

# Dominant Class Culture and Legitimation: Female Volunteer Directors

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*Female volunteer directors are largely drawn from affluent professional and corporate families. Their role in the reproduction of the upper class has been overlooked by studies of class culture and class legitimation. This study argues that women who take on community leadership roles (volunteer directorships in particular) are motivated to do so because of class cultural incentives: noblesse oblige, duty to community and prestige. These combine with incentives for personal achievement in ways which, at once, serve to reproduce upper class prerogatives for community leadership roles and maintain the volunteer board status quo.*

The role of female volunteer directors generally, and the part played by upper class women specifically, has been overlooked by studies of class culture and class legitimation. The literature on power, class, and community and national power structures takes as its subject men who dominate the corporate sector and corporate boards (Allen, 1974; Domhoff, 1970; Higley, et al., 1979; Clement, 1975; Useem, 1978, 1979). These high profile men also take on prestigious community leadership roles. They head up large fund-raising committees, chair influential university and hospital boards, make large donations and are instrumental in garnering large donations from contacts in the corporate sector (Ross, 1952, 1953). They also provide legal, financial and other expertise, which is necessary for the formulation of organization policy and programming (Cohen, 1960; McDougall, 1976; Hartogs and Weber, 1974). Indeed volunteer board service is viewed as the testing ground of promising young executives (Ross, 1965).

With regard to upper class women, we know (from the society pages) that they organize parties, dinners and gala events; that they serve on smaller, often less prestigious boards (Babchuk et al., 1960; Ross, 1958; Moore, 1969); and that they do direct service work, for example, pushing carts around hospitals, operating thrift shops or organizing door-to-door canvasses for various annual funding drives (Burke, 1960; Gold, 1971; Frankel, 1965). Rarely do we hear about, or think to study the female volunteer who has literally made a career out of volunteer board service (Gray, 1981).

This study argues that women who take on community leadership roles are motivated to do so for the same reasons as their high profile male counterparts: first, to satisfy the demands of their dominant class culture and second, to

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legitimate their socially privileged positions. The purpose of this paper is to describe how women's class cultural incentives for participation—noblesse oblige, duty to community and prestige—combine with incentives for personal achievement and community leadership roles as a dominant class prerogative in the reproduction of class and the volunteer board's status quo. An analysis of women's entrance to volunteer boards, their expectations of contributing time, their sense of family tradition, commitment to a "community" and noblesse oblige, reveals the dominant class culture which prepared them for participation in voluntary sector work. In addition, female volunteers are likely to have post-secondary education and have developed expertise in decision-making, writing and speaking skills and expertise in areas of specific importance to voluntary agencies (e.g., day care, elderly care, fund raising, corrections, the arts). Thus, volunteer directorships offer women, who do not have full-time careers, an avenue for personal growth (Maxwell and Maxwell, 1971). Working with professional people at the level of policy development is an opportunity that many would not otherwise have.

The women's class membership is also an important element in their initial and subsequent membership on volunteer boards. Contact networks which supply names of potential board members, and the "selective" memberships of the Junior League, Imperial Order of Daughters of the Empire (IODE), and the women's committees of arts organizations, act to limit entrance to those from the upper class.

Less discussed but of equal importance to the personal growth and class cultural motivation for participation in voluntary organizations is the incentive for class legitimation and maintenance of the status quo. Community leadership roles in their overt helping of those in need also serve to publicize the "community spirit" of corporations and wealthy citizens. In this way the harsh profit motive of this class is softened (Domhoff, 1970), and the prerogative of the upper class to assume directorships is maintained.

This paper divides discussion of class and women's voluntary directorships into two parts. First, is a description of a sample of women who currently hold volunteer directorships, their background characteristics and class cultural incentives for participation on voluntary sector boards. Second, through an analysis of their opinions of staff and client participation on boards, I will suggest that the women do work to maintain the existing system of inequality, thereby preserving their privileged position and maintaining their class's supremacy. This they accomplish in their capacity as volunteer directors.

### SAMPLE PROFILE

#### *Sample Procedure*

The sampling procedure consisted of interviewing an initial list of women who held multiple directorships in one large North American city's voluntary sector and, in subsequent interview phases, using a snowball sample technique to contact a wider group of women who had been suggested as likely respondents by the initial women interviewed. This strategy was used because the narrow focus

of the research was upper class women's service on volunteer boards. The sociological literature on community leadership roles of upper class members (Clement, 1975; Domhoff, 1970; Higley, et al., 1979; Ross, 1952) documents the fact that volunteer directorships normally are given to those who can bring wider resources — in financial, legal, fund-raising and/or public relations expertise, and in contacts to others in the business community. While only a token number of women serve as directors in the corporate sector (Financial Post, 1977), there are many more women who serve on volunteer boards. These women are invited because of some use that can be made by the agency of the women's social contacts, direct service experience and fund-raising skills (Ostrander, 1976, 1980). The logical research sample was one which consisted of women who had acquired volunteer experience and who could speak to issues which are of concern to boards and generally discuss the involvement of women as volunteer directors.

