

ABSTRACT

“Now What?”: Understanding the Organizational Exit Experience of Nonprofit Board Members

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Organizational exit is an inevitable phenomenon that organization members experience. However, extant research disproportionately focuses on the onboarding process, which overshadows the exit process. Understanding exit is consequential since individuals enter new organizations with their previous experiences to guide them. Knowledge about organizational exit is vital for nonprofit board development since a detrimental board exit can cause significant loss (e.g., donation, community network) for the nonprofit. Consequently, this study examined how nonprofit board members made sense of their exit from the board. Models of planned organizational exit and sensemaking were used as guiding theoretical frameworks. This study used one-on-one, semi-structured interviews to gain insight into the board experience. Analysis revealed that three temporally related themes emerged: *unceremonious exit*, *diverging paths after board service*, and *continuing service elsewhere*. These findings contribute to the scholarly literature by extending organizational exit models and illuminating the identity work that exited board members experience.

"Now What?": Understanding the Organizational Exit Experience of Nonprofit Board Members

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DEDICATION

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

An organizational exit is an inevitable event for every member of an organization. The timing and reasons for exit may vary, but everyone must eventually leave their post. Although exit is universally experienced, extant research disproportionately focuses on onboarding or the early stages of socialization (Dailey, 2016; Jablin, 2001; Kramer, 2010). Exit is greatly overshadowed by onboarding because it is a process that is often rushed by both the individual and the organization. That is, leavers may need to transition to a new role or opportunity quickly, and organizations (stayers) shift efforts to hurriedly filling a vacancy.

Even though the exit stage can occur rapidly, it is still important to investigate how people understand the exit process because they will take their past experiences with them to their new organizations. Understanding past encounters are paramount since people do not enter new organizations as blank slates. Every individual who joins a new organization possesses previous experiences used as guides when navigating new spheres. As for the organization left behind, recognizing the impact of the past members' exits can illustrate future improvements that the organization may need to make. The exit stage is a quintessential time to spur sensemaking, which is the process of "assigning meaning to experiences" (Kramer, 2017, p. 2126). Sensemaking is essential for equivocal events since people must pick which interpretation to commit to out of the many possible choices. The essence of sensemaking is to "create a reality that represents the lived

experiences of individuals,” but these realities do not conform to one objective reality (Kramer, 2017, p. 2126). Sensemaking illustrates that the organizational exit may create one view of reality for the leaver and a different reality for those who stayed.

Research to date is mainly centered on organizational exit in the context of paid employment, which raises questions about the transferability of these findings to other types of work, such as volunteering. Namely, employment exit tends to be more permanent than the work contract examined in the present study: the volunteer work of board service in nonprofit organizations. For instance, if a person resigns or becomes terminated from a paid position, said person would likely seek employment from a different institution. However, this pattern is not as applicable to volunteers who have the freedom to weave in and out of nonprofit organizations (NPOs) (Kramer, 2010; 2011). Research has examined volunteer work and exit, but most of the studies concentrate on the typical volunteers who are not rigidly bound to the organizations they serve. These volunteers’ centralization excludes more complex groups such as nonprofit board members who shoulder distinct roles and legal responsibilities.

The United States and most other nations legally require every incorporated nonprofit organization to formally establish a governing body made up of board members, volunteers “who are entrusted with and accountable for the leadership and governance of the organization” (Renz, 2010, p. 126). These governing bodies are referred to as the board of directors (BoD) or board of trustees, and they are legally accountable for not only leadership and governance but also the management of the nonprofit organization’s affairs (Aulgur, 2016; Bryce, 2017; Chait et al., 2005; Renz,

2010; Widmer, 1993). Boards of directors are paramount since they confer legitimacy for nonprofit organizations (Chait et al., 2005).

The necessity of boards makes them a prevalent topic to study in the nonprofit sector. When boards are examined, practitioners typically limit their focus on the board's group dimension and overlook the individual members. Therefore, the articles that permeate the literature about boards of directors are prescriptive best practices (BoardSource, 2016; Chait et al., 2005; Renz, 2010; Widmer, 1993). Because individual board experiences are not considered, there is little empirical evidence about how board members make sense of their roles.

Like any individual that joins a new group or organization, board members must go through the socialization process. The first step of socialization for board members occurs when they are oriented by the NPO (or a third party) to ensure that they know the specific functions of their new role (BoardSource, n.d.). The literature about board orientation is abundant but repetitive because most articles echo the best practices outlined by BoardSource (n.d.). However, outside of orientation, the discussion about the rest of the board's socialization process, particularly organizational exit, is limited.

The examination of a board member's exit is necessary since exit often requires a "proactive letting go" and an engagement in exit activities that help prepare the way for organizational transition (Gothard & Austin, 2013, p. 272). Furthermore, there is a lack of appreciation for the nature of how exit influences the morale of those who remain (Ashforth, 2001). When immersed in the academic and nonprofit industry literature, there is sparse information on how board members made sense of their exits. Highly respected nonprofit industry websites such as BoardSource (BoardSource, n.d., 2016, 2017) and

National Council of Nonprofits (National Council of Nonprofits, 2015a, 2015b, 2017) tend only to discuss the best practices of board term limits, resignations, and exit interviews. Even though the discussion of these topics provides some insight into board exit features, they still omit individual board members' distinct experiences.

The board of directors is a staple of nonprofit organizations. Although the members of the board are regarded as volunteers, the board position is unique since it carries a significant amount of power and responsibility for such a perpetually short-termed membership arrangement. Understanding the exit of board members is valuable for nonprofit organizations since it is a fundamental and inescapable reality that is constantly faced (Miller-Stevens & Ward, 2019). Understanding organizational board exit is also consequential because it affects the exiting board member and the remaining individuals in the NPO. For instance, individuals subjected to a negative exit experience may decide to never join another NPO BoD for the rest of their lives. This outcome would be troubling because it wastes the accumulated knowledge about the board experience.

Arguably, the most detrimental exit outcome would be if the leaving board member considers the exit as a divorce from the NPO. At this point, the NPO is not only losing a board member but also losing financial (i.e., frequent monetary donations), social (i.e., community network), and physical (i.e., the ex-board member quits attending events or informal volunteering opportunities with the NPO) support. Consequently, the exit and loss of support force the NPO into a vicious cycle of dividing time and energy into the board's repopulation and finding additional avenues that will make up for the lost resources. Board repopulation takes a huge toll due to the long search for the perfect

candidate. Regrettably, some NPOs might have to settle with subpar board candidates that fill the seat so they can continue pursuing the mission. Given these possibilities, it is essential to understand the process and implications of board member exit.

To reiterate, the exit of board members is not permanent because past members can theoretically return to the NPO and serve another board term. However, the exit of a board member is also not highly fluid because board members are elected to their positions (Jaskyte, 2012). The election process disables leaving and an abrupt rejoining of the NPO BoD. Regardless of the permanence of the board member's exit, the act of leaving the board role does not prevent the past member and the NPO from further supporting each other.

The present study qualitatively explored how past NPO board members made sense of their organizational exit. The exploration employed one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with past board members to uncover the events and feelings encountered during the exit process. After qualitatively analyzing the interviews, three temporally related themes emerged: *unceremonious exit*, *diverging paths after board service*, and *continuing service elsewhere*. These themes contribute to the scholarly literature on socialization and volunteering.

Intersecting nonprofit board literature with socialization models and sensemaking theory can expand the scholarly and practical knowledge of understanding the experiences of individual board members. This study's results expanded and enriched the prescriptive texts that tend to clarify and codify conventional board governance practices. Since the board of directors' function is often laden with a legal obligation, it can be easy to forget that the members serving on the board are also people who have different life

duties and experiences. People are the lifeblood of any nonprofit organization and must therefore be cared for and understood (BoardSource, 2017). The lack of research about board members' experiences does past members a great disservice because they are then seen as expendable. This study provides a more humanized insight into board members and how they understand their reality.

The following chapter provides context about the nonprofit sector, an in-depth overview of the board of directors, and the advancement of socialization studies. Furthermore, it will also elucidate sensemaking - the guiding theory of the study. Chapter three describes the methodological approach of the study. Next, chapter four elucidates the three emergent themes. Finally, the last chapter addresses the scholarly implications, practical significance, limitations, and avenues for future investigations.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

The purpose of this literature review is to illuminate the connections between boards of directors and the research and theorizing on organizational socialization and sensemaking. Doing so sheds light on how and why nonprofit board exit should be examined through a communication lens. The communication aspect of board research is limited since research tends to focus on the board as a whole rather than individual board members. This literature review begins with some background about the nonprofit sector, followed by an overview of the information available on boards of directors from scholarly and industry perspectives. The latter half of the literature review concentrates on frameworks and models of socialization and sensemaking as critical to understanding the process and implications of board member exit.

Nonprofit Volunteering and the Distinctiveness of Board Service

Never enough time. Never enough resources. These seem to be the reality that many nonprofit organizations face due to the increasing demand for them to solve society's problems with the small number of resources allocated to them. Private nonprofit organizations provide necessary services that governments cannot or will not provide and when for-profit businesses cannot offer said services due to a diminishing return on investment (Jeavons, 2010). According to the National Center for Charitable Statistics (2020), 1.54 million nonprofits were registered with the Internal Revenue Service in 2016. The registered nonprofits consisted of service organizations (i.e.,

charities that provided health, education, advocacy), labor unions, professional associations, and more. One of the critical facets that separate these NPOs from governmental or for-profit organizations is their reliance on voluntary members or volunteers (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008; Kramer, 2011).

Evidently, society depends upon NPOs for various essential functions such as providing food, housing, welfare, and other social services. However, these NPOs cannot exist without the volunteers that carry out programs (Bryce, 2017). The United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2016) legally defines volunteers as “persons who did unpaid work (except for expenses) through or for an organization” (2016, p. 1). Accordingly, they also found that 62.6 million Americans volunteered between September 2014 and September 2015 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Similarly, the National Center for Charitable Statistics (2020) estimated that 25.1 percent of American adults volunteered in 2017, contributing an estimated 8.8 billion hours of work (NCCS Project Team, 2020). The two estimates are close but not exact, which may be due to the varying definitions of volunteers.

A generalized but expanded definition of volunteer work is that it is “unpaid non-compulsory work; that is, time individuals give without pay to activities performed either through an organization or directly for others outside their own household” (Turner et al., 2020, p. 5). This expanded definition covers more ground than the Bureau’s definition, but it still fails to cover all of the intricacies of volunteer work. Lewis (2013) asserts that “volunteering is more than an offer of ‘free labor’ as many common definitions would imply” since it is intertwined with varying types of personal motivations (i.e., values, self-enhancement, skills improvement, social acceptance) (2013, p. 1). Regardless,

scholars still typically refer to volunteering as an altruistic behavior that usually includes the characteristics of performing tasks with free will, receiving no remuneration, and acting to benefit others (Jeavons, 2010; Lewis, 2013; Turner et al., 2020).

Since there are diverse ways that volunteering takes form, studies have cataloged the different types that emerge. One dichotomy that exists is between formal and informal volunteering. Formal volunteering occurs through organizational services (Lewis, 2013). A well-known example of formal volunteering is when an individual volunteers for a local soup kitchen. Meanwhile, informal volunteering manifests as spontaneous acts of kindness (Lewis, 2013). Individuals that partake in informal volunteering are termed direct volunteers since they are prone to helping individuals instead of organizations (Turner et al., 2020). An example of informal volunteering would be someone helping his/her neighbor move furniture into the house. The individuals in the aforementioned examples can be the same, and these volunteering activities might occur on the same day. The main difference is, it is more challenging to track informal volunteering since the acts can be small, spur-of-the-moment activities that are quickly forgotten.

Formal volunteering is researched more than informal volunteering due to the greater availability of data connected to or saved by NPOs. In the studies about formal volunteering, there is a distinction between habitual and episodic volunteering (Lewis, 2013). Habitual volunteering implies that a volunteer consistently volunteers for a cause or an organization. To refer back to the earlier example, the individual is considered a habitual volunteer if he/she serves at the local soup kitchen every Thursday night. Contrarily, episodic volunteering consists of volunteers who sometimes participate in one-shot volunteering activities or a series of one-shot volunteering events. An example

of this would be college students joining a trash pick-up with their certain clubs once or twice per semester. According to Lewis (2013), episodic volunteering has been gaining popularity and traction because it enables people who constantly lead 'busy' lives to serve their community.

The act of volunteering can be nuanced, and individuals do not fit the categories perfectly. Moreover, "volunteers, like paid workers, may have more than one volunteer job with more than one organization" which adds further complexity into how volunteers make sense of their world (Lewis, 2013, p. 4). Statistics show that most formal volunteers were involved with either one (72%) or two (18.3%) organizations (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2016). Unfortunately, there is no data set that has tracked informal volunteering. To conclude, volunteering and volunteers are important subjects to study because NPOs rely on volunteer work to continue serving their communities; hence, keeping the nonprofit sector alive.

Fully understanding the role of the board of directors can be challenging because they do not behave like typical volunteers. Sometimes, there can be a stigma attached to volunteers because they are viewed as 'not professionals' who only receive limited training, possess no disciplinary knowledge, and possess little power even if their work has significant social consequence (Lewis, 2013). This stigma is not as present in reference to BoD since they are expected to become knowledgeable about the NPO they serve. Another difference is that the board of directors is customarily elected to their position because the role is charged with legal responsibility. Even with these heavy responsibilities, they are not compensated for their work which provokes some people to see them as 'suckers' whose work is devalued because it is given away (Lewis, 2013).

