



“We Are Not Contractors”: Professionalizing the Interactive Service Work of NGOs in Rajasthan, India

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abstract

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have been much studied for the impacts of neoliberalization on their funding, procedures, and motivations. In this article, I use a case study from Rajasthan, India, to show how conflicts that have been generated by recent trends in development funding are taking a specific shape at the scale of NGO workplaces. A process of professionalization is occurring that is altering NGO-client interactions and the hiring priorities of NGOs. I use the framework of interactive service work to argue that previously close relationships between fieldworkers and clients have become shallow encounters, characterized by a relative interchangeability of provider and customer. The work of an NGO fieldworker has become deskilled and degraded. For the NGO I studied, deskilling brought about a rapid turnover of senior staff, who were replaced by low-paid, low-caste fieldworkers. The change in staff spurred the management of employees' emotional labor as the NGO leaders attempted to generate the necessary emotional connections between fieldworkers and clients, so its contracted project could move forward successfully. Changes in the caste composition of staff, coupled with new labor processes in villages, also created tensions about the status of the NGO's work as a social service. The research adds depth to previous studies of neoliberalism's impact on service workers in the Global North and South and to the literature on the professionalization of development.

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The quotation in the title of this article was uttered by Sunil, the joint director of Rural Power, an Indian nongovernmental organization (NGO), when denying a suggestion that the NGO had become a development contractor. Even in a remote place like rural northern Rajasthan, Sunil was familiar with international criticisms of NGOs and was aware that being called a contractor was pejorative. So when my research assistants and I told him that the employees and clients¹ of Rural Power had suggested that the NGO had become a contractor, he vehemently denied it (O'Reilly and Dhanju 2010). In Sunil's denial is the expression of a dearly held belief by many development practitioners: NGOs are independent social service organizations, not business operations. NGOs are known by donors and governments as ideal service providers—connected to distant populations, but cheap and hard-working (Escobar 1992; Feldman 1997; Townsend, Porter, and Mawdsley 2002). Sunil is clearly invested in this image, and his denial is all the more striking because Rural Power is actually contracted to facilitate a poverty-alleviation project for the Government of Rajasthan (GOR). This article explores how grassroots NGOs try to maintain an appearance of their work as a social service at a time when shifts in development funding have resulted in NGOs that are actually working to fulfill development contracts.

Shifts in development funding include favoring NGOs for the implementation of projects and an increase in the number of projects worldwide—from an estimated 10,000 to 80,000 in the past decade (“The Future of Aid: The Scramble in Africa” 2008). Flows of aid to NGOs have increased; approximately US\$27 billion, or about one-third of the flows of multilateral aid, is channeled annually through NGOs (“The Future of Aid: The Scramble in Africa” 2008). NGOs are not only serving more people in poor areas, but they are hiring more people (Dichter 2005). This research questions how NGO labor processes have changed because of shifts in funding and donors' demands for professionalism (Mawdsley et al. 2002; Townsend, Porter, and Mawdsley 2002; Kamat 2004). I am concerned with the outcomes and wider social

¹ The term *client* (in English) was one that the Rural Power fieldworkers used. Their meaning was synonymous with *customer*. Although elsewhere I suggest that fieldworkers acted to create patron-client relationships (O'Reilly 2010), I use the term *client* here as the fieldworkers did.

implications of these new labor processes for NGO fieldworkers—those who do the face-to-face work of delivering NGO services.

Studies of workers, including studies of service workers, are fairly common in geography and sociology (Pringle 1988; Leidner 1993; Crang 1994; Bryson, Daniels, and Warf 2004; McDowell, Batnitzky, and Dyer 2007), but as yet, little research has examined the labor processes behind the interactive service work of NGOs in the Global South. NGOs have been closely studied by scholars of development across disciplines, but not usually with attention to NGOs as the employers of service workers. The research presented here moves beyond research on NGOs as development institutions by bringing to bear a more intensive focus on NGO labor processes. I use the term *labor process* to signal (1) the practical aspect of labor process—the set of activities involved in transforming raw materials into useful objects or, in the case of service workers, the activities that facilitate the provision of a service and (2) the relational aspect of labor process—the social relations of workers to each other and to management in the workplace (Burawoy 1979). For NGOs, the goal of the labor process is not to increase profits but to implement projects successfully, which will lead to the funding of future projects and longevity for the organization. For grassroots NGOs, like Rural Power, their success in fulfilling donors' demands and satisfying their own identity as social service, politically motivated nonprofits are at odds (Kapoor 2005).

