, Deval is selectively pointing to participants to share with the group who they included in their circles, and whom they put where. "Me" made it into most people's center, except for Angel who put "God" in the middle, which Deval accepted. At the end of the session, Deval takes a moment to reflect on the exercise, and on the program:

> This is a selfish program. In life we have to become selfish to come to a certain place. We *have* to. If we didn't, it may become our downfall. It's dangerous: we can easily lose ourselves in other people. Today was all about that. The whole point is to get you in the circle.

In these and other settings, clients at *Safe* learned that they need to take responsibility for their actions, to focus on themselves, stay away from "risk factors," and to accept that what comes next is a consequence of their decisions. The attitude that *Safe* requires of its clients is expressed as follows by one of its alumni, Cesar: "You gotta crawl before you walk. People complain that there are no jobs, no opportunities, but it's there for you if you want it."

Deval's words on the importance of choice and responsibility are mirrored in the physical make-up of the *Safe* drop-in center. Stepping out of the elevator, the first thing you see is a banner displaying in bright colors the words "positive change." Posters on walls throughout the building feature information and advice. One poster, which is prominently displayed in the drop-in center, states "Life's full of choices, choose carefully." The stress on individual choice is a key part of *Safe*'s motto – "reintegration by rehabilitation." It serves to stress clients' responsibility to choose wisely; to take charge of their lives and to live it responsibly.

The positive choices that clients need to make, find their expression also in the negatives they need to avoid. As I will illustrate in the next section, staffers

painted a bleak picture of the dangers that lurk on the street and in the criminal justice system more broadly. They urged clients to stay away from their old communities, habits and friends, and from those things that may constitute a risk of recidivism. It is the resulting stress on personal responsibility, and the focus on clients' personal reform that sows the seeds of their disengagement from community and civic life.

Notably absent in Deval's group services and *Safe*'s programming more generally were considerations of race. Whereas both staffers and clients at *Safe* constitute racially diverse groups (Deval, for instance, is black), on no occasion during my 12 months of field work did I observe a client bringing up an instance of racism or racial inequality, nor did staffers acknowledge the racialized barriers that some clients will face in their road to reentry. This null finding is especially striking given that my field work took place during Obama's first term, leading up to the 2012 presidential election, during which race was a salient topic of public conversation. The only instances in which race was a topic of conversation at *Safe* were in abstract references to clients' past – never in the present or when looking at the road ahead. Clients' incarceration is understood to be the result of a host of factors outside of their direct control, whereas their future is presented to them as something entirely of their own making. Simply put, *Safe*'s road to reentry left no room for race.

"Make the Choice to Stay out"

I am in orientation and Bill Williams is talking. Bill is a 60-something year old African American man, with a short and sturdy built, and salt-and-pepper hair and beard. He has a radiating kindness, soft-spokenness, and at the same time very seasoned look. Bill leads the weekly two-hour mandatory orientation for new clients. There are five men and a woman present today when Bill starts off the meeting:

> When I was a kid, people used to say "Stay out of jail – don't become a number." Recognize that? Know what I mean? Nowadays this has changed somewhat. Now prisoners are a *co-mo-di-ty*. A product. Merchandise. Because prisons are private corporations. Now there aren't that many of them here. But go look in the Southwest! Here, there's one I know of [Bill carefully pronounces the name]. I've heard it's owned by lawyers and judges. And they got stinkin' rich of it. I'm not *saying* it goes down like this, but it *might* go like this: a case comes up before the judge and the judge knows: if he sends you to jail, that'll pay for his holidays; put his kid through college. [Bill takes a long pause and looks around the room.] Reason I'm telling you this is that you can *choose* not to be a commodity. The criminal justice system – where they pick you up and lock you up – is a *business*. What I'm telling you is, don't be part of the system. Make the choice to stay out.

The system can refer to a number of different things. As used by Bill here, the term refers to the criminal justice system. In other usages by staffers, it refers specifically to the public prosecutor's office, to prison, to parole officers, or to the legal system as a whole. Stories of mistreatment, poor legal representation, and terrible parole officers abound. The general opinion is voiced by one client who

told me: "the problem with parole is that they are interested only in keeping society safe. They don't care about you."