Finally, unlike other volunteers, the BoD is expected to continually upkeep their role as advocates who champion the mission and vision of their NPO (National Council of Nonprofits, 2017). This is especially crucial for when board members are raising money by speaking to donors, grant makers, friends, and family members (Turner et al., 2020). The literature on other volunteer groups is expansive and it includes studies that examine the unique experiences or motivations of volunteers (Lewis, 2013). Unfortunately, explorations like these seem to be nonexistent for board members since the academic and nonprofit practitioner-oriented articles present tend to look only at the group identity of the board of directors.

Roles and Responsibilities of NPO Boards of Directors

The board of directors is a “curious beast” whose complexities are often underestimated (Block, 2014, p. 26). Due to the multiple functions of the board, their work tend to be misunderstood even by those who work with or serve on them (Renz, 2010). Board members are most likely misunderstood since there is not a one-size-fits-all board that works for every type of nonprofit group yet most of the existing research on boards of directors leans towards a prescriptive approach to governance (Aulgur, 2016; Miller-Stevens & Ward, 2019; Preston & Brown, 2004; Renz, 2010). These studies offer checklists and best practices in hopes that it can result in effective governance, but they typically fall short because these formulaic approaches are not what the organizations need. For decades, nonprofit governance experts have searched for a perfect board model or a simple fix to improve board functioning and effectiveness but have fallen short due to the heterogeneity of nonprofit boards (Block, 2014; Bradshaw, 2002; Miller-Millesen, 2003).

As previously mentioned, the boards of directors are the bodies that are legally responsible for governing NPOs and managing their assets. The narrow conception of boards make them “instruments of accountability and conservators (and sometimes suppliers of tangible assets” (Chait et al., 2005, p. xvii). The size of BoD varies per NPO but the average board consists of fifteen members and the median board is composed of thirteen members (BoardSource, 2017). These elected members often serve for a specified term (three-year terms are the most common) and are limited to consecutive reelection which implies that eventual organizational exit is unavoidable (BoardSource, 2016; Renz, 2010). To reiterate, most of the resources written about nonprofit BoD are prescriptive to promote board survival. One of the most valuable documents to read would be BoardSource’s (BoardSource, 2016) *Recommended Governance Practices* since it compiles the best governance practices that are currently available.

Multiple lists of best practices exist because they help the boards of directors adhere to their legal duties of loyalty, care, and obedience (Bryce, 2017; National Council of Nonprofits, 2017; Renz, 2010). The duty of loyalty requires individuals serving as board members to be motivated by what is best for the NPO instead of being motivated by personal or business gains (Bryce, 2017; Renz, 2010). Similarly, the duty of loyalty states that individuals should not join a board if there is a conflict of interest present or a concern for self-dealing. Abiding by this duty is crucial for NPOs because it ensures that all of the organization’s assets are spent judiciously. The breach of the duty of loyalty can manifest itself into a scandal which can ruin the legitimacy of the NPO and even damage the validity of the whole nonprofit sector (Chait et al., 2005).

The duty of care requires an individual to act in a manner of someone who truly cares for the NPO (Bryce, 2017). To demonstrate that they care, board members must not only attend the scheduled board meetings but also be prepared for said meetings so that the decisions and actions taken are informed, appropriate and prudent (Renz, 2010). Plainly put, “to know is the duty” but it is this particular duty that hinders compassionate but busy individuals from serving on nonprofit boards (Bryce, 2017, p. 133). The last duty is the duty of obedience which holds the BoD responsible for making sure that the NPO stays on course. Demonstration of this duty includes upholding the nonprofit’s mission or augmenting it when necessary and maintaining the bylaws amongst other laws or standards set (Renz, 2010).

The three legal duties basically illustrate what it means for boards of directors to have fiduciary responsibility to the nonprofit organization and the larger community they serve. Fiduciary responsibility includes ensuring that the board develops the organization’s missions, visions, and strategic directions (Renz, 2010). By and large, the board of directors is ultimately held accountable for all the acts undertaken in the name of the organization.

Boards of directors should not remain static if they wish to remain effective for the everchanging nonprofit sector. Over time, boards change and grow, but not all reach full maturation. According to Karl Mathiasen III (2017), there are three board stages that continuously appear in various permutations. The three stages are Stage 1: Organizing/Founding Boards, Stage 2: The Governing Board, and Stage 3: The Institutional Board.

The first stage usually consists of board members who are founders or close friends and followers of the nonprofit organization (Mathiasen, 2017). At this stage, the NPO might be so small that it is yet to have staff that keep up with daily operations. Due to the lack of manpower, the board members end up becoming a part of what the nonprofit industry calls “the working board” (Masaoka, 2008). The informal term working board emerged to describe a governance setting where board members perform not only their fiduciary duties, but also partner with early staff to fulfill management and technical functions (Masaoka, 2008; Whitney, 2013). Even if small nonprofits acquire staff, the working board may become a permanent fixture if there are too many functions that need to be filled. Regardless, NPOs with working boards are often encouraged by the nonprofit literature and consultants to “transition into a structure with clearer delineation between staff and board roles even though the NPO may never achieve the needed sustainable revenue streams to successfully do so” (Whitney, 2013, p. 2). According to Mathiasen (2017), transitioning out of this first stage is the most difficult because there is a rift that grows between original members and newcomers which puts a strain on the whole organization.

When the BoD shifts from performing operational tasks to the gradual assumption of governance, Stage 2: The Governing Board has been reached (Mathiasen, 2017). The boards at this stage are typically the main audience for the readily available prescribed governance practices that litter the literature. The establishment of staff members allow board members to explore and try different governance practices that will hopefully provide foresight, oversight, and insight for the NPO (National Council of Nonprofits, 2017). At this stage, many boards might fail to govern well because they have yet to fully

shed working on trivial items that might be masqueraded as board work (Widmer, 1993). The switch from stage one to stage two can be uncomfortable for some board members if they are accustomed to hands on work. Furthermore, the transition might be a sad moment for passionate board members because governance practices can distance them from enacting the mission on the field which might have been the reason they joined in the first place (Mathiasen, 2017). Fortunately, the transition to being an institutional board is not as painful because it does not include a full reorientation of the board's work (Mathiasen, 2017).

The last stage, The Institutional Board, functions similarly to a board currently on stage two but the main difference is that the NPO is now focused more on thriving instead of merely surviving. This is evident by the make-up of the board consisting of more prestigious or attractive community movers and shakers that come with a lot of connections that enables the NPO to extend its outreach (Mathiasen, 2017). This mature stage relies on board capital to reach success. Board capital consists of the mixing of human capital and social capital (Jaskyte, 2012). These high-profile board members bring their expertise and reputation along with their power and community contacts to ensure that the NPO is visible. This is important because possible donors, clients, researchers, other NPOs, and other stakeholders look at the composition of the board to determine the legitimacy of the NPO (Masaoka, 2008; Renz, 2010; Robinson, 2019). This might be why individuals are apt to ask "Who is on your board" rather than "What does your board do?" (Chait et al., 2005, p. 21).

Differentiating Board Members from Boards of Directors

To quote Masaoka (2008), “there’s a difference between what the board does, acting as a body, and what board members do” (p. 2). Just because the legal aim of BoD is to govern, it does not mean that individual board members do not ‘work’ regardless of what stage their board is on. Serving on a board is more than being elected to be part of the body, it requires continuous learning and work from the individual board members (National Council of Nonprofits, 2015b). As already stated, individual board members have the duty of care which enforces them to stay knowledgeable and prepared for the sake of the NPO. Work for the board member includes but is not limited to the reading of documents before board meetings, learning how to analyze financial documents, acquiring funds, advocating for the NPO’s mission, etc. (National Council of Nonprofits, 2015a; Renz, 2010). Unfortunately, outside of the knowledge that individual board members perform work regardless of the board’s stage, there is not much else that addresses the understanding of individual board member experience.

Academic and practitioner literature “focus more on the nature of the board’s activities and governance challenges, not board member characteristics” which limits how we understand BoD holistically (Jaskyte, 2012, p. 441). It is not enough to just explore characteristics and effectiveness of the board as a whole and neglect the individual experiences of the members that make it up since it is a disservice to the time that these volunteers have invested in the NPOs. To echo Jaskyte (2012, p. 443) “the key to a great board is not its structure but its human element” (2017, p. 443).

Organizational Socialization

Socialization formally refers to the “broad overarching process by which individuals learn the attitudes and skills they need as they join, participate in, and leave organizations” (Kramer, 2011, p. 239). Socialization has been defined and theorized many ways, but it is easily understood as the process by which people ‘learn the ropes’ that enables them to adapt and function properly in the organization (Dailey, 2016). Learning the ropes can include learning the literal ways of the group but it also includes being aware of cultural practices that are left unsaid. Socialization has cemented its place in the organizational studies discourse since it is a universal process that everyone experiences when joining something new.

Socialization was popularized by various models that depicted its complexity. Socialization models typically entail three common phases: time period prior joining an organization, initial participation as a new member of the organization, and full membership (Dailey, 2016; Hinderaker & O’Connor, 2015; Jablin, 2001; Kramer, 2010). These three common phases disproportionately focus on the early stages of socialization since being a newcomer is an intense experience filled with uncertainty (Kramer, 2010). Furthermore, organizations might put more focus on early socialization due to the importance of hiring, orienting, and retaining employees. As for nonprofit boards, the early stages of socialization are valuable because these are the moments where they learn about their role description and meet their fellow volunteers. Since board members do not see each other frequently like traditional employees, a large part of onboarding occurs during an orientation meeting or an organized board retreat (BoardSource, 2016; National Council of Nonprofits, 2017).

Understanding how new members become part of the groups they join can be crucial for an organization's success, but it is not a standalone factor. Although there is a continuous and pressing need to understand how pre-membership, initial participation, and full membership work, the impending exit cannot be neglected. The whole cycle of a group member must be investigated since all members eventually face the phenomenon of exiting their organization. Because of this reality, Jablin (2001) added a fourth time period for socialization called exit or disengagement. Exit signifies when individuals have left the organization thus concluding the linear models of socialization (Jablin, 2001).

Compared to the onboarding or early processes of socialization, organizational exit has received little attention (Klatzke, 2016). This delays the growth of organizational communication since the limited understanding of how individuals make sense of exit can greatly affect the individual's next socialization encounter. When individuals leave an organization or a group, there seems to be an abrupt "that's it" feeling that prompts them to quickly get over the concluded experience so that they can be ready to move on to the next group or event where they will restart the socialization process. For past board members, these experiences may not fully translate because they can choose to continue supporting the organization they were serving in a different context. Furthermore, past board members do not necessarily have to restart the socialization process in the NPO, but they will probably have to navigate some changes due to their new role.

The existing knowledge of organizational exit hinges on the three categories of exit: voluntary exit, involuntary exit, and a blur of the first two (Jablin, 2001; Klatzke, 2016; Kramer, 2010; McNamee & Gould, 2019). Voluntary exit is defined as exit that

occurs due to an organization member initiating membership change (Kramer, 2010). Examples of voluntary exit include retirement, resignation due to a life change (i.e., pregnancy, moving, new job offer), or disconnection with the organization and its values. Involuntary exit is understood as forced membership change initiated by others (Kramer, 2010). Common examples would be termination or layoffs. The third exit was conceptualized by Kramer as exit that blurs voluntary and involuntary exit due to the emergence of individuals disagreeing on the exit type (2010). For instance, an individual might believe that he or she willingly left an organization due to personal reasons, but a different organizational member might perceive said exit as something that was encouraged or initiated by the organization due to a performance issue. Even though these three types of exit can be helpful in conceptualizing organizational exit, they also act as a flaw in the literature since not all exit types can be neatly categorized under voluntary, involuntary or blur exit (McNamee & Gould, 2019).

Regardless of how exit is cataloged, the exit phase officially begins once an individual officially becomes a former member of the organization (Jablin, 2001). This conclusion of membership typically leads to limited and waning communication with the organization and its staying members. The very start of the exit phase may be jarring for some past board members because they become excluded from BoD communication. Past members might feel something akin to being demoted since they no longer hold a key position in the NPO. Overall, organizational exit is intriguing because it necessitates disengagement just as the initial phases of socialization necessitates engagement (Ashforth, 2001).

During organizational exit, disengagement is a mutual process that is experienced by the leaving individual and the organization's staying members. The leaving individual slowly disentangles himself/herself from the organization and its remaining members but the remaining members must similarly withdraw from their attachment with the leaving individual (Jablin, 2001). The process of disentanglement might produce some tension between friends or colleagues who served as BoD together but exited at the same time since they would have to maneuver one of them lacking the board privilege that the other still holds. Thus, just as early socialization may involve a long and arduous process of adjustment, so too may exit (Ashforth, 2001). Organizational exit is a critical part of a member's reality but the process needs to be further examined since little is known about how a person's attitudes, behaviors, and communication change as exit approaches (Davis & Myers, 2012). Furthermore, there is limited clarity in how people understand their transition from being organizational insiders to organizational outsiders.