In the following pages, I demonstrate that conflicts that have been generated by recent trends in development funding are taking a specific shape at the scale of the workplace of NGOs; the practical realities of neoliberal development projects and funding are altering NGO-client interactions and NGO hiring priorities. A process of professionalization is occurring that shifts an NGO's priority in providing services to the donor, away from village clients (Mawdsley et al. 2002). I use a frame of interactive service work and emotional labor (Hochschild 1983; Leidner 1993) to argue that previously intimate "relationships" between fieldworkers and clients become "encounters" that are characterized by the lack of personal exchange (Gutek 1995). Fieldworkers are no longer hired because of their commitment to social service; their work has been deskilled and degraded.

However, community participation in a project is critical to the long-term success of the project; therefore, the interactive service work of NGOs has become a job in which fieldworkers are trained to behave in ways that will compensate for the lack of trust and connection between the NGO and its clients. Trends favoring participatory development have meant that one job of NGOs is to increase or maintain the participation of clients in their projects. Although NGO clients realize that NGOs give them access to otherwise unavailable resources, people, and power (Mosse 2005; O'Reilly 2010), they also know that participation in NGO projects involves opportunity costs. When these costs do not outweigh the benefits of participating (Mosse 2005; O'Reilly 2010), the burden of participatory development falls on NGOs, which must find a way to generate community participation regardless of their constituents' interest in the activities that are offered. Framing NGO work as interactive service work yields insights into NGO labor processes as NGOs struggle to resolve tensions between donors' calls for professionalism that distance them from clients and the need to create or maintain personal relationships that will sustain their client base. How do NGOs generate the necessary relationships between themselves and village communities—or at least an appearance of them—when the practicalities of their work demand that their focus be elsewhere? I argue that fieldworkers' emotional labor is extracted to generate the appearance of a personal relationship between the NGOs and their clients in villages.

Much of the research to date on interactive service work and emotional labor has studied workers in the Global North (Hochschild 1983; Paules 1991; Leidner 1993), so

this research serves to fill a gap in our knowledge of service workers in the Global South (exceptions include Mirchandani 2005; Syed, Ali, and Winstanley 2005; Bryson 2007; Poster 2007; Otis 2008a, 2008b). The Indian economy is growing rapidly (estimated at 6.5% for 2009; Srivastava 2009) and growing as a service economy,² making it all the more timely and salient to understand the particular impacts of service work and emotional labor on a growing cadre of workers who accept service employment in the South Asian context and beyond. Furthermore, India's tradition of social service work, coupled with increased funding and donors' demands, provides a rich context for exploring changes in the social service sector. As the work of development becomes a career path, both in India and elsewhere, the wider social and economic impacts of development must be explored. This article adds two additional elements to studies of labor process that have focused on the Global North. First, it explores NGOs as playing a unique role because they both serve *and* employ marginal populations who are not experiencing India's rapid economic growth. Second, it is concerned with the dynamics of the Indian caste system and the particular ways in which caste comes into play at the local scale of NGO employment because of transformations in funding for development aid at the global scale.

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With ethnographic evidence from a Rajasthani (Indian) NGO, I show how changes in funding and accompanying demands led to the deskilling of NGO work and the hiring of individuals who were willing to perform emotional labor in lieu of deep connections with NGO constituents. Senior, higher-paid members of the NGO quit, and low-paid, low-caste fieldworkers were hired. The organization turned from retaining its long-term fieldworkers who were motivated to build the NGO and perform social service to hiring short-term workers without better opportunities for employment in the region where the NGO was working. I suggest that changes in the NGO's hiring practices stemmed from donors' demands for professionalization. The outcomes of professionalization were (1) the alienation of fieldworkers from their work and clients, (2) the successful implementation of NGO projects, and (3) transformation of the workplace—including a loss of prestige for the NGO. Sunil's denial that "we are not contractors" was a response to a suggested loss of status.