A second sampling consideration was the existence of a prestige hierarchy wherein certain organizations—teaching hospitals, universities, certain social service agencies—are the domain of directors from the upper class, while other boards are dominated by individuals outside of this class. (Babchuk, et al., 1960; Moore, 1962, 1969). In order to obtain an initial (incomplete) list of women who were highly involved and prominent enough in the voluntary sector to serve on a high status board, over 100 of the largest of the city's organizations (assets) were contacted for a list of their directors between 1979 and 1981. Those women whose names appeared more than once were considered to hold multiple directorships: highly involved, experienced and in demand. Thirty-eight women made up this initial list, 33 of whom were eventually interviewed. A total of 67 interviews were eventually completed, the balance of which was obtained from suggestions offered by the first fifty women interviewed. They suggested 107 names, 24 of which appeared on the initial multiple directors list.

### *The Sample*

At the outset, it is of interest to note the religious and ethnic background of the sample. Seventy-three percent of the women interviewed are of Anglo-English, Irish or Scottish origin, and 20% are Jewish. The sample also consists of four women from other ethnic groups: Chinese, German, Swiss and Latvian. In terms of religious affiliation, 61% were Protestant, 13% were Catholic and 20% were Jewish.

The women's age distribution is skewed toward an older age cohort: 87% (or 58) were between the ages of 50 and 79, while only 13% (9) of the women were between 35-49 years old. Of this older group of women, all had a bachelors degree and another 12 or 20% had graduate degrees: LLB, M.D., Ph.D.. Fifty-three percent of the sample also have attended private or separate schools.

Thus the interview data reflect the opinions of women who are highly involved and have had years of education and service on boards. A majority of the women first volunteered for direct service work when they were young adults, and with experience, moved to board service. By the age of 50, the women have at least 30 years of voluntary sector experience.

The occupational status of the women is important to note. Forty-two or 63% of the women are "career" volunteers, which contrasts with the 12 women who work full-time (six of whom are also corporate directors). Six of the women are currently retired and continue to participate on volunteer boards. The final seven women serve currently only as corporate directors. Thus 13 of the women interviewed have moved to the corporate sphere. For half of these women, at least part of their entry to corporate boards is the result of directorships in family enterprises. Two of the remaining six women were invited to serve as a result of volunteer director experience. The final four women are corporate directors as a direct result of their career as volunteers. Their experience includes service on at least one high status board—hospital, university, United Way or arts board—on which they have met and shown their talents to men who also serve on corporate boards.

The age and occupational distributions of this sample reflect the snowball technique which was used to contact women and their network of volunteer acquaintances. This sample also reflects the life expectations of a generation where home and family were central and where volunteer work provided the opportunity for adult company, intellectual stimulation and personal achievement. The upcoming generation of younger women will serve on boards in their own right as professionals able to provide legal and financial expertise, and contacts—combined with a family tradition of volunteering. This contrast is the subject of future research. The focus of this paper is those women who have had a wide experience in the voluntary sector, whose origins are at least the professional and corporate owner class.

The women's private school attendance suggests that their family of origin and of marriage have been at least middle class. This is verified through the occupations of the respondents' fathers and husbands. The majority of the occupations of the women's fathers involved professional and business careers. While many of their fathers were owners of their own companies, and/or were independent entrepreneurs (23 or 34%), or in upper level corporate management positions (7 or 10%), almost as many were professionals: lawyer, doctor, professor, engineer (26 or 39%). Only 11 (16%) had lower status occupations such as bookkeeper, transit operator, salesman, and carpenter.

The husband's occupations show status improvement. Only three of the husbands could be classified as having non-professional or non-corporate occupations. The sample tends to be consistent in inter-generational occupational status. Those women whose fathers were professionals or businessmen tended to marry men whose occupational status was similar.

### VOLUNTEER BOARDS AND CLASS CULTURE

The majority of the women originate from at least upper middle class professional families and their family of marriage is equally high in status. It is chiefly from the ranks of this dominant class (of professionals and corporate businessmen) that men and women are drawn into volunteer directorships. They have the expertise needed by boards and the educational level to articulate policy and

programming, and the social contacts to obtain funds and expertise where necessary.