Early socialization models are helpful in visualizing the cycle of organizational membership, but they lend themselves to criticism due to their perceived linearity and lack of fluidity and transferability. Furthermore, these models are typically atheoretical because their main objective is to describe and neatly organize the socialization process (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008; Kramer, 2010). However, there are scholars that have taken up the call to further the theorization and application of socialization, specifically, the organizational exit phase.

Exit in the Nonprofit Sector

The prior section mainly discussed socialization in the for-profit and employment setting but various studies have expanded its reach to the nonprofit sector (Davis &

Myers, 2012; Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008; Kramer, 2011; McNamee & Gould, 2019). Since the nonprofit sector has its own norms, it often does not conform with the patterns of the for-profit sector; hence, it must be separately investigated. Jablin (2001) purposefully excluded nonprofit organizations from his socialization analysis because he was cognizant of the distinct functions and behaviors of NPOs. Existing literature on organizational exit typically privileges the employee/employer relationship barring the few studies below.

Outside of the communication field, Debbie Haski-Leventhal and David Bargal were amongst the first scholars that recontextualized socialization by creating The Volunteering Stages and Transitions Model (VSTM) (2008). Although the VSTM is rooted in early socialization models, the five phases that emerged for volunteer socialization were nominee, newcomer, emotional involvement, established volunteering and retiring. Although BoD are distinct volunteers, they seem to also follow this model more geared towards general volunteers. In addition to the creation VSTM, the authors also found that despite of the central role that volunteers play for nonprofit organizations, they typically face ambiguity regarding their task and expectations due to the perceived lack of training (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008). Although board members typically experience training during their orientation, there is not always full clarity about the role since the multitude of governance practices can easily confuse new members. Furthermore, board work can greatly differ depending on the stage of the BoD (i.e. Governing Board vs. Institutional Board) (Mathiasen, 2017).

According to most of the volunteers that were part of Haski-Leventhal and Bargal's study, although the early stages of learning and adapting were grueling, they found the

work to be worthy of their time. The worthiness that is assigned to the volunteer role along with the emotional labor the volunteers experienced interestingly made ending the volunteering participation sometimes harder than quitting a paid job (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008). This notion was broached by Joyaux (2014) when she discussed how she felt some sense of emptiness after her board tenure. This study is important because it provides a possibility that the most dedicated board members may find exiting their position more difficult than exiting a job if they have invested large amounts of unpaid, volunteer labor. Additionally, leaving may be difficult because an individual who has worn the board role for so long might have already weaved being a board member as part of his/her identity. Now, the exiting board member not only has to make sense of his/her finished experience but also take part in some identity work.

Despite Haski-Leventhal and Bargal's findings, communication scholar Michael Kramer critiqued the VSTM as a model that "failed to consider how the volunteers' simultaneous membership in other organizations and their unique characteristics as voluntary members influenced the socialization process" (Kramer, 2011, p. 234). To address the limitation, Kramer developed his own multilevel socialization model for voluntary membership. Kramer's model has three distinct levels: single organization voluntary socialization, socialization of voluntary members in multiple groups, and socialization of multiple voluntary members in multiple groups (Kramer, 2011).

Kramer's (2011) first level recognizes the importance of communication during the initial socialization process as volunteers navigate various membership statuses (Kramer, 2011). This level is fairly similar to the phases of VSTM (i.e., nominee, newcomer, emotional involvement, established volunteering and retiring) but with a

stronger concentration on inspecting the role of communication during the phases. The second level emphasizes that “the socialization experiences of voluntary members in a particular organization are influenced by their simultaneous membership in other groups and organizations including family, work, and other volunteer organizations” (Kramer, 2011, p. 250). This level demonstrates that volunteering does not exist in a vacuum. Finally, the third and final level recognizes that “the simultaneous memberships of multiple individuals across multiple organizations influences their socialization experiences in a particular volunteer organization” (Kramer, 2011, p. 250). In other words, this final level showcases how various socialization experiences of individuals circulate and intermingle. For instance, an individual might be a full member at his/her place of worship but at the same time, he/she must also navigate being a new volunteer for the church’s soup kitchen.

Kramer’s multileveled model is significant to this current study since it displays how the distinct experience of one volunteer can greatly affect not only another member of the organization but the organization itself. Individuals who join organizations not only bring themselves but also their varying experiences. Furthermore, Kramer’s model highlights the fluidity of voluntary membership which makes voluntary exit from a nonprofit organization not hold as much finality compared to an employee’s departure. For the most part, volunteers can leave their post and come back again whenever they desire. At their core, boards of directors are voluntary members, and this socialization model is helpful in understanding them because it places the membership in a larger context.

Kramer’s (2011) model supports the assumption that board membership is not the only

membership that exist for those who serve since there are other distractors such as work, family and friend groups, and maybe other organizations at which they volunteer.

Kramer's multilevel model was followed by Davis and Myers's (2012) study on planned exit. This planned exit research, although it examined sorority members, is very influential for this current study since it thoroughly described an exit that was not properly categorizable under voluntary exit, involuntary exit, or a blur of the two. Planned exit exists as a result of fixed factors such as the completion of a project, program, or time period (Davis & Myers, 2012). Planned exits refer to exits that take place from time-limited membership (i.e. sororities, student government membership, board of directors), in which the time of one's membership in the organization is predetermined prior to entry (Davis & Myers, 2012). The knowledge of when the impending exit is provides tension for the individual which may cause the person to start disengaging with the organization and its members weeks or even months before the set departure.

Davis and Myers's (2012) research resulted in the creation of The Model of Planned Organizational Exit which is composed of three stages: focusing on the future, focusing on the present, and focusing on the past and future. The first stage, focusing on the future, involves the individuals constantly thinking of what is next for them. Since the future is at the forefront, individuals continuously celebrate and mark the "lasts" of their organizational experiences (Davis & Myers, 2012). This is the stage where individuals begin to start taking less-active roles in the organizations since they are preoccupied with other matter such as planning for the future. Although there is currently no transferability of Davis and Myers's (2012) research for the BoD, planning for the future, or the first

stage of disengagement, for exiting board members might appear as reallocation of their volunteer hours to other volunteering activities, working more hours at their employment, or enjoying time with their families.

When the novelty of planning the future starts to wear off and the anxiety bubbles up about what will actually happen in the future, individuals start stage two and focus back on the present. Focusing back on the present allows members to avoid the aforementioned anxieties since it shifts their concentration to safe and familiar activities (Davis & Myers, 2012). Although there is no data to support the conjecture, a dedicated and long-serving board member might feel anxious about losing his/her role and worry about how future interactions with the NPO will transpire. To avoid the uncertainty of the future, the board member might default to the familiar activities such as attending board meetings, joining and aiding committees, fundraising for the NPO, etc.

As the date of the exit approaches, individuals begin to focus on both the past and the future. Focusing on the past causes exiting members to commence feeling sentimental about the organization since this stage triggers the remembrance of the best moments that were experienced. Reminiscing is then followed by the exiting members passing on their knowledge and wisdom to the staying members which aids in the advancement and longevity of the organization (Davis & Myers, 2012). Before the exiting board member vacates the position, there is a chance that he/she will pass on the knowledge to the new board member to ensure that the individual is prepared for the new position. It is possible that the exiting board member will feel sentimentality about the past, but it might not be to the same extent as what the graduating sorority members felt from Davis and Myers's study. Exiting board members can theoretically come back, serve another term, and make

more memories while the graduating sorority members must fully move on from their experiences.

In summary, Davis and Myers's study revealed that in planned exits, members fluctuate between "eagerness for the future and a desire to remain in the more familiar present organizational role" (Davis & Myers, 2012, p. 213). Although their study particularly focused on sorority members, it can still be used as guidance for examining boards members since they also "enter their roles with full awareness of their termination dates" (Davis & Myers, 2012, p. 195). Just like exiting sorority members, the board of directors might feel reluctance at how to properly deal with the approaching end of their organization role. However, it is important to note that board members might not identify with the nonprofit organization they are serving as strongly as a sorority member has identified with her sorority. Regardless, Davis and Myers's research are influential for this present study because it provides steps that transpire between the VSTM stages of established volunteering and retiring which can be used as guidance for this present study.

The academic literature is mainly concerned with creating various models that display how socialization takes place in the nonprofit sector. As previously mentioned in the introduction, the nonprofit sector has yet to fully explore the implications of exit unless it is in the frame of term limits, resignations, and exit interviews. One of the repeated best practices for BoD is the inclusion of term limits for board members. Term limits are valuable because they naturally rotate off board members and enable fresh new ideas to enter the organization (BoardSource, n.d., 2016; Renz, 2010; Robinson, 2019). Furthermore, term limits help ensure the avoidance of stagnation and concentration of

power (BoardSource, n.d.). This naturally occurring rotation is the only section where literature in the nonprofit industry hints at the planned exit that all board members must eventually face. However, the discussion of term limits is often followed by interest in recruitment of new board members which then eclipses the importance of past board members. This practice implies that there is no need to focus as much on the past members because their direct relationship with the NPO has been severed. The implication can be damaging because it is sending a message that maybe in general, the average board member does not actually matter because he/she will eventually be replaced.

Another type of exit that is discussed in the nonprofit sector is the resignation of board members. There is a plethora of reasons as to why a board member might decide to leave, but the reasons seem to not matter as much as the way to conduct the resignation so that it may be beneficial for the remaining board members (BoardSource, n.d.; Masaoka, 2010). The alleged golden rule for board resignation is to “resign in a manner that you as a board member would like others to resign” since this provides transparency and clarity (Masaoka, 2010, p. 1). Even if a board member decides to resign, it feels as if they are still indebted to serve the NPO even in their last hours of membership. The centralization of the board as a whole further support how board members are neglected in the research.

When it is finally time to exit, regardless of the reason, the nonprofit literature advocates for conducting exit interviews since they provide a meaningful way of capturing the wisdom that was gained while serving on the board (Droesch & Stepleton, 2018). This recorded knowledge, in theory, will then be passed down to future board

members. Although this practice is helpful, it does have its flaws. For one, the prescribed exit interview tends to focus too much on how it can benefit the NPO to the extent that it neglects the past board members and how the relationship with them can be nurtured in the future. Another flaw is that the prescribed best practice of conducting exit interviews does not discuss the necessity of collecting the previous interviews and analyzing them together to see if any patterns about board membership emerges. The methodology of this present study will address and improve the aforementioned limitations.

Interestingly, the only source found that explicitly discussed how retired board members felt after they have left their organization was from a Nonprofit Quarterly think piece by Simone Joyaux (2014). In this short post, Joyaux (2014) laments the disappearance of the relationship between her, an ex-board member, and the NPO she served after the farewell board meeting. This loss is exacerbated when the ex-board member reminisced about how she carved a place in her busy life for the organization only for said organization to abandon her after her organizational exit (Joyaux, 2014). Furthermore, the post examines how ex-board members seem to immediately lose their status of importance to the NPO after their service. After board members exit, they become relegated to the status of a regular donor who ceased to receive any personalized note or invitations from the NPO. It is as if their time of past service meant nothing now that they are not part of the in group anymore.

Even though Joyaux's (2014) piece was only a short, guest blog post, it was essential to include because it was a vivid example how an exited board member made sense of her reality post board service. It is crucial that more insights like this are uncovered because these reflections can exhibit how past board members want to be

perceived and recognized as valuable individuals. The think piece provides a possibility that maybe exited board members do not want to become ex-board members but instead be recognized as retired board members that might still want to aid the NPO in different avenues. To confirm this assertion, multiple exited board members must be interviewed about how they made sense of their organizational exit.

Sensemaking

The general understanding of the socialization process seems to devalue the experiences of individuals, particularly if they are the unique experiences of people who are not part of the dominant demographic of the organization (Kramer, 2010). This can propagate groupthink and echo chambers that mute minority groups. The absence of full understanding of all the members can hinder the growth of an organization because it does not fully welcome the inclusion of novel or different ideas. For instance, if only the prominent board members are consistently heard, the BoD starts to become a homogenous body which can negatively affect the advancement of the NPO. This is a crucial point where the NPO is susceptible into being steered in the wrong direction if no one dissents with the popular, but dubious opinions.

Nonprofit literature boasts that BoD are effective bodies because of their heterogenous nature yet there are limited expressions of heterogeneity outside of including diverse board members. Although the board members are diverse, the BoD can still have homogenous thinking if only the prevalent viewpoints are heard. To magnify understanding and expose the individual experiences of board members, there are three main theoretical lenses that socialization studies utilize.

To magnify understanding, Kramer (2010) illustrates that the three main theoretical lenses are sensemaking, uncertainty management, and social exchange theory. Sensemaking is an iterative process where one organizes stimuli into some kind of intelligible framework (Kramer, n.d., 2010; Weick, 1995). The process of sensemaking has seven general principles: it is grounded in identity construction, retrospective, affected by environments, social, ongoing, extracted by cues, and driven by plausibility rather than accuracy (Kramer, 2017; Weick, 1995). Sensemaking is essential since it is a way for people to assign meaning to their experiences. It is because meaning that is chosen does not have to be grounded in objective truth (Kramer, 2017; Weick, 1995). During the sensemaking process the individual is essentially trying to answer the question: what does an event mean? (Weick et al., 2005). Sensemaking is necessary because it allows individuals to commit to a particular meaning even though multiple meanings are available due to the equivocal nature of events. Sensemaking takes time since it is the continued redrafting of an emerging story so that it becomes more comprehensive and more resilient in the face of criticism (Weick et al., 2005). Since individuals are free to choose the meaning that resonates with them, it can prevent groups from reaching a shared understanding.