Safe's relationship with parole officers is often tense. In a staff meeting, one day, a case manager brings the news that a particularly unfriendly parole officer has received a promotion. A cheer goes up in the room as staffers realize this means he will not be working with their clients anymore. The name of another parole officer comes up, and a case manager asks in a serious tone never to mention her name to this person, nor *Safe's* for that matter: "[The parole officer] really got it in for us. She will tell people outright: 'you're not going there [to *Safe*] – they're horrible.'" Some of her colleagues recognize the name and chime in, while others take note, "Yeah, she's a real bitch. She's rough." Bill looks surprised and calls out, laughing, "what did y'all do to her?" The case manager who brought up the point recalls an event earlier that year: "[The parole officer] came up here looking for her client. So I see her at reception and I go get Sarah [*Safe's* director]. Sarah walks in a moment later – and she tore her a new one before kicking her out, saying she was trespassing, and that she wants *Safe* to be a safe place for clients." Bill laughs upon hearing the story, as does the rest of the room.

Perhaps the strongest case for mistreatment by the system is that of Lionel, a client at *Safe*. Lionel spent over 20 years in prison. He was incarcerated for first degree murder in the 1980s and was released a few years ago when his case was overturned. I asked him whether he considered suing the state, and whether it is important for him to redeem himself. He says "what's important to me is to be out of prison."

Lionel's is an extreme case. His response however was typical for the attitude *Safe* cultivated. Clients were rarely encouraged to engage with mistreatment or injustice. In all its programming, the focus is on individual reform, not on addressing the injustices experienced by clients. Clients were told that finding employment is their number one priority. This focus on employment is in line with the pursuit of what criminologists refer to as an important turning point in the lives of formerly incarcerated persons, and one of the major factors preventing recidivism (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Sampson & Laub, 1993). *Safe's* road to reentry required both employment and making positive changes – as I overheard a case manager say to her client: "Let us worry about getting you housing and employment. You work on yourself." This focus on personal reform is however not to suggest that *Safe* is an apolitical organization – it is to indicate the distinct roles which staffers and clients each played in *Safe's* political activities. To this topic I now turn.

Surrogate Representation

One afternoon in the fall a group of *Safe* staffers gathered at the State House to protest legislation that would introduce a "three strikes law" barring parole for three-time violent offenders. When I walked into the common room the morning of the organized protest, I found three case managers sitting at a table, making protest signs. All three are drawing with colored markers on pieces of cardboard. One sign is done. The others are works in progress, but it is easy to make out

what they will look like. There is one with the words "three strikes" in a red circle and a strikethrough. One says "rehabilitate, don't …" Rob, a client who is seated at the other end of the table, suggests "jail," but the staffer making the sign says she can make "incarcerate" fit. The third sign simply says "Stop three strikes." As they work on their signs the three staffers chat about nothing in particular. Rob while seated at the same table does not participate, and the women make no effort to include him – his remark is ignored. Rob however wants to talk.

Rob is in his early 30s, bald, wearing sneakers, shorts, and a sleeveless shirt that reveals tattoos on both arms and one in his neck. He seems worked up over something and starts to speak to me as I am sitting down. Rob recounts how he lost his job earlier this week after a fight at work. The fight was triggered by the fact that he picked up his phone while working. His colleague and he "got verbal," and Rob went outside to blow off some steam. There he met another colleague, who he told that he was "ready to smash the kid's head in." The next day when Rob arrived at work, his supervisor called him in to reprimand him for picking up his phone at work. At that point Rob realized that a colleague must have told on him. He said so to his supervisor ("he ratted me out!"), in response to which his supervisor brought up the threat Rob made. In the end, the supervisor told Rob to look for employment elsewhere.