What follows is a discussion of the class cultural incentives for participation in the voluntary sector articulated by the women during their interviews, and an analysis of the mechanisms for class legitimation surfacing from the women's comments. As with any small sample the analysis is a first step in a newer area of research, and necessarily raises more questions than it answers.

The women's understanding and awareness of the elements of upper class culture become immediately apparent in their comments on the 'personal' meaning of volunteer work, the unique aspects of being a volunteer director, the advantages and disadvantages of serving on multiple boards, and their initial involvement on boards. Most respondents commented that their participation was the result of a strong family tradition, a duty to community and a responsibility to return something to those who are not as privileged.

It was a way of life in our family. It's partly an obligation just as I have to do for the family, I have to do for the community (No. 24)

That's what life was about, to do something for the community. (No. 23)

... We were brought up with a sense of duty. We were all taught that because we were all fortunate we must put something back into the community. (No. 38)

I was brought up with it. I was extremely privileged and I had to pay. It was a way of life. My father and mother and everyone was involved. (No. 25)

You usually find that a family has a major commitment to service. You usually find that people are brought up in an atmosphere of trying to service those less fortunate than yourself. (No. 3)

Many women explained that they learned the tradition of volunteering from their families, or that it was instilled in private school. This role was acted upon through teenage volunteering and later, in direct service work through the Junior League and other women's training groups. Thirteen of the women stated that the reason for their invitation to a particular board was due to membership in the Junior League, which has the reputation of being an invitational organization, with an excellent international reputation for "turning out" trained volunteers. While the Junior League has been the premier volunteer organization for daughters of prominent Protestant families (whose membership until the mid-sixties was by invitation only), there also exist matching organizations in the Jewish and Roman Catholic communities. While it cannot be said that the Junior League excluded Catholic women (one of the Catholic respondents had League training), there was a general feeling among the Jewish respondents that it was not open to them. However, women who received training in religious-based organizations like the Catholic Women's League (CWL) and Hadassah or the National Council of Jewish Women, became presidents at the city-wide level and subsequently were recruited to serve on other boards.

During the interview, women discussed their reasons for becoming involved in the voluntary sector, their thoughts on its place in their lives and their own volunteer experience. From the outset, it became clear that a majority of the women would not otherwise have had the opportunity to participate in decision-making or policy issues if they had taken paying jobs. The following

comments are suggestive of the generally held view that if the women had wanted to work, they lacked the formal qualifications to make it in business.

If I went to get a job, they'd ask me what my qualifications are. I mix with people on boards that I wouldn't have otherwise come across. I'd probably be a filing clerk. (No. 54)

... It's always changing, you're into policy changes and issues. ... Another fact is that women who come onto agency boards do not have the training to get the jobs that they would be interested in. (No. 32)

In the short time I've been doing board work, I've been working with a higher level of person than I would have if I had a paid job. If I have been ten years in the paid labour force I would not be at that level. (No. 33)

These comments reflect the advantages of the women's volunteer commitment. They have flexibility, which is important in raising a family, travelling or socializing with friends; and they have the opportunity to meet a wide variety of people, expand their network of friends and become involved in difficult policy issues, in a context that that is related to corporate and governmental spheres.

The women were also aware of the fact that the opportunity to serve on a board was limited to a specific few. They discussed the existence of a volunteer service network and used terms like clique and inner circle. This sample of women often became involved as a result of friendship obligations. In this regard, the women's self-reported reason for each of their directorships is instructive. Of the 417 directorships (over the past thirty years) 365 were the combined result of invitations by friends (100) and acquaintances (175), through the service network (87) and because their family had a tradition of service on a particular board (13). As an informal assessment of the importance of acquaintances and the volunteer service network as a means of "closure" to many boards, the following comments are instructive:

You go to a board meeting and you think, "Oh my god, his sister-in-law would be perfect to do something." ... We're always looking for bodies. But the most natural thing is if you know somebody. (No.7)

It becomes a network system. That's really what happens. I wasn't unknown to [X organization] ... It's very hard to take someone without knowing something about them. (No. 65)

You learn a lot of what's going on in related organizations. It's quite incestuous too ... and occasionally you wish to know who's going off [X board] so you can pick them up when their term is up. So there's a bit of a network out there (No. 25)

You meet people and then when you need someone you call them; you must have a wide acquaintanceship. (No. 34)

One respondent was explicit in her assessment of the closed nature of many boards:

I'm not unaware that it becomes a sort of, not exactly a clique, but it becomes an inner circle ... [Y hospital board] is very heavily Anglo-Saxon. [This city] isn't that way anymore. ... You tend to move in your own circles so you don't know a lot of people that are East Indian or anybody who would be comfortable and would feel at ease participating. (No. 8)

The final incentive for board participation is the prestige gained from invitations to serve on boards, particularly hospitals, universities and large welfare agencies. Clement (1975), Ross (1953) and Auerback (1961) have pointed out the importance of prestige for furthering a young executive's career, and the community recognition resulting from service on a socially prominent hospital or university board. For women, an invitation to a prestigious board seems to be equally important. The women work with top professionals and businessmen of the community. The women's comments reflect the importance of prestige as an incentive:

Some get on for this. They work out, in fact, maybe even better—for their egos and a sense of accomplishment—they show the organization what they can do . . . I know many people who are actively seeking a spot on a hospital board. They feel they've made it in government for example and they want to make it in the voluntary sector. (No. 29)

Being a chairman of a teaching hospital is a very prestigious job. You are selected onto these boards for your business experience, social connections and financial connections. (No. 1)

When someone asks you to be on [X board, a prestigious child welfare agency], it's an ego boost. It makes you feel good inside. But there's no glamour. There may be a little prestige. (No. 31)

I feel some people are on boards because having their name on them is useful and there are certain boards where they are not called upon to do anything, only to rubber stamp. Very often I see when husbands and wives are members they don't usually come together at the same time. Sometimes the husbands are there in name only because they are people of power and prestige, money. But usually where there is a husband and wife, it is the wife who will be the active one, and the husband will lend the name. (No. 46)

Thus the class culture of volunteer participation concomitantly provides incentives for participation—noblesse oblige, family tradition, prestige—and ensures that community leadership roles are retained as a prerogative of this class, through service networks and friendship obligations.

### CLASS LEGITIMATION

As discussed above, respondents are aware that opportunities for participation are limited. Several women suggested that change at the board level is also slow. Two women commented that boards are often limited to certain types of people and that their programs are slow to acknowledge change in the client population. The first respondent, a self-described token ethnic on a service agency board, stated:

The board is 100 years old and has WASP ideas. It is only now discussing what front-line workers have known for years. The agency decides to do its own study. Now, five years later, there's still no movement. (No. 13)

The second respondent, then the president of the same agency stated:

We're very aware at the agency that we're not serving our immigrant population as effectively as we should. It's mainly because we're working out of our traditional Anglo-Saxon base and the programmes just don't work. (No. 31)

It must be emphasized that while the respondents and volunteer directors generally exhibit a willingness and enthusiasm to implement changes, the class prerogative for volunteering remains intact. The idea of staff and client participation was discussed by all the respondents. Underneath the prestige of volunteer boards is the notion of exclusivity and leadership. People invited to serve, in essence, are being recognized for past or potential community leadership ability (Zald, 1970). This incentive for leadership roles is directly linked to social legitimation of their class position.

The women were questioned about their relationship with paid professionals and whether volunteer directors represent the interests of a dominant socio-economic group. Responses in each area of questioning reflect their class-bred interest in community leadership roles. The women justify their service on boards, and the existence of volunteer boards in general, by emphasizing the role played by "community" volunteers.

The two areas of their involvement as volunteer directors—with paid professionals and client directors—speak directly to the legitimacy of the women's community leadership roles. The following comments are instructive of the symbiotic yet adversarial relationship between the agency's staff and volunteer board.

The levels of knowledge are different. The staff person has a day-to-day appreciation of the problems and services. The board takes a lot longer to come to this. However, the staff are often too close to see an overall broad perspective. (No. 44)

In all these things, there is public money being spent. Whether it's money you've raised or from government, it's your money and mine. My experience with paid staff is that they're primarily interested in their own area . . . and they therefore will spend. There has to be someone to watch it. There also has to be someone in the community to get money. (No. 38)

We have so much talent on our board you couldn't pay them their fees to sit on the board. Also they don't have an axe to grind. A paid person on a board may be protecting her/his own position. A volunteer, if she sees she doesn't like something, can always leave or fire the executive director. (No. 29)

You cannot operate a fund raising agency on behalf of a sensitive social service sector out there and not understand and interpret that sector to the donor, be sensitive to their needs, their worries about policy development. . . . You may have a strong professional staff and a good deal of the leadership, the nuances of what the community needs are . . . can only [be developed] if sections of the community are involved in it. (No. 47)

The qualities required for a successful board member coalesce in the dominant class personality—a willingness to serve, contacts for fund-raising, expertise and an arm's-length perspective. The women's discussion of their role in agency money management, funding and policy development reveals the thin line between community leadership as a tradition of service and maintaining the system where they retain control of these leadership opportunities. It is therefore

reasonable for the women to emphasize, as they have done, the reasons for the importance of their role on voluntary agencies. By perpetuating the need for their participation on boards, the women legitimate their rights to these roles. Indeed, the characteristics of a system which suggest inclusion of certain persons for boards service reinforce the exclusion of others.