The second theory is uncertainty management which examines “situations in which there is uncertainty or unclear meaning due to lack of information from which to make an interpretation” (Kramer, 2017., p. 2133). Uncertainty management, like sensemaking, is concerned with how individuals understand or assign meaning to experiences. However, the two theories differ in the process of assigning meaning. Sensemaking typically focus on how individuals make sense of their experience

retrospectively while uncertainty management focus on how individuals proactively seek information to manage their uncertainty and complete their reality (Kramer, 2017). The last theory is social exchange theory (SET) which encompasses the various works of scholars who focus on “the way individuals weigh cost and benefits in making decisions about continuing or discontinuing social interaction” (Kramer, 2010, p. 15). Compared to the first two theories, SET has a very economical perspective. In essence, individuals continuously exchange money, goods, services, information, status, affect, etc. and they will proceed to do so until the costs outweigh the benefits.

Out of the three theories, the best suited for the present study is sensemaking since it enables people to learn about and make sense of their environments and experiences retrospectively, and exit can only be understood after it has happened (Weick et al., 2005). When an event, like organizational exit, occurs, the leaver and the individuals that remain partake in sensemaking (Kramer, 2010). Of course, this sensemaking process will most likely produce different, and sometimes even opposite, answers because situations are inherently equivocal. Fortunately, sensemaking is not about discovering an existing truth but is instead about imposing or inventing one’s own truth (Ashforth, 2001; Weick, 1995; Weick et al., 2005). This flexibility is precisely what the nonprofit sector needs when it comes to understanding boards of directors because even though scholars and industry experts continue to claim that NPOs and their boards are vastly different, they can’t seem to withdraw from advocating the prescribed and generalized best practices. Instead of best practices, what the NPOs in the sector may need is guidance into how they can understand their own board of directors and interpret

and transform the information that will benefit the board members and the rest of the organization.

It is practical that NPOs strive to have a high-performing board since without them, the organization might cease to exist. The consensus is that to be a high-performing board, the membership must be willing to regularly examine its performance so that they can identify improvement opportunities and make the necessary changes needed for organizational betterment (Aulgur, 2016). However, the problem is, not a lot of board members partake in this practice due to perceived lack of time. The organic participation for self-reflection will probably yield the best result for boards but it is difficult to force it upon a busy and preoccupied governing body. I argue that an undisruptive method of peering into the board and its complexity can be reached by investigating the experiences of an exiting or already exited board member since they have mostly been freed from their duties. Additionally, sensemaking reminds us that an action is always just a tiny bit ahead of cognition, meaning that we act our way into belated understanding (Weick et al., 2005).

Research Question

In the nonprofit literature, studies exploring volunteers, leadership, and employee participation are fairly abundant but the examination of board of directors can be scarce. When the board of directors is investigated, it usually focuses on the entirety of the group instead of the experiences of individual board members (Aulgur, 2016; Block, 2014; Gothard & Austin, 2013; Miller-Stevens & Ward, 2019; Preston & Brown, 2004; Renz, 2010). Nonprofit boards of directors need further analysis since they are one of the most influential stakeholders for the nonprofit organization (Bradshaw, 2002). Furthermore,

research on boards must deepen since "boards are complex entities that defy sweeping generalizations and partly because there is an incredible degree of heterogeneity in the range of settings in which boards work" (Renz, 2010, p. 126).

The experience of exiting an occupation work group, or organization can be traumatic because in a sense, "part of one's self is being left behind" (Ashforth, 2001, p. 134). Regrettably, all too often, the "transitions on the nonprofit board are treated as routine" which makes it difficult to analyze the embedded nuances of exit from a nonprofit organization (Dosamantes, 1999, p. 14). Uncovering the individual experiences and exit stories of nonprofit board members can have the capacity to provide closure for the leaver, but it can hopefully also provide clarity and guidance for success of future board members and the nonprofit organization they are serving. Society expects so much from volunteer board members that in turn, they need to be thoughtfully supported (National Council of Nonprofits, 2015b). Understanding how board members view experiences at exit can be consequential to themselves, the organization, and possibly the larger community. With that in focus, this study pursues the following research question: How do nonprofit board members make sense of their organizational exit?

CHAPTER THREE

Methods

This research project examined how past nonprofit board members made sense of their organizational exit. To explore the proposed research question, the study took a constructivist qualitative approach that focused on exited board members (EBMs). A total of 10 EBMs were interviewed. This chapter describes how the study was conducted, including details relating to the participants and their recruitment, interview protocols, analysis methods, and the procedures used to ensure the validity of the data.

Sampling and Data Collection

Ten exited board members (6 female, 4 male) participated in the study – all but one of the participants previously served on other nonprofit boards. Mainly using snowball sampling, I accessed EBMs in three ways: (1) through local nonprofit foundations and local public networking sites, (2) through local nonprofit agencies, and (3) through personal connections. With approval from the University’s Institutional Review Board, the groups and individuals were contacted via email (see Appendix A, B, and C). Maximum variation sampling and snowball sampling ceased after I had conducted 10 one-on-one interviews with EBMs.

As part of the requirement to participate in this study, all participants needed to have exited a nonprofit board. The participants’ organizational exit took place no more than five years from the time of their interview, but half of the participants exited recently in 2020. The reasons for exiting the board greatly varied and are further described in the

next chapter. The EBMs that participated in this study served a variety of nonprofit agencies, including those that focused on faith ($n = 3$), education ($n = 3$), music and arts ($n = 2$), and homelessness ($n = 2$). A more detailed summary of the participants can also be viewed in Appendix F.

The majority of the data was collected from in-depth, semi-structured interviews. These interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom after the participants scheduled their preferred meeting time. Before the interview began, all participants were assured confidentiality, and they provided their consent (see Appendix D). During the interview, participants were questioned about the circumstances of their exit, their experience after board membership, and their overall thoughts about nonprofit board membership (e.g., “Can you describe what happened during the last few months of your position?” and “Now that you are no longer a board member, what does your relationship look like with the organization?”). For the complete list of interview questions, see Appendix E. The interviews averaged 42 minutes, with the shortest being 25 minutes and the longest being 61 minutes.

The approximately seven hours of interview data were transcribed using the automated transcription software Temi. Transcripts were then personally checked and edited for any mistakes to eliminate errors during analysis. This process yielded approximately 141 single-spaced pages of data. Lastly, observational memos and post-interview memos were also utilized to facilitate the interpretation of the data. These memos totaled 10 typed, single-spaced pages. All of the raw and processed data were saved on a password-protected computer.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was heavily influenced by Tracy's (2013) iterative approach, which alternates between emic (emergent) and etic (using existing models and theories) analysis. Using the iterative approach meant that the analysis of the data was not exclusively dictated by what inductively emerged. Instead, the inclusion of etic coding during several phases of analysis brought in influences of socialization models (Davis & Myers, 2012; Kramer, 2011). In line with several previous studies of organizational exit (Dailey, 2016; McNamee & Gould, 2019), an iterative approach was adopted to allow emergent themes within the framework of existing theory and research. My analysis process is outlined in turn.

The initial phase of analysis started after the completion of my eighth interview. At this point, I submerged myself in the breadth of the currently available data. This officially marked the start of the data immersion phase, where I tried to make sense of the overarching story that the participants were sharing. After all ten participants were interviewed, I began what Tracy (2013) refers to as *primary-cycle coding*. During this cycle, I primarily coded complete sentences or short paragraphs. In a sense, the very first coding session was done manually; I downloaded the PDF interview transcripts on my password-protected iPad and used various highlighter colors to segment related information. Furthermore, I also implemented some line-by-line coding on the margins, which primarily focused on "what" was present. This first coding procedure was primarily inductive since it reduced raw data into a summary format (Thomas, 2006).

Since the primary-coding cycle can occur several times, I reread and coded the transcripts a few days after. To have a more holistic view of the emerging codes, I

inputted the chunks of data and codes onto a Notion database (similar to an Excel spreadsheet). There was a total of 333 blocks of coded text and 254 first-level prescriptive codes. After this phase, I reviewed the literature on organizational exit and nonprofit boards to gauge which frameworks and models can provide helpful ways of thinking about the data.

The review of the literature was followed by the creation of a new Notion database that housed updated and revised codes. These codes were developed after using the constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2006), which compared the data that applied to each code. This practice lumped similar codes or modified them to describe the data better. Furthermore, it removed information that did not relate back to the research question. After this procedure, there were 115 sections of coded text and 90 codes.

At this point, I initiated the *secondary-cycle coding*, which critically reexamined the already identified codes (Tracy, 2013). For this more etic approach, I used thematic analysis to identify the common themes in the interviews. According to Owen (1984), themes offer a “limited range of interpretations that are used to conceptualize and constitute relationships” (p. 274). I noted themes in the discourse if they met the three criteria of recurrence (“implicit recurrence of meaning using different discourse”), repetition (“explicit repeated use of the same wording”), and forcefulness (“vocal inflection, volume, or dramatic pauses which serve to stress and subordinate some utterances”) (Owen, 1984, p. 275). Subsequently, I developed six themes. After another quick review of the literature, I began constructing my codebook (see Appendix G). Lastly, I revisited the six initial themes and condensed the ideas into three overarching

themes that are temporally related: *unceremonious exit, diverging paths after board service, and continuing service elsewhere.*

Procedures to Ensure Validity

To ensure the trustworthiness of this project, I carried out three specific actions. First, I executed thorough record keeping by using an audit trail which enabled me to track my research progress and thought processes (Farley & McLafferty, 2003). For example, after each interview, I recorded memos in which I described any reactions I might have to the interview along with any epiphanies that surfaced. To further ensure validity, I used peer-debriefing, whereby I consulted with my thesis advisor during data collection and analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This activity made sure that I was on track, and it enhanced the accuracy of my analysis.

After writing my results chapter, I conducted four *member checks* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The four participants read the thematic interpretation of the data and agreed that the findings reflected their experiences. There were, however, slight variations in the degree to which each participant experienced the themes presented. For instance, three of the members fully agreed that the three themes resonated with their board exit experience. Furthermore, one of these participants said that the themes were “pretty much on target.” However, one of the participants claimed that the third theme (continuing service elsewhere) was not as indicative of his experience as the first two themes. Even though there were variations in how members resonated with the themes, all four agreed that it represented their board exit experiences.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

The purpose of this study was to better understand how individual nonprofit board members made sense of their exit from the nonprofit agencies they served. Emerging from detailed analysis of interviews, findings revealed three main themes referred to as *unceremonious exit*, *diverging paths after board service*, and *continuing service elsewhere*. Together, these themes represent short exit phases that are temporally related. They are not necessarily discrete, sequential steps that occur after exit but are more like steppingstones that exited board members (EMBs) inevitably traverse.

These themes illuminate the dimensions of a form of planned exit – that is, exit from a finite membership contract with a predetermined point of organizational or role exit (Davis & Myers, 2012). Planned exit is a normative practice in the nonprofit sector as most boards subscribe to a director or trustee term limits. As Rebecca, one of the participants, described during her interview, “everything has a beginning and an end, and you do not come on to a board with the intention to be there in perpetuity.”

Thus, the same was true for all ten participants in this study. All were aware of the brief timeframe of their service. However, not everyone experienced a frictionless exit, meaning a smooth and traditional leaving that is common in the nonprofit sector. During frictionless exits, the EMBs were aware that it was time for their exit to occur. Out of the ten participants, only half (Brett, Gabriel, Rebecca, Stacy, and Vickie) experienced a

frictionless experience as they finished their full term. As for the other half, some types of friction prevented them from exiting traditionally.

Factors associated with a fractured or fraught exit varied across participants. Most friction typically occurred due to unforeseen circumstances. Alex, for instance, had to stop his board service in the middle of his second term since the NPO he was serving had to fold. On a similar note, Shirley had to leave during her second term when her son suddenly became ill. Lastly, Charlotte had to extend her term with the school board, although she was ready to leave, due to the coronavirus pandemic. She explained, “my term was supposed to be up in May, but because of COVID, they couldn't have an election, so I had to stay [un]til November.” Uncontrollable forces were not the only reasons that appeared to prompt an exit with friction. Accordingly, the other exits were fraught due to a jarring realization that the exit has arrived. Even though these exiting board members were fully knowledgeable about the date of their exit, they were surprised that it has already appeared. Maurice and Sharon both experienced surprise when it was time for their role to conclude. At the start of the interview, Maurice confessed: “I have to be honest with you, I was literally – I had forgotten the time of my service that I was to rotate off.” Similarly, Sharon disclosed, “the only shock that I had was, I didn't know I was going off the board until they presented me at a meeting.” In a sense, there is a disconnect between understanding something to be true versus encountering it in lived experience. Set side by side, forgetting the date of exit is not as severe as dealing with uncontrollable forces, but it does prevent one's exit from being frictionless.