As Rob tells his story the staffers continue working on their signs. When he is finished, one of the three staffers asks him, without looking up from coloring her cardboard sign, "So, did you learn anything from this situation?" To Rob, the moral of the story is that he was fired for picking up his phone to be there for his young daughter, who was home alone – and because of the colleague who told on him. The staffer asks him how old he is, and says he must have met more people like that in his life, suggesting that it is *how* you deal with people. He says he never had to work with bad people before. She does not press the point.

That morning, after they had made protest signs, staffers marched to the State House, vocalized *Safe*'s reform agenda, and then continued their working day. As such, whereas the organization has a political identity, and the staff members are free in expressing theirs, it is only by surrogate that clients themselves participate in politics. In the 12 months I spent at the organization, I never saw or heard a staffer try to politicize a client – e.g., no one encouraged Rob to make a case for unfair treatment by his boss. In fact, the organization's emphasis on choice often served to delegitimize what may have been a legitimate (political) concern or complaint.

In one-on-one interviews, staffers expressed to me that they felt a tension between providing a safe environment for their clients, and them being politically involved. Staffers invited clients to talk about injustices they suffered in the past, and they acknowledged these stories, sometimes volunteering accounts of their own. While staffers' ideal would be for clients to get involved, their immediate focus is on clients' personal reform; encouraging clients to accept these injustices for what they are in an effort to stay out of the system. Clients' accounts served mainly to inspire staffers' advocacy. Staffers took it upon themselves to act as a voice for their clients, through their newsletter, picketing events, and in their cooperation with other advocacy organizations. The organization, then, has a

political voice, whereas clients are politically passive. Staffers at *Safe* advocated for their clients, both on a personal level and in striving for political reform where they think their clients would benefit. Politics however was considered to be the domain of staffers rather than clients. Staffers recognized this as a tension between political empowerment and personal development, which they did not know how to resolve.

Staffers' Politics

Part of *Safe's* approach to politics is conditioned by the complex relationship between their organization and the other organizations they have to deal with, in particular the penal institutions they are dependent on for access to clients who are about to be released from penitentiary.[4] Sarah, the organization's director, described to me the fine balance they have to seek in addressing concerns that they have with the penal system, on the one hand, and making sure they get the cooperation they need to do their work, on the other. One day she put it to me especially candidly: "You don't go running to the newspaper every time you see something terrible." At the same time, *Safe*'s origin is as an activist organization working toward prison reform and that mission continues to be an important part of its identity – and, as we will see below, of several staffers' motivation to work at the organization.

Some staffers at *Safe* seemed ambivalent about politics; they were uncomfortable or just not interested in talking politics. Some had become disillusioned about political change. Consider for instance the following group meeting, a day after the first televised presidential debate. Lunch is served and a dozen clients sit down at the large table in the common room, eating. This is the "reflections" group, led by Hank, where everyone takes a turn to share with the rest how they are doing. After the first client has spoken for a couple of minutes, Hank asks the next person, Clint, what is on his mind. The first thing Clint says is: "That was an interesting debate yesterday!" Hank responds by saying: "Yeah? Okay." and without a pause he moves on to the next person. None of the other clients brings up the debate again, nor does Hank.

Later that day I asked Hank about what political role, if any, *Safe* has to play. Hank:

> I think we should do more. I think the disenfranchised feel like I have. I put down a box here so they fill out the registration form to vote for the presidential elections. But I have to be honest with them at some point that I voted for Ronald Reagan when I was 18. Since then I haven't voted 'cause I've not trusted the whole…. – I made the excuse that I don't trust the fucking politics. My motto has been: not understanding it, so stay away from it.

This seems to be exactly the message that Hank impresses on clients. Note also that a large group of clients at *Safe* have been disenfranchised by virtue of their criminal record. When I asked Hank about it, he shrugged.

Other staff members however expressed to me a nonambivalent political commitment. Samantha told me that she came to work for *Safe* because of the political aspect to its activities. Samantha:

> The work I was doing before, even though I really loved it, it didn't have the same recognition behind it that I feel that *Safe* has. There wasn't a politicized side of it, and I felt that this work was something that I felt connected to beyond just the work, but larger, I guess, implications of the work. [Moreover], we don't work with corrections exactly. We work alongside of them in some ways but we're not an arm of the correctional institution. We're working for the people who have come through that system. So it feels subversive to see a problem in the way that the correctional system functions, and trying to support folks and divert people away from that system. That feels really important to me personally – like, it's my politics.