My opportunity to study changing NGO labor processes arose when Rural Power began implementing a World Bank poverty-alleviation project shortly before my ethnographic research began. Rural Power operates in rural northern Rajasthan, India, where the population is generally poor and agricultural, and the majority caste is Jat (considered an Other Backward Class³ in Rajasthan; Muralidharan 1999). Other castes include Brahmins and Rajputs (upper caste); Baniyas (intermediate caste); Kumhars and Other Backward Classes; some Meghwals, Nayaks, and other Scheduled Castes (untouchable or *dalit*); and Muslims.⁴ For six months, over the course of two years, I witnessed the NGO and its fieldworkers go through an adjustment process to the World Bank and GOR's exacting demands. These demands included meeting targets, filing receipts for reimbursement, and providing intensive documentation of progress. These professionalization processes also seeped into other projects that the NGO worked on. I began participant observation in

² For example, NASSCOM (2006, cited in Poster 2007) projected that Indian call-center jobs would triple to 1 million by 2008.

³ The Government of National Capital Territory of Delhi Commission for Other Backward Classes (n.d.) selected Other Backward Classes on the basis of "social and educational backwardness."

⁴ The Government of India, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (2009), offers the following definitions of Scheduled Castes: "extreme social, education and economic backwardness arising out of the traditional practice of untouchability" and Scheduled Tribes: "indications of primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with the community at large and backwardness."

December 2005 and completed it in December 2007, with two follow-up visits to the NGO in the summers of 2008 and 2009 (see O'Reilly and Dhanju 2010 on dissemination). Staff interviews (32) were conducted in Hindi and Marwari; I also attended monthly reporting meetings of staff whenever possible. Villagers were interviewed and met in focus groups (22 and 8, respectively).

The following section sets the terms of the debate with a detailed discussion on the ramifications of professionalization for the interactive service work and labor processes of NGOs, with specific attention to research in South Asia. This discussion is followed by an ethnographic section that draws on the words of Rural Power fieldworkers and village clients before and during Rural Power's transition to donors' demands. In an analytical section, I discuss the broader impacts of changes in NGO labor processes, with attention to the practical and discursive effects within the organization. Finally, I draw some conclusions about the fruitfulness of exploring service work in the Global South for deepening our understanding of the effects of neoliberalism at many scales.

Professionalization in the NGO sector

The acronym NGO is a catch-all term that has multiple meanings across a variety of contexts. The typology created by Mawdsley et al. (2002) indicates that Indian NGOs range from small, independent, local organizations without foreign funding to large, nationally dispersed, foreign-funded organizations, with many in between. Here, I am concerned with nonprofit rural NGOs that are social service institutions performing the work of development through local or foreign funding and operating, at least historically, independent of governments. Nonprofit groups in India employ about 6 million full-time workers, about half of whom are paid and half of whom volunteer (Srivastava, et al. 2004). By comparison, there are approximately 6.6 million paid laborers in the manufacturing sector. As a percentage of the population, the proportion working in nonprofits is less impressive (1.4 percent), but India has a long history of social service organizations with a wide variety of interests and constituents (Sen 1993). Staples (1992) counted about 100,000 private societies that were registered in India, with 18,000 working as development organizations. Like elsewhere in the world, funding provided to Indian NGOs from outside the country increased dramatically from the 1980s to the 1990s—from 5 billion Indian rupees to an estimated 9 billion rupees (Robinson, Farrington, and Satish 1993). According to more recent data, Indian social service organizations spend approximately US\$2.8 billion annually (Tandon et al. 2004), which amounts to roughly 2.9 percent of the total expenditures of the 2002–03 Indian budget (US\$95.3 billion), the time of Tandon et al.'s (2004) data collection. A sizeable portion of social service spending in India, then, is provided directly by NGOs and their donors. A growth in funding has meant a growth in employment in NGOs, both in India and beyond.