Unceremonious Exit

Regardless of the reason for exiting the board, all EBMs experienced an unceremonious exit during their last day of service. An unceremonious exit refers to an inconspicuous affair that lacks celebration or fanfare. Furthermore, it punctuates the exit phase of EBMs. The unceremonious nature of exit was exemplified through a short incidence during a regularly scheduled meeting. The meeting was typically a monthly board meeting (face-to-face or virtual), but it sometimes also aligned with the NPO's annual meeting. In any case, the meetings were unceremonious since they were not dedicated celebrations for the leaving members. When asked about the possibility of celebration occurring during the exit meeting, Stacy queried, "Like fanfare? [chuckles] *No*, not a lot of fanfare." Furthermore, Brett explained that "there wasn't like any kind of celebration, cake, ice cream or anything like that" during his last meeting. Whereas retirement or graduations may be accompanied by commemorative rituals or celebrations, the participants in this study did not report any events of this nature.

Although unceremonious exit sounds bleak compared to personalized parties, EBMs did not necessarily consider them a sad affair. However, the study's participants discussed two varying types of unceremonious exit: a positive unceremonious exit and a negative unceremonious exit.

Positive Unceremonious Exit

Most of the participants experienced a positive unceremonious exit. One of the reasons why the participants' attitudes were positive is because the exit they experienced fulfilled their expectations about the timeline of their service. As an illustration, Vickie explained:

As a board member, you go on, um, for a three-year term. I filled somebody's term, and when that time was up, then I knew it was time to exit off. So, um, that was pretty much it. It's very much organized – very much regulated.

Stacy echoed Vickie's sentiments when she articulated the progression of roles in the NPO she served:

So that's kind of the way it works. You're in the VP role, and then you move into president, and then you exit. Um, so, so yeah, I mean, it was time. I've done it for, I think, five years and, um, my term was up.

Both Vickie and Stacy were aware that their times of service were coming to a close.

They were at peace with the ending since they recognized that rotating off the board is part of the conventional procedure for their organizations.

As shown, adhering to the norm of the organization can produce a positive experience. However, a more impactful reason for the positive experience is due to moments of appreciation being embedded in the exit events. These moments enabled the participants to categorize their unceremonious exit as a satisfactory occasion fitting for the board role's conclusion. Appreciation for EBMs materialized in two distinct forms: verbally and physically. The verbal experience was common to most participants. To summarize the collective experience, Brett elaborated: “[during] our last meeting, um, the board recognized and thanked, myself and I think, two to three others who were rotating off. Um, so we were appreciated and given kind words.” Vickie experienced something similar when she discussed how “they said thank you for your service, and they were glad that you could have the opportunity to serve with them,” but Vickie also quickly reaffirmed that “it wasn't that type [celebratory].”

Some nonprofit organizations took an extra step to show appreciation by implementing a physical component. The physical component can be as simple as being

briefly presented with a certificate like what Sharon's NPO did for her. Although the certificate received seemed like a formal recognition, it was still a fleeting acknowledgment of service writ large. Other times, the physical component was more personalized. For instance, Rebecca exclaimed, "I certainly was honored at the last [virtual] board meeting, and they sent me flowers and have been more than gracious, and I certainly feel appreciated." No participant distinctly discussed having a preference for the way they received appreciation. However, some participants suggested that what resonated with them is the personalization and effort put behind the appreciation. Since board members are not remunerated for their work, they spoke of these moments of appreciation as something that makes them feel valued. The presence of appreciation and recognition made their unceremonious exit feel positive. Unfortunately, not every NPO seems to have the capacity to honor or recognize their EBMs.

Negative Unceremonious Exit

It is not surprising that not every EBM encounters a positive unceremonious exit since the types and cultures of NPOs considerably vary. Furthermore, there is an inevitable heterogeneity of board compositions, as discussed in chapter two, that can further prevent someone from having an enjoyable involvement. The negative unceremonious exits for the participants were prompted by the board members actually having various unfavorable experiences during their board service. There is almost an element of self-fulfilling prophecy for these board members since they have let their past experience govern the future. Because they have settled on the idea that everything about the particular board service is bad, they, in turn, have doomed themselves to a negative

exit. In sum, it was not the unceremonious exit itself that made the event negative, but rather the discomfort during service that affected the incident.

Only two participants, Charlotte and Gabriel, described recent board exits as comparatively less favorable than previous ones. To truly understand why their unceremonious exit is negatively tinted, a little context to their experiences must be shared. Charlotte, like mentioned earlier, was part of a school board that asked her to extend her service due to the coronavirus pandemic. As a past teacher, Charlotte is extremely passionate about education, but she decided not to pursue another school board term due to differences in philosophy and politics in the board. A clear and recent example of this that Charlotte provided is when she disclosed that her “administration does not believe in masking.” Accordingly, Charlotte did not physically attend her remaining meetings for September, October, and November to keep her and her family safe. When her time for exit finally came, Charlotte described it as a “very quiet” and “uncomfortable” event. Furthermore, the exit did not have any “big marketing mindsets,” which was just fine with Charlotte since she attested, “I was not looking to be recognized; I just wanted to be through.” Charlotte did not share or explain every tension that she might have faced while on the board, but based on her descriptions, the service and her exit were not viewed by her as positive, even months after it occurred.

Gabriel’s exit was not as recent as Charlotte’s, but it echoes similarly negative sentiments. Unlike everyone else, Gabriel’s board met only quarterly. Although he did not see his other board members as much as the other participants, he still shared that he faced some opposing philosophies in the board. The main issue for him is that “there was always this kind of pull between old guard and new guard.” As someone who identified

as part of the new guard, he felt like the old guard did not really value his contributions. When Gabriel's term came to an end, he was relieved since "the exit was partly, you know, I didn't really want to do that work, but also just, I needed to focus on, uh, my job." Gabriel's tone when he made this statement insinuated that the exit could not have come quickly enough. Like mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, Gabriel experienced a frictionless exit, but that only meant that he followed the prescribed path for board members. Just as Gabriel's experience showed, there is no distinct link between having a frictionless exit and having a positive unceremonious exit. Overall, a negative experience on the board can tarnish the other aspects of membership, such as the unceremonious exit event.

Diverging Paths After Board Service

The event of unceremoniously exiting is only the beginning of the exit process for exited board members. After EBMs have formally exited the organization, they are faced with the decision of determining what happens to the relationship between them and the NPO. According to this study's participants, there are two avenues post board membership: transitioning into a supporting member or slowly dissolving the relationship. Six participants transitioned into the role of supporting member while four participants slowly dissolved the relationship. Alex framed the dichotomy succinctly:

There are board members who are like, you know what, I'm done with this. Um, I did my time. I liked it at first, but now, I want nothing to do with it. That's fine, but I feel like, you know, like there are those board members that grow, you know, they grow fond of what they did, and they want to stay connected somehow.

Becoming a Supporting Member

Some of the participants made sense of their board exit as the start of a role transition. Instead of permanently leaving the organization, the board exit was just a closing of a particular role. Stacy remarked that when she exited, “it wasn’t like kind of stopping, but, um, it was time. I mean, you know, it was a natural progression.” She then explained how although she left her role as board president, she did not fully disengage with the board or the organization since the relationship with the organization was colored by longstanding history. Due to the connection, current board members still sought her advice. At the end of Stacy’s interview, she mirrored Alex’s sentiment about those members who want to stay. Stacy specifically said, “a lot of times, you know, people continue to volunteer, and they may actually come back on the board later at some point, you know, that can happen,” therefore affirming the phenomenon. There is no single reason that explained why participants decide to stay engaged with the organization they just exited, but the two prevalent reasons include the organization having a personal significance to the EBMs and the EBMs encountering pleasant interpersonal experiences.

The participants that became supporting members discussed how the organization is personally meaningful to them somehow. For two participants, the significance of the organization is due partly to supporting a family member. Bringing back Stacy once more, it is important to note that she served for a nonprofit organization that supported young and accelerated medical school candidates. Stacy mainly joined the board since her son was a student, and she further elaborated:

It was a wonderful experience, and that was probably one of my more favorite, you know, volunteer activities only because my son was involved. Um, I mean, he wasn't participating with me, but I was doing something that supported him, so that was fine. Um, and then just supporting a medical healthcare education

organization was fun for me [be]cause I have three kids, and two of them are in healthcare.

For Stacy, the organization is special since it is connected to her family – specifically, her children. Even though her son has now graduated, the organization’s relation to the healthcare industry still prompts Stacy to support it.

Sharon’s experience with her local symphony paralleled Stacy’s story. For Sharon, the local symphony is significant in her life since her son used to play in it, and she casually plays a stringed instrument. Sharon described how her role change from board member to supporting member has not really changed much:

So, I still go to the concerts. I still, you know, I’m still parked. I still buy tickets. I still, you know, I still support the symphony. I mean, it’s been something I’ve, you know, I’ve supported the symphony since my son played in it. Many years ago.

A few minutes after this statement, Sharon joked that it seems like the only telling difference is that now, she does not have to wear a name tag that identified her as a board member when she attends the various concerts and events.

Familial ties are not the only reasons why an EBM might view an organization as significant. Rebecca was compelled to stay connected with the NPO she served since she is a cofounder. This deeply rooted relationship with the organization made Rebecca’s exit from the organization a little more difficult than the others’ exit, but something that helped ease her transition into a supporting role is the fact that she moved to a different city towards the end of her board tenure. While she was serving from afar, she realized that “board members really need to be on-site and involved, particularly with a new nonprofit.” Rebecca still supports the organization in various ways she can from afar, but it is ironically her distance that has helped the most. Rebecca explained, “if you care

about the organization and you don't want it to fail, you go away. The best thing you can do is to help grow and train new people, and I think that's critically important."

The reason for becoming a supporting member is not always as deep as having a personal connection or deep investment in the organization. Sometimes, it can be as simple as developing positive experiences. For Vickie in particular, it was the executive director that really impacted her continued connection with the NPO. Vickie recalled:

I think one thing that's nice is when the director meets the people [BoD] when they come in because that's what Mr. Leader always did. And I thought that it was really nice that the director realized that you are a person - you're giving up your time, you're coming to this meeting. So, they greet you. So, it's just kind of a courtesy thing, but I think it means a lot to the people that are serving.

Since Vickie experienced great care and attention from the executive director, she continues to support the group since it sets it apart from other organizations that she has served.

On the other hand, it was the board members themselves that amplified the experience for Maurice. Every month, Maurice looked forward to the board meeting since it was like "a monthly reunion" where he gets to see his friends and hear about progress at their various churches. When prompted about what made it so special, he said, "I just like getting to know other board members. And, uh, I think those, those memories are the, are the best. Um, and I, I love to laugh." The organization has brought joy into Maurice's life in the form of new friendships, and this is only one of the reasons why he continues to support it.

EBMs become supporting members not out of obligation but because they have the desire to stay invested. For this group, the desire comes from personal reasons, as elucidated above. To clarify, these supporting members support their organizations in the

ways in which they find appropriate. For Brett, he has now taken more of an advocate role for his NPO. He emphasized:

I feel like I'm still contributing to the Association, maybe in different ways. And I made it clear that when I exited that I was not exiting out of involvement, I just was exiting out of that, um, that commitment. Uh, well, I really wasn't even exiting. I was completing that commitment and trying to focus on other commitments.

As Brett's comment exhibits, it is up to the EBM to decide what happens with the relationship. At the end of the day, no one can force EBMs to stay engaged. As Stacy put it, "I think you stay connected to the organization probably as much as you want to." This highlights that the EBMs have the autonomy to decide whether they want to continue allocating parts of their lives to the organization or whether it is time to move on to another group or venture.

Dissolving the Relationship

As exhibited in a previous sub-theme (negative unceremonious exit), serving on the board is not always a positive experience. Sometimes there are circumstantial factors that push EBM to abandon the NPO they served. Although the board member's exit is an unceremonious event, the process of detaching oneself from an NPO is not always simple and clear-cut. Hence, it is a slow transition to dissolving the relationship. The dissolution of the relationship is more than a single act and is not always permanent. Sometimes, even though an EBM wants to sever the tie fully, residual relationships and emotions can still remain. An example of this slow disengagement can be seen by the way Gabriel expressed how he "really doesn't do anything with the group," but he is still mildly affiliated with the NPO he exited. His mild affiliation to this day is only due to his personal friends in the group asking him to contribute to some of their projects.

Just like with transitioning to a supporting member, there are different reasons as to why an EBM started the process of dissolving the relationship. The two most frequent reasons that surfaced were tension in the organization and lack of reciprocity. It is not surprising that Charlotte and Gabriel, the EBMs who experienced a negative unceremonious exit, are also two of the four members that chose the path of dissolving the relationship.

As thoroughly described under the section of negative unceremonious exit, Charlotte and Gabriel dealt with continued tensions while serving on their respective boards. Charlotte's politics and policy differed from those of the majority of her board, and this gave her a sense of defeat since she felt like she "couldn't affect change." For Charlotte, the board was a losing battle since she did not feel supported. Now that she is not bound by her board term, she expressed that her post-board life is "just wonderful." Because of Charlotte's overall negative experience, she decided to sever her relationship with the school board. However, the relationship has not been fully severed since new board members that know her still contact her for advice as described below:

The two new board members are young men who are kind of firebrands. And so, it's been, it's been crazy, um, trying to get the rest of the board to move their direction, you know, so I have stayed quiet and I, if, if the- I'm friends with both those young men. If they ask, I tell them what I know, but I do not give anyone my opinion. Um, it's not for me to do at this point. It'll just start trouble and, um, just hope that wisdom finds its way in there somehow.