In an interview with one of her colleagues, Laura, I got a similar response to my question about political advocacy.

> I think we do in some ways, I mean on local levels, we rally for funding. We talk to the people who have access to funders. We try to tell the stories how our clients tell their stories. So that people have an idea of the need. So in those ways, potentially, we can effect change.

The excerpts are to show that it is often despite rather than because of staffers' conscious political commitment that clients' political and community involvement may come to be pushed to the background. This follows from the organization's approach to reentry which stresses clients' personal rehabilitation, emphasizes individual responsibility, and portrays communities as a risk factor to be avoided.

DISCUSSION

Becoming a client at *Safe* entails acceptance of personal responsibility; to take charge of one's life, and to make "healthy, productive choices." This narrative of taking charge can be experienced by the client as a source of strength (Maruna, 2001) or as a burden (Newman, 1999, p. 233; Wacquant, 2010). The fact is that most clients will face sizable obstacles finding housing, employment and entering new relationships as they are branded by the stigma of criminal conviction (Pager, 2007; Western, 2018). Adding to their already vulnerable position, most clients have little education, limited work experience, and many suffer from illness or struggle with addiction (Harding & Morenoff, 2014; Travis et al., 2001). In this light, the stress on clients' agency fuels a broader, perhaps distinctly American, narrative of individual responsibility (Mijs, 2016b; Newman, 1999; Wacquant, 2010) that shifts responsibility of failure and success to clients and away from the organization on whose help they rely.

Taking the organizations' road to reentry furthermore implies that clients find employment and accept the political reality ("the system") for what it is, avoiding injustices rather than voicing their concerns and engaging them politically. Given that mass incarceration in the United States is defined by racial inequality, discussions of race and racism were strikingly absent in group services I attended and client-staff interactions I observed. By not acknowledging race as a factor in clients' reentry, clients are led to believe that racialized police treatment, barriers to finding employment and other well-documented inequities will not obstruct their road to reentry. That, unfortunately, is not a realistic expectation (Pager,

2007; Travis et al., 2001; Western, 2018). Nor does it help men and women of color recognize racist treatment, find their way to support and recourse, and develop bonds of solidarity with others similarly affected. In fact, the omission of race from the organization's road to reentry may further promote clients' internalization of blame for society's problems which disproportionately befall racial minorities.

There is a tension in *Safe's* narrative of responsibility, of clients being in charge of their lives, and the perception of clients as vulnerable – unable to resist the bad influence of the old and familiar – and unable to really change things. Success at *Safe* is measured by clients' ability to avoid risk factors and to focus on taking positive steps on their individual road to reentry. The emphasis placed on personal reform and of avoiding the system, may lead to politically pacify clients: as they are told to avoid the (criminal justice) system, they are urged to accept the (unjust) political and economic reality for what it is. In fact, the more successful a client – employed, responsible – , the less of a political citizen – vocal, engaged – they are.

Much in line with Nina Eliasoph's (1996, 1997) research on volunteers, activists, and recreation groups in a West Coast suburb, it was striking how at *Safe*, for clients, politics was not a topic of discussion. Even when the opportunity arose, staffers took care to avoid "talking politics": they would move on to a different topic or stressed instead their clients' individual responsibilities. Eliasoph's research on civic volunteering suggests that such avoidance may foster hopelessness:

> So, the youth programs all just conducted projects with which no humane person could disagree – gathering mittens and cans of tuna for the poor, but not asking why there is hunger, for example – thus severing any connection between civic volunteering and political engagement, and tending to breed, paradoxically, hopelessness about finding any solutions beyond one mitten at a time. (Eliasoph, 2011, p. 12)

My research on *Safe* suggests that whereas the organization pursues a political agenda, and its staffers advocate on behalf of their clients, clients themselves are kept out of politics; they are political actors only by surrogate.