Whereas NGOs once engaged in political education and consciousness-raising, they are now being criticized for being contractors. NGOs take on contract work to pay their employees' salaries and generally to pay their bills (Kapoor 2005), while trying to continue the grassroots organizing they are (somewhat romantically) known for. Mawdsley et al. (2002) and others (Miraftab 1997; Townsend et al. 2002; Nagar and Raju 2003; Kamat 2004) have found that professionalization in the form of providing documentation of and accounting for a project to donors significantly eats into the time and energy that NGO fieldworkers have for clients. Changes in NGOs' funding and demands for professionalization bring fieldworkers and villagers into a new kind of relationship—one in which there is a greater distance between them—yet fieldworkers' livelihoods are more dependent than before on villagers' participation in NGO projects. A change in labor

processes prescribed by professionalization has moved from one of “relationships” to “encounters” between fieldworkers and clients (Gutek 1995). Gutek (1995) defined *encounters* as service delivery interactions that take place between a provider and a customer who are basically interchangeable. The customization of workers’ activities has been replaced by routine. As I demonstrate later, the work of Rural Power fieldworkers moved from relationships to encounters. Connection to clients was substituted with surface interactions that required the expenditure and management of fieldworkers’ emotional labor.

Emotional labor has been widely explored as an integral element of interactive service work or frontline service work. Robyn Leidner (1993) defined interactive service work as the kinds of jobs that involve direct, face-to-face interaction with clients. That NGOs perform interactive service work is nearly always taken for granted by scholars (exceptions include Crewe and Harrison 1998; Sangtin Writers 2006; see also Mawdsley, Townsend, and Porter 2005 on North-South NGOs’ face-to-face interaction). This research seeks to make the performance of service work explicit for the purpose of illuminating the outcomes of changing labor processes that are due to neoliberal development. Emotional labor is a job demand—an attempt made by management to control the emotions of workers to create an emotional display for the customer during a service interaction (Hochschild 1983; Wharton 2009). Emotional labor involves generating or withholding emotional expressions to forward the provider-customer interaction; to increase revenues; or to ensure a positive, long-term outcome (Gutek 1995; Wharton 2009). It goes beyond ordinary emotional management for civility’s sake because it is elicited to further organizational goals—whether they are to generate profits or to successfully implement a project.

The emotional labor of fieldworkers serves multiple purposes. NGOs, especially smaller organizations, may be desperate enough for funding to accept contracts that place the financial burden of their projects’ success on them. Donors’ demands for accountability mean that NGOs are placed in the position of funding development until the success of their projects is proved. When an NGO is not reimbursed for expenses until a project is completed, (as was the case for the District Poverty Initiative Project, or DPIP), clients must participate in the project until the end, or the NGO stands to lose its investment. For development organizations, as for other service providers (e.g., Bryson, Daniels, and Warf 2004; Otis 2008a), the reaction of clients is a significant part of the interaction because without their consent or approval, the interaction or “sale” cannot move forward. But as development contractors, NGOs do not design the projects they implement (Mawdsley et al. 2002); they cannot count on their clients’ interest in the projects they have contracted for. Emotional labor is expended to build sufficiently strong ties with clients in villages so the clients feel an obligation to participate in projects even if they receive no immediate benefit or continue to participate even when the demands become onerous.⁵ Fieldworkers realize that the goal of their emotional labor is to build relationships that will keep a development project moving forward toward success. The success of a project not only reimburses the NGO for its expenses over the cost of the project, but, in India, procures a “no-objection” certificate⁶ that can obtain future funding for the NGO.

The emotional labor of NGO fieldworkers weaves together with two neoliberal threads that Nightingale (2005, 187) identified as key to recent changes in development projects:

⁵ For other ways in which fieldworkers aim to increase participation in a project, see O’Reilly (2010).

⁶ The GOR gives a “no-objection” certificate to contractors that indicates that the work has been completed as reported. Without this certificate, a contractor that has worked for the GOR before will not be rehired.