In Gabriel's eyes, the board term was unfavorable since established members of the staff and board are unfairly established, meaning that they frequently control decisions for the organization. Furthermore, Gabriel was alienated by the frequent organization infighting. He recalled how his friends tried to prompt him to come back:

Um, and then I was invited back, and I was persuaded. It's going to be different. We promise, you know, we've got, changes are in order [...] so, I go, and I contribute on different committees when I'm asked if I feel like I have a contribution. Um, and then I do like, I've done webinars and like different things like that. So, I mean, I still contribute to [it] when I'm asked by certain people who know me and, you know, feel like they can reach out to me and ask me, um, but I don't insert myself into the daily operations of the organization. Um, and I don't really go out of my way to find ways to contribute.

This recollection cemented that Gabriel has slowly dissolved the relationship with the organization. To really cement his decision to disengage, Gabriel emphasized, “if the board isn't interested in my contributions, I'm not going to last very long. If you don't really need me, then why am I here?”

The other reason that EBMs dissolve the relationship with their organization is due to a lack of reciprocity. After the exit event, some EBMs realize that they have invested too much of themselves into the organization only to receive little to nothing. The main problem is that there was not much acknowledgment during or after service. When asked about why Alex's board participation was problematic, he lamented:

Oh, I guess you could say I was overdrawn on my account. I guess you could say in terms of, uh, just mental, physical, and, um, even on just all my financial and all my personal finances, I was just overdrawn.

The unsustainability of the organization is part of why it ceased to exist. Similarly, Shirley endured a similar experience. Although Shirley abruptly left to tend to her ill son, she was cognizant of the fact that “that board kind of [long pause] because of some of the dynamics that went on, it kind of chewed up board members.” Being chewed up sounds like an unpleasant ordeal which prompted Shirley to remain distanced from the organization even though it has rebranded. To further rub salt to the wound, Shirley recounted that she had received nothing from the organization after she had to leave. She reasoned,

I'd love to get like, you know, newsletters or something, but it's just, it's an indication to me that they just aren't growing. And so, when you just drop a board member and nothing - I mean, *nothing*, they're not going to support you.

Continuing Service Elsewhere

Regardless of the path that EBMs take with respect to their relationship with the NPO that they just exited, there is a theme of continuation of service elsewhere – usually, a different nonprofit organization. This occurrence generally happened to the EBMs that dissolved their relationship, but it also appeared for the ones who transitioned to supporting members. As Rebecca asserted during the end of her interview, “what you ought to do when you leave a board is to take your knowledge and your concern for the value of nonprofits and just put it to work someplace else.”

EBMs continue to serve their communities after they exit from their most recent NPOs. This is prominent for those who did not have the best experience since they did not view their NPO departure as dissolution of their volunteer identity. All of the four dissolvers but Alex are currently and actively serving as board members for new nonprofit organizations that they feel like they belong to. For instance, Shirley is currently serving as a board member for a nature conservatory that she stated as “awesome” since her board is diverse, and they make her feel like she “can make a difference.” In the same way, Gabriel has found a more fitting nonprofit for him called Listen Up that aims to spread positive communication, which makes him feel worthy and involved. Likewise, Charlotte actually became board president the same day I interviewed her for a library-centric organization that she has been a volunteer of for thirty years. She disclosed that she is excited about this appointment since she viewed libraries as magical places.

The three aforementioned EBMs continue to serve other organizations since service is a central value in their life. Shirley pursued other board memberships since she declared that her “life had been run around mission,” and the “board is great” because it allows her “to fulfill one of her greatest currency of mission.” As for Charlotte, she is inclined to continue volunteering because “once you had a life of service, it's kind of hard to give it all up.” Even though Alex is not currently an active board member for a different organization, he still shared the sentiment because he said that he would most likely serve again if he were “given an invite” for something he “believes in.” Practically, EBMs know that their previous board experiences have given them an opportunity to gather nonprofit knowledge that can be useful elsewhere.

Continuing service elsewhere is not exclusive for those who chose to slowly dissolve their relationship with the NPO. Even those who chose to become supporting members extended the network of NPOs they serve. For instance, Brett and Sharon are currently serving as board members for a different organization. The difference between them and those that dissolved the relationship is that this current board membership was active prior to them leaving the NPO. To simplify, they were serving two boards at once. When asked why they had two board memberships, Brett cheekily said, “because I can’t say no,” while Sharon added, “I think people navigate to boards that they're interested in, or they have a passion for that area.”

The paths of the three other board members who chose to become supporting members for the NPO they just left are just a bit different. Stacy is not an active board member for a new organization, but she continues to volunteer for her local women’s shelter regularly. She mentioned that she had dedicated her time to this group for almost

twenty years. Meanwhile, Maurice and Vickie are also not currently serving as board members due to the pandemic, but both disclosed that they would join a new board if they were asked and if the group's mission aligned with their beliefs. Vickie explicitly stated, "if I was asked somewhere, yes. I'm not going to go seeking, but if I were asked, I probably would," which echoes Brett's attitude about not being able to say no.

In sum, interviews with exiting board members revealed a common path of unceremonious exit. From there, EBMs decided how the relationship with the NPO progressed and whether to continue a relationship with the organization and/or serve elsewhere. These themes are not concretely linear phases, but they are temporally connected steppingstones for EBMs.

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion

Through thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with former nonprofit board members, this study examined the research question: How do nonprofit board members make sense of their organizational exit? The findings revealed three major themes. First, exited board members (EBMs) experienced an unceremonious exit event which punctuated a range of post-exit experiences and involvement with the organization. Second, following the unceremonious exit, EBMs approached the changing relationship with the nonprofit organization by either transitioning into supporting members or commencing a process of dissolving the organizational relationship in full. Third, despite diverging paths after board service, EBMs continued their nonprofit service in some capacity, either for the NPO they served previously as a director or elsewhere.

The results of this study extend the literature on organizational socialization research and nonprofit research as well as offer practical implications for nonprofit board member development. This chapter begins by discussing two scholarly implications of this research, which focus on: (1) the distinction between the ephemeral exit and the extended post-exit process and (2) EBMs' sensemaking as identity work. The scholarly implications are followed by a discussion of the study's practical implications. Finally, the chapter closes with limitations and directions for future studies.

Scholarly Implications

Ephemeral Exit and Extended Post-Exit

The first scholarly implication of the study is that the whole exit experience of board members can be segmented into two parts: the ephemeral exit and the extended post-exit. When EBMs depart from their organizations, they first experience an ephemeral exit. That is, the act of leaving lasts a very short time. Although short, the ephemeral exit event acts as a pivotal point that leads into the extended post-exit. During the post-exit, EBMs decide how to proceed to new ventures. The next steps can include serving the recently exited NPO in a new capacity, joining a new board, or even discontinuing service altogether.

Because the initial instance of exit is so fleeting for board members, said exit is typically unceremonious, meaning that it lacks celebration or fanfare. In the instances where the board member might not necessarily be leaving the NPO permanently, it makes sense that the exit event is more relaxed. The understated exit presumably saves the face of the organization and the EBM to avoid future discomfort. For instance, if an NPO hosted a celebration for exiting board members, awkwardness might surface if any of the EBMs decide to return a few weeks later as a volunteer, advisor, etc.

Unceremonious exit is the normative practice in the nonprofit sector since board members do not always rotate out at the same time. As described in the previous chapter, various factors can easily extend or shorten a board member's service timeline. To recap, this is precisely what happened to Charlotte, who had to extend her board term because of the coronavirus pandemic, and Shirley, who had to cease her service in the middle of her second term to care for an ill son. The unceremonious exit is presumably common for

NPOs due to three factors. One, as previously mentioned, the timelines for exit differ greatly for board members. Since there is not one distinct date for a group of people to leave, there would have to be multiple special celebrations to commemorate the multiple board exits that occur. This situation would then lead to the second factor, which is NPOs are typically stretched thin when it comes to personnel and labor. Small nonprofit teams would face constraints organizing a quaint party, much less a banquet dedicated to honoring EBMs. Lastly, reserving the time for grand celebrations can take away time from completing the board work. Ultimately, there is still a board that remains, and these members will have to continue to adhere to their legal duties of loyalty, care, and obedience (Bryce, 2017; National Council of Nonprofits, 2017; Renz, 2010). Due to people having busy schedules, it is already difficult finding a time to meet together once a month. A ceremonious exit event could just create more planning complications for the organization, its remaining board members, and even the exiting board members.

The concepts of ephemeral exit and extended post-exit add new dimensions to what Davis and Myers (2012) conceptualized as a planned exit. As they contend and illuminate, planned exit refers to an exit that takes place from time-limited membership in which the time of one's membership in the organization is predetermined prior to entry (Davis & Myers, 2012). In theory, a model of planned exit is applicable to board members since they are typically informed about the duration of their term. EBMs' exit process, however, extends how planned exit is understood by giving it more continuity. Davis and Myers's (2012) study maintained its central focus on the pre-exit process where their participants, sorority members, began to prepare for college graduation and their eventual exit from the sorority. In their context, planned exit implies that the act of

eventual leaving is synonymous with a point of finality. This might be accurate for their sample group, but it is not always the case, as shown in this present study. Definitionally, as presented by Davis and Myers (2012), EBMs undergo planned exits. However, the exit that transpires does not always signify the end. The present study developed this conclusion by focusing the scope on the extended post-exit.

Davis and Myers's (2012) proposed model of planned organizational exit (MPOE) helped shape the present study of board member exit. The MPOE has three substages labeled as focusing on the future, focusing on the present, and focusing on the past and present (Davis & Myers, 2012). The first substage is characterized by "departing members placing less importance on organizational activities" due to the exciting prospects of acquiring new jobs, moving away, getting married, etc. (Davis & Myers, 2012, p. 205). Meanwhile, during the second substage, the leaving members "exhibited renewed interest in their present organizational membership" (Davis & Myers, 2012, p. 205). This renewed vigor emerged to combat the feelings of rolelessness or anxiety about the uncertainty of the future. Lastly, the third substage promoted a sense of nostalgia invoked by members' reflections on organizational memories and their imminent exit. At this point, the leavers began adjusting their identification (Davis & Myers, 2012).

The current study's findings did not fully resonate with the MPOE. One explanation for why EBMs did not follow this model is because of the substantive difference in membership roles. For instance, sororities are social groups that thrive when their members continuously see and bond with each other. Even though some nonprofit research on volunteer motivation (Clary et al., 1998) suggest that people might volunteer (and even volunteer as board directors) for social purposes, the board is still prominently

realized as a formal governing body. The board of directors typically only meets once a month, and meetings are not primarily treated as social events since they mostly consist of board work (e.g., approving budgets, planning fundraisers) (BoardSource, 2016; Masaoka, 2010). Due to having fewer meetings, there are not many opportunities for board members to experience critical incidents that signify the progression through the substages described in Davis and Myers's (2012) model (e.g., sorority chapter rituals, ring day, university-wide senior appreciation week). Truly, the only critical event that most board members face is the unceremonious exit.

Exited board members did not entirely follow the path of the MPOE since most of their focus was on the extended post-exit process that followed their ephemeral exit. However, the last substage, focusing on the past and the future, tangentially relates to the second theme from this study, diverging paths after board exit. After the unceremonious exit of EBMs, they must forge how the relationship with the NPO will continue. At that moment, EBMs begin to adjust their identification just like the departing members of the sorority. Furthermore, this phase may cause them to grapple with choosing between retaining or disposing of their nonprofit knowledge that they acquired from their board membership. Although the third substage and the second theme parallel each other in some respect, it is important to note that when EBMs underwent the phase, it was not as ritualistic as what the sorority members experienced, causing the deidentification process to be less pronounced.

Even though the MPOE did not illustrate the experience of EBMs, something that did offer a more accurate representation of the board member exit process is Kramer's (2011) Multilevel Communication of Voluntary Socialization (MCVS). In comparison to

the linear design of the MPOE, the MCVS offers a more dynamic view of how a volunteer's membership is not only fluid but is also interconnected to other memberships. The MCVS also has three distinct levels: single organization voluntary socialization (level one), socialization of voluntary members in multiple groups (level two), and socialization of multiple voluntary members in multiple groups (level three).

MCVS's first level mainly examined one's voluntary membership with a single organization. It is similar to traditional socialization models (Jablin, 2001), but it consists of overlapping membership statuses instead of linear phases of participation (Kramer, 2011). The five different membership statuses are prospective member status, new member status, established member status, former member status, and transitory member status. The model depicts these statuses as "overlapping with broken lines to suggest the ambiguous nature of voluntary organizational membership" (Kramer, 2011, p. 245).

Although this level does not particularly allude to the punctuating event of an unceremonious exit, it implies that there is an ephemeral moment that voluntary members face, which triggers the shift to or acquisition of a new status. Furthermore, the transitory member status and former member status in MCVS parallel facets of the post-exit experience for EBMs. In particular, the transitory membership status, which "indicates that the relationship of the individual to the organization is uncertain and ambiguous," accurately describes what occurs during this study's second theme, diverging paths after board membership (Kramer, 2011, p. 245). Further, the former member status depicts the gradual decrease in participation which is similar to what occurs when EBMs decide to dissolve the relationship.