These findings need to be considered with some caveats in mind. This study has described the ways in which this nonprofit organization's staffers and their approach to reentry offers clients a definition of self (Maruna, 2001), shapes clients' repertoires for action, and suggests legitimate lines of action by framing these in terms of "good" and "bad" choices (Lamont & Small, 2008). It is one thing however to describe the organization's approach, and another to state that clients accept this and make it their own. I did not find evidence of the radical sort of "programming" or "trimming" of inmates or mental patients that Goffman (Goffman, 1961, p. 16) describes in his studies of the total institution. Rather, I acknowledge the ability of clients to accept, reject, or creatively play with the organizational language presented to them, as suggested by ethnographies in similar settings; Carr's (2010) study of an addiction treatment program calls it "flipping the script" as clients learn to perform prescribed ways of speaking.

A related issue concerns the necessary limits of my observation. Perhaps a different dynamic takes place in the private meetings between case managers and clients that I am unaware of. That said, I have observed client and staff interactions in various settings, ranging from talks over coffee to formal group settings and mandatory orientation. Also, I have talked to staff members on smoke breaks, or in the privacy of their offices, and asked about what they want to impress on clients, and I have witnessed the backstage discussions that take place at staff meetings. Nothing in these moments contradicts the general patterns I have described.

An additional reflection concerns the counterfactual scenario in which clients at *Safe* had *not* found their way to the organization or, instead, if the organization had focused less on individual reform and more on providing for clients' basic needs (health, housing, employment) and on (re)connecting clients to their communities rather than keeping them away from the people, places and things of their past.[5] It could be countered that clients, burdened by the trauma of incarceration and the challenges ahead, would have little time or energy for political engagement anyway (Miller, 2014, 2021). The point, however, is not that *Safe*'s approach to reentry failed to mobilize a clientele that is ready to jump into political action. My findings, rather, describe ways in which the organization and its staffers, despite the stated mission of prison reform, lead clients to internalize structural issues in American society, compounding their feeling of powerlessness, and doing more to politically pacify than to help them find their voice. As such, at *Safe* the tension between "social service" and "social change," as described in the social movement literature (Kivel, 2017; McKnight, 1995; Wolch, 1990), takes on a very particular form: whereas staffers do not make a conscious choice for either – in fact, they work hard to do both, the real tension is between the organization's stated mission and the effect of its programming on the formerly incarcerated men and women who become *Safe's* clients. While staffers politically advocate for their clients, its road to reentry leads clients around rather than through their communities, primes them to "be selfish," to individualize responsibility, and to avoid rather than confront injustices.

A final important question is to what extent my findings about the dual political role of *Safe* can inform the study of the political role of other government-funded nonprofit organizations. The treatment of its clients, especially the emphasis that this organization placed on avoidance, is evidently based on the particularly vulnerable nature of their client base – men and women returning from years of imprisonment, facing formidable barriers to reentry and, statistically speaking, a high likelihood of re-incarceration. That said, many nonprofit service providers deal with vulnerable populations (or people perceived as such), including but not limited to single mothers (Mohr, 1994), (female) juveniles (Feld, 1999; Haney, 1996), low-educated job seekers (Smith, 2010), and the homeless (Mosley, 2012). Research suggests that in dealing with any of these groups of people, organizations often take a paternalist stance that resembles that of *Safe* described in this chapter (Allard & Small, 2013; Bruch et al., 2010;

Castellano, 2011; Mohr, 1994; Soss et al., 2011). It is therefore not unlikely that such organizations may play a similar political role in politically pacifying their clients.