In the interviews the women were asked to comment on the suggestion that volunteer directors represent the interests of an upper socio-economic group. The majority of their answers focused on client participation on boards. The respondents agreed that the representativeness of the community at large is insufficient. One respondent explains the attitudes of volunteer boards:

I do think that, for a long time, that particular sector of people with the best intentions in the world, thought that they had to speak on behalf of people who could not speak for themselves, the disadvantaged, so to speak. To a certain degree, I think it still holds true. But for a long time, it was thought that those clients didn't have a voice of their own. In fact, you never asked the client. (No. 32)

This respondent articulates what Noble (1979) characterizes as class practices that preserve the existing system of class relations. While this attitude is not as prevalent today, it has not totally disappeared. For example, the women of this small sample tended to justify their class prerogative for community leadership roles by outlining why clients were not commonly found on volunteer boards. The women described board work as generally needing people with:

- Specialized skills: legal, financial, and fund-raising.
- Effective speaking and writing styles to detail policy and act as mediator in governmental funding submissions.
- Expertise in social service areas, such as day-care, child welfare and the handicapped.

In addition to the skills required in board work, the women identified personal attributes which excuse clients' inability to participate. Four respondents, in particular, articulated the problems with client participation on boards:

It's an educational problem. You bring someone on the board who has a limited education, even if they are very bright, they're being thrown among a circle of people who speak a different language, who take for granted a lot of values and hypotheses, that these people have never been exposed to. So people from lower SES are not comfortable; they don't know what the boards are talking about half the time. (No. 32)

An addict is not the kind of person you need on a board because . . . they have their own reality. They're not interested in whether the building is falling down. They need to be brought up through committees to see the value of that they're doing and to drop some of their narrow perspectives. (No. 52)

We tried to have involvement from our former clients. . . . They possibly didn't have the time to spare, or the skills to express themselves and perhaps didn't have enough of the right clothes to wear. (No. 31)

The meetings are at noon. That means people have to be non-working or work downtown and be free to take fairly long lunch hours. As soon as you get into those things, you're moving into "those" sorts of people. (No. 56)

The skills, time, point of view, education and values that the respondents suggest account for the limited use of clients on boards serve to justify the con-

tinuance of the upper class in community leadership roles. Also, the reasons given by the women for the shortcomings of client directors serve to limit their ability to participate effectively. The values and behaviors taken for granted by the upper class directors result in a situation where the client feels a need to defer to the volunteer directors. Thus the client's participation is limited in a situation where the clients must learn the rituals of board work and where they are confronted with discussions on legal and financial points about which they have little understanding. These obstacles to participation serve to unobtrusively ensure the client's inability to confront (conservative) board policies. In this way the possibility of any far reaching impact by clients on boards is effectively curtailed.

In view of the "disasters" which resulted from placing clients immediately on boards, many agencies now include clients on committees of their boards. In these committees the client learns to express her/his opinion, to adopt the expected role of a director, and to feel comfortable with people from high status positions. This tack works well for all those concerned. Clients can find their level in a small, informal group and discover whether they have the talents and interest to eventually become a client director. On the other side, boards are able to assure that potential directors have knowledge of board rituals and stances on issues. In this way the board re-socializes the client to board values, traditions and points of view as "the way things are done" on boards. This training and education has the effect of socializing new members into approved roles and of reducing behavior that is potentially disruptive to existing administrative practices.

### CONCLUSION

The women interviewed are aware of and act on class-consistent incentives for taking on community leadership roles. While raised to volunteer out of family tradition and noblesse oblige, the women are not unaware of the rewards of their work: they develop expertise, expand contacts and gain prestige, and assure the continuance of community leadership roles as a dominant class prerogative and the maintenance of the voluntary sector status quo. These latter two incentives are broad class goals. Yet they surface in the respondents' comments nonetheless. By asserting the importance of an impartial perspective, expertise, contacts and community membership, the women make the case for their being the social group best suited for the job. That is, they are the natural choice to develop policy, manage agency finances and make funding submissions to the government. By doing so, they reinforce their position and obscure their interest in maintaining the voluntary sector as it is.

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