The second level of MCVS still focuses on the experience of one individual, but it specifically explores how individuals' multiple group memberships interact and affect their volunteer socialization (Kramer, 2011). To simplify, this model illuminates that individuals are "simultaneously members of multiple groups and organizations" (Kramer, 2011, p. 246). The various groups can include more informal associations such as family and friends. The last level of MCVS recognizes that "multiple group memberships of others further influence the socialization process" since it examines "how the socialization processes for multiple people are interdependent" (Kramer, 2011, p. 239).

The second and third level of MCVS correlates with the nuances of the study's third theme, continuing service elsewhere. As some board members disclosed, it was not uncommon that they served on multiple boards at once. Each of these memberships, along with other associations such as employment, family, and friends, affected the board experience. For instance, if one of the nonprofit boards is more enjoyable than the others, chances are, the individual will choose to further serve there. This is similar to what happened to Charlotte after she completed her school board appointment. Charlotte eventually became board president for a nonprofit library organization she continuously volunteered at for 30 years. Kramer's (2011) third level contends that multiple memberships of others are interdependent. To refer back to Charlotte's experience, just because she severed the relationship with the school board does not mean that she left the nonprofit sector. Her continued involvement in the community still connects her to other board members or volunteers, as seen when two new school board members asked her for advice. Charlotte affirms that she is "friends with both those young men," which illuminates that they share the experience of the school board and a friendship sphere

outside of it. In turn, these linked involvements can affect the trajectory of each other. Overall, Kramer's (2011) level two and three, along with this study's third theme, demonstrate that service for EBMs and other volunteers does not exist in a vacuum.

As Kramer (2011) stated, the proposed model "provides an important starting point for examining the socialization of voluntary membership," yet it still has room for development since his study only contextualized the socialization in a voluntary choir setting (p. 249). This current study aids in the growth of Kramer's model since it investigated a different typology of volunteers. NPO board of directors is distinct from voluntary choir members since they are more formal and defined. As previously stated, NPO board members have clearer boundaries of membership since they are elected (Jaskyte, 2012) and have the three legal responsibilities of loyalty, care, and obedience (Bryce, 2017; National Council of Nonprofits, 2017; Renz, 2010). What makes board members particularly interesting is that this clear membership boundary transforms to something more ambiguous once leaving transpires. However, what makes board members particularly interesting is the transformation of the clear membership boundary to something more ambiguous once leaving transpires. Of course, to fully advance MCVS, further examination on the board must occur. However, the development looks promising since the themes of this small-scale study already reflect part of Kramer's (2011) model.

Sensemaking as Identity Work

Prior to this study, not much was known about the individual experiences of board members, particularly when they exited, since most board research focused on onboarding (Block, 2014; Dart et al., 1996; Mathiasen, 2017), board dynamics

(BoardSource, n.d.; Preston & Brown, 2004) or different approaches to governance (Bradshaw, 2002; Chait et al., 2005). Ergo, this study pioneers the examination of individual board member experience and how it specifically relates to the exit process. Investigating how EBMs used sensemaking to frame their exits humanized the nonprofit board. Through the lens of this study, the board is not just a cluster of people making legal decisions on behalf of the NPO but is instead a collective made up of distinct individuals who bring in different viewpoints.

The first scholarly implication explained the distinction of the ephemeral exit and the extended post-exit process, but the identity work that occurs during the latter phase will be further illuminated here. Although nonprofit board members are ungeneralizable due to their diverse experiences, something that can bring them together is using sensemaking to elicit identity work. Sensemaking is what enables people to learn about and make sense of their environments and experiences retrospectively (Weick et al., 2005). During the interviews, the participants utilized sensemaking to narrate their organizational exit process. Concurrently, they were also using sensemaking to describe the identity work that occurred during their extended post-exit process, which exemplified the importance of service in their life.

Identity work is a symbolic activity that enables individuals to continually produce and reproduce identity (Larson & Gill, 2017). This endeavor promotes individuals to make sense of the social world around them and distinguish how they and their ever-changing identity narrative fit. Typical research on identity work “approach the formation and management of identity from the perspective of the individual’s ability (or, agency) to shape and manage her/his own identity” (Larson & Gill, 2017, p.63).

Furthermore, identity work is usually examined while individuals are current members of groups or organizations, but “identity work does not cease simply because one has exited an organization” (p.151). In this study’s particular case, identity work is an ongoing process that can sometimes even be heightened by leaving an organization.

When EBMs from the study engaged in identity work after organizational exit, part of what they did is embed service as an important element of their identity. Identity work is prompted after exiting an NPO since the post-exit experience provides a transitional period where the EBM can pause and raise questions such as “who am I?” To answer this question and new questions that might arise (e.g., “now what?” or “what am I going to do?”), individuals will “craft a self-narrative by drawing on cultural resources as well as memories and desires to reproduce or transform their sense of self” (Alvesson et al., 2008, p. 15). The cultural resources can include favorite events or memories, challenges faced, reasons for service, etc. An example of identity work occurring was when Brett had to explain his new organizational role after he finished his board tenure. He specifically discussed how he is “still contributing to the Association in different ways” since he “really wasn't even exiting.” Based on further commentary, he eventually arrived at the conclusion that he now has more of an advisory role, and this continues to make him feel like a useful asset for the organization.

The exit stage consists of separating from the organization in a physical sense, but also “in cases where one is identified with the organization, identity separation” (Larson & Gill, 2017, p. 151). This occurrence requires someone to re-narrate a sense of self, which is what particularly happened with Rebecca. Rebecca exited her NPO board in 2020 after moving to a different city. Rebecca’s experience was slightly different from

the other participants since she is a cofounder for the NPO; this meant that it was a little more difficult for her to move on. However, she explained that after she physically moved, she realized that it was important for her to leave the organization to promote growth. Now, she is more focused on her new location and how she can be of service there.

In sum, the exit of EBMs is a complex procedure that does not end the moment a board member leaves her/his last meeting. The unceremonious meeting occurs, which triggers the ephemeral exit EBMs experience. The initial phase is short since EBMs are compelled to move on to the post-exit process to determine how they need to proceed. During this longer process, EBMs undergo identity work which can lead them to continue service. These scholarly implications are important since they extend socialization and volunteer literature. Along with the importance of scholarly implications comes practical implications and actions that nonprofit practitioners can employ to enhance the board experience.

Practical Implications

The practical application of this study is targeted towards nonprofit organization leadership, staff, and board members. These stakeholders should be cognizant of the three emerging themes from this study since it can guide them to the eventual implementation of personalized board exits. In this context, personalized exit does not mean that there should be grand parties to honor the EBM. Instead, it implies being aware of what the board member wants from the organization after the end of their role. Personalized board exits can be paramount since they can reveal that the NPO cares not only about its current members but also those who have exited.

As asserted in the introduction, people are the lifeblood of nonprofit organizations and must therefore be cared for and understood (BoardSource, 2017). Personalizing a board member's exit can demonstrate that the NPO appreciated the time and effort that the board member contributed. In the nonprofit literature, there is a tendency for EBMs to be forgotten and overshadowed by the impending recruitment of new board members that will replace them (National Council of Nonprofits, 2015b). This can unfortunately lead to EBMs feeling neglected (Joyaux, 2014). To prevent this situation, NPO leadership and staff must exhibit reciprocity and respect.

One of the board's legal duties is the duty of care. To demonstrate care, board members are expected to be prepared and knowledgeable about the NPO to ensure its success (Renz, 2010). This duty of care should be reciprocated by the NPO leadership and staff. If these stakeholders care about the NPO, then they must also care about its governing board (Bryce, 2017). Leadership and staff can simply embody the duty of care by understanding the individual board members. Understanding can come in multiple ways, but in the context of implementing a personalized board exit, it can be as simple as determining the path that the exiting board member might take after their service.

After board exit, some EBMs arrive at a diverging path where they must decide where to go. The different pathways include becoming a supporting member or dissolving the relationship with the NPO. The process of determining which one an exiting member might pick does not have to be a guessing game. Rather, it is encouraged that NPO stakeholders partake in intentional conversations with the exiting board member to reveal their desires and expectations once exit has commenced (Nichols, 2012).

An intentional conversation about the inevitable exit can enhance or fully replace the typical exit interviews that the nonprofit literature advocates for (Droesch & Stepleton, 2018). One of the weaknesses of the prescribed exit interview is that it can overfocus on how it can benefit the NPO, which in turn can neglect the needs of the exiting board member (Dosamantes, 1999). The intentional conversation about exit does not have to be a major affair since it can be as easy as asking a question along the lines of “although you will no longer be a board member, how do you see yourself as involved with the organization?” If the question is received well, it can also be followed by encouragements or supportive phrases along the lines of “I can help you stay as engaged or as involved as you want to be.”

If the exiting board members want to continue to be involved with the nonprofit group, the NPO must make sure to build in some follow-up component since Kramer (2011) discovered that continued messaging after exit sometimes prompted an easier return to the organization. Engagement with EBMs can be as simple as sending them holiday cards, inviting them to major fundraising events, requesting them to join volunteering occasions, etc. However, if the exiting board member does not want to stay engaged after their board tenure, it is important to respect their decision. It is best to avoid sending them further organization messages unless they specifically asked to be kept on the list (Kramer, 2011; Inglis & Cleave, 2006).

Instead of adding to the list of nonprofit best practices, what this study provides to the nonprofit sector is guidance into how they can better care for and understand their own board of directors. Understanding can lead to a better interpretation of what these

members want and need during and especially after board service. Keeping exited board members engaged is crucial since they remain as valuable assets to the NPO.

Limitations and Future Research

The study illuminates the exit process that nonprofit board members undergo and how it is both ephemeral and extended. It further emphasized the consequentiality of service in EBMs' lives. Whereas some studies focus on the group function of the board, this study particularly humanized the individual board members and examined how their experiences differ and are alike. Nonetheless, the findings and implications of this study have three major limitations.

First, the participants were mostly recruited using snowball sampling. The method of snowball sampling might have resulted in a homogenous sample that only included past board members that are unusually altruistic and extremely dedicated to service. Furthermore, the participants in this study were all white which is not wholly representative of the typical make-up of nonprofit boards (BoardSource, 2017). An increase in the number of participants for future research can begin to address this limitation.

The second limitation lies in the method of the study. The study only used the singular method of interviewing nonprofit board members. Although this yielded insight about organizational socialization practices, it does not provide a full enough picture to convey best practices for future board development and exit processes. To address this limitation, future research can employ a multi-method approach. Along with interviews, future research can also incorporate focus groups, surveys, observation, etc. (Johnson,

1997). After including an additional method for collecting data, validity can be ensured by using methodological triangulation (Tracy, 2013).

The last limitation is that half of the participants ($n = 5$) exited during the peak of the coronavirus pandemic. Due to this worldwide event, safety precautions were implemented, which might have highly affected the structure of board meetings and exit dynamics for NPOs. For instance, it is pretty difficult for NPOs to host a party that honors their exiting board members if the meeting is transpiring virtually. The pandemic further affected this study since it spurred the interviews to be conducted on Zoom. A major disadvantage of these technologically mediated interviews is that they only provided “mediocre embodied or nonverbal data by comparison with face-to-face approaches” (Tracy, 2013, p. 165).

Understanding how board members view their experiences at exit is consequential to themselves, the organization, and the larger community that they are a part of. To fully understand the holistic view of the exit process and its effects, future research can analyze the point of view of various organizational stayers (i.e., other board members, executive directors, staff). However, the investigation of board members should not be abandoned since something that started to appear from this study is the concept of a “professional board member.” Uncovering what being a professional board member entails can provide insight into what type of individuals thrive at the board position. In the same vein, board members can be asked to discuss the notion of closure. As this study showed, there is not always a clear marker of when the exit process ends. Pinpointing when EBMs experience closure from their exit might finalize the exit process.

The proposed themes from the study should be viewed as a step into the development of organizational exit literature. Furthermore, the study hopes to inspire future research on individual nonprofit board members. Although this study focused particularly on exit, it is only the beginning of uncovering the complex dimensions of nonprofit board members.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Recruitment Email for Organizations and Networking Groups

Subject Line: It's time to explore the individual experiences of board members

Dear [*organization name*],

I am a second-year master's student from the Department of Communication at Baylor University, and I am currently working on my master's thesis. For my project, I am interested in examining the process of organizational exit and how it is experienced by nonprofit board members. I would like to invite [*insert organization*] to become a part of this endeavor.

It is distinctly crucial for the nonprofit sector to understand how board members make sense of their exit because these volunteers do not always have the finality of exit that comes from leaving employment, but they also do not have the luxury of casual volunteers who weave in and out of nonprofit organizations. Without full understanding of the board experience, nonprofit organizations might not be empowering their past board members to the full extent.

I am writing to [*insert organization*] because it has a rich and established network that connects the local nonprofits of [*insert city*]. I would like to humbly ask for your help in gathering research participants to interview. Helping me should be very easy and

painless. All I request is that you include my attached research flyer to any newsletters or bulletins that you will be sending out for the rest of the year.

This study has the capacity to uncover rich data about board exit from very influential individuals. As a token of my gratitude, I would like to share my thesis findings and interview questions with [insert organization] in hopes that they can provide a way for nonprofit organizations to keep past board members engaged. I will present these findings in an easy-to-read formal report.