CONCLUSION

The research presented in this chapter suggests that the debate over the relationship between government funding and the political activities of nonprofits may be advanced by zooming in on what goes on between staff and clients inside the nonprofit organization. An analysis at the level of the organization paints a very different picture than the in-depth look at staff-client interactions offered in this chapter. In line with previous research, I find that the government-funded nonprofit I studied engaged in political activities in surrogate representation of its clients (Chaves et al., 2004; Donaldson, 2007; Leech, 2006; Mosley, 2010, 2011). At the same time, however, the organization discouraged its clients to be politically engaged by impressing on them the importance of avoiding people, places, and things belonging to their past lives, leaving injustices for what they are, and, in particular, avoiding to talk politics even when confronted by injustice. This study suggests that measures of nonprofit's political activities may miss the full political impact that nonprofits have on clients' lives, such as the potential political pacification here described.

To put these findings in perspective, I start with the fact that social support services have come to be provided, in majority, not by government to its citizens, or informally by family members, friends, neighbors, or community organizations, but by nonprofit organizations contracted to provide welfare services. This study suggests that as nonprofits formalize their organization vis-à-vis the government which funds them and the persons they serve, the latter become more than recipients – they become clients (Smith & Lipsky, 1993, p. 118). As such, citizens seeking support become embedded in the organizations they are dependent on and are affected by the treatment they receive from staffers, and by the service model that such organizations operate on. Clients at the organization I studied were led on a "road to reentry" characterized by three tenets.

First, clients were made to understand that their future depends on the choices they make. Staffers told clients to "work on the self," by learning how to make better life choices. Second, in learning how to make better choices, clients were pressed to avoid their old neighborhood, friends, as well as their family – as one client put it, "I need to take care of myself before I can take care of another." In addition to avoiding specific people, places, and things, clients were told to be wary of the "the system," which variably referred to the criminal justice system as a whole or to lawyers and parole officers in particular. Third, staff members urged clients to avoid injustice in social life, on the work floor, and by the system; and to accept the economic, legal, and political reality for what it is.

In stressing clients' individuality, the organization (re)produced a "culture of political avoidance" (Eliasoph, 1996). Formerly incarcerated men and women receiving services at the organization were primed to put their own interest first:

to "be selfish," cut ties to their communities, and to focus on their individual rehabilitation. Avoiding recidivism came to be clients' main concern, as political citizenship and civic participation were pushed to the background.

This process has a broader political implication which puts the current state of the contemporary anti-prison movement in a new light. Whereas a self-understanding of being able and responsible may be a source of optimism and strength for some formerly incarcerated men and women, it draws attention away from the structural problems underlying the American prison boom and its burdens, which disproportionally befall racial minorities, economically disadvantaged members of society, and the neighborhoods they live in. The organizational language of individual responsibility transforms those structural problems into personal troubles, thereby legitimating and solidifying penal practices by giving them the strongest of legitimations: the formerly incarcerated taking full ownership of their own punishment.

NOTES

1. The discussion of the political role of nonprofits suffers from some terminological confusion. As Eliasoph (2009) argues, the political activities organized top-down by nonprofits are often conflated with terms such as "civic associations," "volunteers," and "participatory democracy" (see also Lichterman and Eliasoph (2014). The differences become explicit in Putnam's distinction between "classic secondary [voluntary] associations" and the rise of "tertiary organizations," which include, in Putnam's words, "everything from Oxfam and the Metropolitan Museum of Art to the Ford Foundation and the Mayo Clinic. In other words, although most secondary associations are nonprofits, most nonprofit agencies are not secondary associations" (Putnam, 1995, p. 71). To Putnam, tertiary sector membership and involvement offers no remedy to the erosion of community ties in America, for the latter embodies no social ties, and does not contribute to political participation.

2. Throughout this chapter, persons' names are replaced by pseudonyms, as is the name of the organization.

3. The fact that I attended a well-known university also generated some interest and, probably, respect. It also meant that at times I was challenged – in good spirits – to show my worth, as in an impromptu quiz from a client with an especially keen knowledge of geography (which I passed) and in a game of chess with another client, who relished in defeating me in a game that was witnessed and applauded by all in attendance. I believe that my relationship with clients strengthened through these moments.

4. Case managers impressed on me the importance of starting work with clients "pre-release" so as to best prepare them for life outside of prison, and allow them to "hit the floor running."

5. I thank an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

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