(1) professional and expert knowledges and (2) the increasing promotion of market-style relations. Market-style relations form the context for the disbursement of donor funds and the competitive distribution of project contracts on behalf of donors. What NGOs are “selling” in the development marketplace are their access to a client base, knowledge of an area, reputation, quality of reporting, financial accountability, and previous successes (Craig and Porter 2006). Craig and Porter (2006, 61) claimed that NGOs have a comparative advantage in selling donors and governments cheap governance in the periphery. NGOs do so by being cost effective and employing flexible labor. They may find themselves in competition for donor contracts that are publicly tendered; if funding is not found, then NGOs often have to lay off staff at the end of a project when the money runs out (see Mawdsley et al. 2002). Competition for funds and flexibility of labor (or job insecurity, from a fieldworker’s perspective) combine to encourage NGOs to pursue projects that are beyond their expertise or objectives. NGOs can claim highly localized geographic and cultural knowledge; they acquire other types of knowledge and performance skills depending on their donors’ needs (Kothari 2005).

Much recent research on service work in economic geography has focused on workers’ performance in workplaces of the Global North, especially performances of gender stereotypes (McDowell 1997) or that obtained by constant surveillance by customers in particular workplaces like restaurants (Leidner 1993; Crang 1994). Emotional labor has the effect of blurring the boundaries among between work, worker, and outcomes (see Crang 1994; Poster 2007). Research outside geography, which has explored cases from both the Global North and the Global South, has taken a particular interest in performance and the body in service encounters and emotional labor. Much of this research has investigated how certain gendered, classed “bodies” are selected for service jobs on the basis of employers’ criteria that assume that the necessary skill set will be acquired later (see Wolkowitz 2006). Social groups from whom deference is expected in general social life (e.g., women) are overrepresented in jobs that require deference and are often seen as “better suited” for the work than are those from privileged groups (Wharton 2009; see also McDowell 1997). Gender, race, age, and other physical characteristics serve to signify what the customer can expect in the service encounter (Macdonald and Merrill 2009, 122); that is, the appearance of workers leads to expectations by clients about the service they will receive. This article contributes to these debates by exploring caste as an additional signifier in service encounters and one that has been neglected as an element of the Indian service economy.⁷

Wolkowitz (2006) drew on Bourdieu’s (1977) notion of *hexis* (i.e., bodily comportment that is learned, classed behavior) to argue that certain bodies are more desirable for service work because of the ways in which they already express (learned) deference to clients. Bourdieu’s (1977) related idea of *habitus* (an individual’s disposition and taste as reflective of class and personal history that structures actions that she or he may take) was used by Jeffrey (2009) to inform his understanding of caste-based differentials in the everyday political strategies of young unemployed Indian men. His work illustrates the significance of habitus and hexis in maintaining a narrow range of opportunities for lower-middle-class, especially lower-caste, youths. Bourdieu’s concept of hexis is useful in the case of Rural Power because it suggests the reasons why the extraction of emotional labor was particularly important after Rural Power began hiring Meghwal (Scheduled Caste) fieldworkers. The bodily comportment and “way of being” in the world of these

⁷ Caste is mentioned in the literature on Indian call centers (Budhwar, Varma, Singh, and Dhar 2006) and is given explicit attention in studies of manufacturing (Chari 2004), brokering (Jeffrey 2009), and unemployment (Gidwani 2000).

new hires were distinctly less confident than were those of the senior or upper-caste Rural Power fieldworkers. The hiring of *dalit* workers was imbricated in the devaluing of Rural Power's work, and fieldworkers expended emotional labor as a means of overcoming some of that devaluation. Issues of performance and the body are no less important for rural NGOs than for other service providers in the era of neoliberalism.

214 Previous research on caste and work in India has indicated that caste, family ties, gender, and geography all converge to influence individual choices of acceptable work and the meanings it is given (Gidwani 2001; Dyson 2008; Jeffrey, Jeffery, and Jeffery 2008; Jeffrey 2009). Workers know that "forms of labor are communicative" (Gidwani 2000, 146). They are aware that their identities are created and contested through the labor process, which takes place in an "economic and cultural arena" (Gidwani 2000, 146) at both the global (e.g., donors) and the local (e.g., villagers) scales. Research on experiences of work in South Asia has indicated that those on the social margins recast their work in ways that increase its importance, such as by claiming it is steady work, not piecework (Dyson 2008) or, as Nightingale (2005) and Gidwani (2000) found, by refusing needed work because it is considered the work of low-caste people. For Gandhian-inspired Indian NGOs that work with the poor and socially marginal (*dalits*, widows), asserting that they are "doing good" enables them to continue to claim the status associated with NGOs. As Jeffrey, Jeffery, and Jeffery (2004) argued for rural north India, forms of labor are determined by education, status, and caste and, in turn, determine the social status of the one who is doing the work. I demonstrate later that development contracting led to a deskilling of NGO work, which was further devalued when the jobs of senior fieldworkers were filled by low-caste employees.