If you would like to help me with my research project, please contact me at ayra_cirilo1@baylor.edu or 432-271-6741 by [insert date a week from when I sent the e-mail].

Thank you for your consideration. If you have any questions or if you would like additional information about this study, please don't hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Ayra Hammon

Master's Student
Department of Communication
Baylor University

APPENDIX B

Recruitment Email for Individuals

Subject Line: It's time to explore the individual experiences of board members

Dear [*insert name*],

As you probably already know, the board of directors plays a crucial role in the success of any nonprofit organization. There is a plethora of academic and industry articles that discuss the impact of the board and its governance responsibility, but there is a lack of information about the experiences of the individual board members that make up the board. There is especially limited insight in how exited or retired board members are understood. I find the act of exiting really intriguing because it is an event that everyone eventually experiences, but it is often rushed and diminished.

To deepen the academic and industry knowledge, I would like to invite you to participate in my research study which examines the exit experiences of past nonprofit board members. You are eligible to participate in this study due to your board service and recent exit from a nonprofit organization. I believe that you will provide extremely valuable insight that is often overlooked by the nonprofit industry about what it means to be a board member.

Participation includes a one-on-one interview with me at the public library or online (via freeconferencecall.com). The interview will be around 45-60 minutes depending on the modality of your choice. Furthermore, the interview will be recorded and transcribed for qualitative analysis.

Remember, this is completely voluntary. You can choose to be a part of the study or not.

If you would like to participate, please contact me at ayra_cirilo1@baylor.edu or 432-271-6741.

Thank you for your consideration. If you have any questions or if you would like additional information about this study, please don't hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Ayra Hammon

Master's Student
Department of Communication
Baylor University

APPENDIX C

Recruitment Flyer



Volunteers Needed for Research Study on Nonprofit Board Exit

Did you recently serve as a board member for a nonprofit organization?
You may be eligible to participate in a communication study that can help
improve the nonprofit sector

You May Qualify If You

- Are at least 18 years old
- Have served as a board member for a nonprofit organization
- Recently finished your board service and exited the organization no more than one year ago

Participation Involves

- a 45-60 minutes, one-on-one interview in person or online

Contact

For more information about this study, or to volunteer for this study,
please contact Ayra Hammon at 432-271-6741 or e-mail
ayra_cirilo1@baylor.edu

APPENDIX D

Consent Form

Baylor University
Department of Communication

Consent Form for Research

PROTOCOL TITLE: “Now what?” Understanding the Organizational Exit Experience of Nonprofit Board Members

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Ayra Hammon

SUPPORTED BY: Baylor University

Purpose of the research: The purpose of this study is to explore the different exit experiences of past nonprofit board members. We are asking you to take part in this study because of your previous board service and recent organizational exit.

Study activities: If you choose to be in the study, you will be

- Asked to sign a consent form
- Interviewed about your past board experience and the subsequent events after your board exit (45-60 minutes).
 - The interview will take place either at the local library or online through (freeconferencecall.com), whichever the participant feels the most comfortable
- We would like to make an audio recording of the interview. Since audio recording is required for the study, if you do not want to be recorded, please do not participate. You will indicate your decision at the end of the form.

Risks and Benefits:

To the best of our knowledge, there are no risks to you for taking part in this study.

You may feel emotional or upset when answering some of the interview questions. Tell the interviewer at any time if you want to take a break or stop the interview.

You may be uncomfortable with some of the questions and topics we will ask about. You do not have to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable. This research study involves sensitive topics. The questions being asked may be sensitive and personal in nature. It is possible that answering some questions may cause some stress. Therefore, you may decline to answer questions or withdraw from the study at any time.

There are no benefits to you from taking part in this research. However, others may benefit in the future from the information that is learned in this study.

Confidentiality:

A risk of taking part in this study is the possibility of a loss of confidentiality. Loss of confidentiality includes having your personal information shared with someone who is not on the study team and was not supposed to see or know about your information. The researcher plans to protect your confidentiality.

Authorized staff of Baylor University may review the study records for purposes such as quality control or safety.

If, during your participation in this study, we have reasonable cause to believe that abuse is occurring, this will be reported to authorities as required by law. The researcher will make every reasonable effort to protect the confidentiality of your research information. However, it might be possible that a civil or criminal court will demand the release of identifiable research information.

If, during your participation in this study, we have reason to believe that you are at risk for harming yourself or others, we are required to take the necessary actions. This may include notifying your doctor, your therapist, or other individuals. If this were to occur, we would not be able to assure confidentiality.

Questions or concerns about this research study:

You can call us with any concerns or questions about the research. Our contact information is listed below:

- Ayra Hammon
 - Email: ayra_cirilo1@baylor.edu
 - Phone: (432) 271-6741
- Dr. Lacy McNamee
 - Email: lacy_mcnamee@baylor.edu
 - Phone: (254) 498-1730

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), you may contact the Baylor University IRB through the Office of the Vice Provost for Research at 254-710-3708 or irb@baylor.edu.

Taking part in this study is your choice. You are free not to take part or to stop at any time for any reason. No matter what you decide, there will be no penalty or loss of benefit to which you are entitled. If you decide to withdraw from this study, the information that you have already provided will be kept confidential. Information already collected about you cannot be deleted.

By continuing with the research and completing the study activities, you are providing your consent.

Signature of Subject:

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. We will give you a copy of this document for your records. We will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I understand what the study is about, and my questions so far have been answered. I agree to take part in this study.

Signature of Subject

Date

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent:

I have explained the research to the subject and answered all his/her questions. I will give a copy of the signed consent form to the subject.

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

Date

APPENDIX E

Interview Guide

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW: Questions for Past Board Members

[Intro overview: define past board member, summarize study purpose, preview questions to be asked]

1. Though you just exited from organization XYZ, let's begin more broadly...
 - a. Have you been a board member for other nonprofit organizations? If so, what is the group/cause?
 - b. Do you remember how you got involved with said groups/causes?
 - c. Which group were you more/less involved in? Why?
2. Now, specifically concerning your experience with XYZ...
 - a. How did you initially get involved with the nonprofit organization XYZ?
 - b. Did you have any prior connections to this cause/group?
 - c. Can you give me a tour of what a regular month looked like for you as a XYZ board member?
 - d. In your opinion, what sets apart "good" from "great" board members at XYZ?
 - e. How would you describe your relationship with other board members? How about your relationship with the staff?
 - f. What is your most vivid experience with XYZ as a board member?
3. Now, let's talk about the closing moments of your time with XYZ...
 - a. Why did you exit from the organization?
 - b. Was there an event, meeting, etc. that officially marked the end of your board member role? If yes, what occurred?
 - c. Can you describe the work you did and/or the activities you participated in during the last three months of your position?
 - d. How well did you feel your contributions to the board and the organization were recognized and appreciated?
 - e. What are some lessons learned that you would share with the new board member that filled your position?
 - f. Now that you are no longer a board member, what does your relationship look like with XYZ?
4. Now, let's talk about some ideal scenarios – "in a perfect world" or ideally...
 - a. What type of person would you suggest is the best fit to fill your board position?
 - b. How would you transition out a board member who is about to finish his/her tenure?
 - c. Do you see yourself being a board member again in the future? Why or why not? What would be your ideal organization/cause?

5. Wrap up questions...
 - a. If I were to ask your close friends/family how being a board member for XYZ has affected your life, what would they say?
 - b. In your experience, what types of people don't last as board members?
 - c. What term(s) best/least describes the role that being a board member plays in your life? "it's like a job"; "it helps with career development"; "it's something else" (if so, what?)
6. Is there anything you wish people knew about being a board member for a nonprofit that you haven't told me already?
7. Are you willing to be contacted after the analysis to check the interpretations of the researcher?

APPENDIX F

Summary of Participants

Pseudonym	Exit Date	Description
Alex	2017	<u>Sex</u> : Male <u>Nonprofit Organization Category</u> : Music and Arts <u>Board History</u> : First Timer <u>Exit Context</u> : exit with friction (organization folded); unfinished second term <u>Current Board Status</u> : no active board memberships
Brett	2020	<u>Sex</u> : Male <u>Nonprofit Organization Category</u> : Faith <u>Board History</u> : Seasoned <u>Exit Context</u> : frictionless exit; completed a regular board term <u>Current Board Status</u> : actively serving a different board
Charlotte	2020	<u>Sex</u> : Female <u>Nonprofit Organization Category</u> : Education <u>Board History</u> : Seasoned <u>Exit Context</u> : exit with friction (difference in philosophy); completed board term (term was actually extended due to COVID) <u>Current Board Status</u> : actively serving a different board
Gabriel	2018	<u>Sex</u> : Male <u>Nonprofit Organization Category</u> : Education <u>Board History</u> : Seasoned <u>Exit Context</u> : frictionless exit; completed a regular board term <u>Current Board Status</u> : actively serving a different board
Maurice	2019	<u>Sex</u> : Male <u>Nonprofit Organization Category</u> : Faith <u>Board History</u> : Seasoned <u>Exit Context</u> : exit with friction (surprised because he did not know exact date of exit); completed a regular board term <u>Current Board Status</u> : no active board memberships
Rebecca	2020	<u>Sex</u> : Female <u>Nonprofit Organization Category</u> : Homelessness <u>Board History</u> : Seasoned <u>Exit Context</u> : frictionless exit; completed a regular board term <u>Current Board Status</u> : no active board memberships

Sharon	2020	<u>Sex:</u> Female <u>Nonprofit Organization Category:</u> Music and Arts <u>Board History:</u> Seasoned <u>Exit Context:</u> exit with friction (surprised because she did not know exact date of exit); completed a regular board term <u>Current Board Status:</u> actively serving a different board
Shirley	2017	<u>Sex:</u> Female <u>Nonprofit Organization Category:</u> Homelessness <u>Board History:</u> Seasoned <u>Exit Context:</u> frictionless exit; unfinished second term <u>Current Board Status:</u> actively serving a different board
Stacy	2019	<u>Sex:</u> Female <u>Nonprofit Organization Category:</u> Education <u>Board History:</u> Seasoned <u>Exit Context:</u> frictionless exit; completed a regular board term <u>Current Board Status:</u> no active board memberships
Vickie	2020	<u>Sex:</u> Female <u>Nonprofit Organization Category:</u> Faith <u>Board History:</u> Seasoned <u>Exit Context:</u> frictionless exit; completed a regular board term <u>Current Board Status:</u> no active board memberships

APPENDIX G

Code Book

Theme	Subtheme	Description	Exemplar
Unceremonious Exit		Exited board members describe the day that they exited their role as an inconspicuous affair. The exit/last day of service usually takes place during one of the scheduled board meetings. Said meeting lacked fanfare or celebration (i.e., there was no party).	“Our last meeting, um, the board recognized and thanked, myself and I think, two to three others who were rotating off. Um, so we were appreciated and given kind words. So, there wasn't like any kind of celebration, cake, ice cream or anything like that. We were still doing virtual meetings.”
	Positive Unceremonious Exit	Positive Unceremonious Exit was experienced when the exit event fulfilled the EBM's expectation about the timeline of their service.	“So that's kind of the way it works. You're in the VP role and then you move into president and then you exit. Um, so, so yeah, I mean, it was time. I've done it for I think, five years and, um, my term was up.”
	Negative Unceremonious Exit	Negative Unceremonious Exit for participants were prompted by the board members actually having various unfavorable experiences during their board service.	“The exit was partly, you know, I didn't really want to do that work, but also just, I needed to focus on, uh, my job.”
Diverging Paths after Board Service		After EBMs' unceremonious exit, they are faced with	“Well, and it's not the end, it's just a transition. How do we

		<p>the decision of determining what happens to the relationship between them and the NPO. There are two possible avenues post board membership: transitioning into a supporting member or slowly dissolving the relationship.</p>	<p>keep you in our folds? If you have spent three or six or nine years on our board, you may be tired of us, but you know, us and you are institutional knowledge.”</p>
	<p>Becoming a Supporting Member</p>	<p>After board service, EBMs might remain connected to the NPO in a different, supporting manner. Common reasons for staying include the organization having a personal significance to the EBMs and the EBMs encountering pleasant interpersonal experiences.</p>	<p>“I feel like I'm still contributing to the Association maybe in different ways. And I made it clear that when I exited that I was not exiting out of involvement, I just was exiting out of that, um, that commitment, uh, well, I was really wasn't even exiting. I was completing that commitment and trying to focus on the others.”</p>
	<p>Dissolving the Relationship</p>	<p>Not every EBM “stays” with the NPO. The counterpart to staying is slowly disengaging with the NPO. The relationship between the NPO and the EBM dissolves due to various reasons such as ever-present tension in the organization and lack of reciprocity</p>	<p>“And so, when you just drop a board member and nothing - I mean, nothing, they're not going to support you.”</p>

<p>Continuing Service Elsewhere</p>		<p>Regardless of where EBMs settle after their board service, almost all discussed the importance and impact of service in their life. EBMs thrive in being selfless and giving to their community.</p>	<p>“I love to serve that's one of my gifts. And when you serve, you're rewarded. Don't do it for that reason, but that's just a by-product of, I don't know, just, um, being able to go and listen. And you know, you're helping somebody or helping a group of people for good, so it's rewarding.”</p>
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