It is the particulars of how NGOs as workplaces are changing and how development fieldwork and who should do it are coming to be redefined that interest me in this article. In the next section, I relate the narrative of Rural Power's transition before and after the World Bank project. I then illustrate the processes of hiring, training, leading, and scripting that—in combination—led to shifts in the labor process over the two years that I studied it. I am especially interested in the role of caste in the selection and performance of employees because changes in hiring demonstrate how a shift in NGO work to the contracted delivery of development services led to the extraction of emotional labor from fieldworkers owing to a loss of prestige in the workplace. Employment in the development sector reveals itself as contradictory—enabling access to resources and (potentially) prestige but requiring the acceptance of low wages, deskilling, and emotional labor from fieldworkers.

Rural Power in Transition

In 2005, Rural Power contracted with the GOR to facilitate the DPIP. The DPIP was funded by the World Bank and was meant to jump-start independent income generation by villagers who were living below the poverty line in the seven poorest districts of Rajasthan. Before the onset of the DPIP project, fieldworkers had considerable flexibility in the field to focus on the work they liked or to do what villagers asked them to do. They had assigned tasks, such as teaching girls to read or assisting migrant workers, but they also responded to villagers' immediate needs. The NGO had roots in the Gandhian philosophy of social service to the poor, outreach to rural India, and self-sacrifice. As Meera, the woman codirector, told me:

Getting help for someone from government schemes is not in our project but we will run after that too, like, if we are asked to arrange a pension for someone, or someone needs an eye

operation then our worker goes with them. If someone says “I want a family planning operation done [sterilization]” and asks the women fieldworkers to come with her to the hospital, so they go along with her. Whatever help is needed, we provide that. (interview, winter 2005)

Meera had this to say when I asked her about the strengths of the NGO:

Attachment with villagers is a strength of Rural Power. We have good attachment with the rural people, whether they are male or female. This is one of the strengths of Rural Power. Also, there is unity amongst the workers. There is no sort of friction or ill-feeling towards anyone. Everyone sits together and talks and has similar feelings (*bhaavanaa*). So these are two main strengths of Rural Power. (interview, winter 2005)

Meera summarized that NGO work *is* the flexible service relationship that fieldworkers have with villagers.

Until 2005, the work of Rural Power was funded by various international NGOs for relatively small amounts of money and usually for the purpose of education. Then some of these international NGOs withdrew their funding. It was rumored within the organization that poor-quality report writing was the reason why funding was withdrawn,⁸ but I could not confirm this rumor. The loss of this income was partially responsible for Rural Power’s interest in the World Bank DPIP project, but management and fieldworkers gave a variety of reasons for taking on the new project:

The times are changing and so are the activities of the *sansthaa* (NGO). (Amir, summer 2007)

All this doing good and social work now happen for money. And even I will say this: People do this [work] to fill their own house. And I would also say that this NGO is working with the same objectives. (Vivek, summer 2006)

Because [projects] like DPIP and others match with the *sansthaa*’s (NGO’s) goal. (Hira, winter 2005)

The funding agency comes to us. It is not that that we have to go there. They call us to give money. If there is a funding agency fair (*mela*), then they call everyone. For two days they have meetings. Information comes from Jodhpur and Jaipur for wherever the project is happening. You can submit a proposal. (Sunil, summer 2007)

All these reasons likely account for Rural Power’s interest in the DPIP project. In addition, Rural Power might have pursued the DPIP because it was a large, long-term project compared to the others they had previously had. The DPIP was expected to move beyond the initial piloting phase, giving Rural Power the potential to move into neighboring districts if its work went well.

The effects of the DPIP project for the organization were dramatic. Meera stated clearly in a follow-up interview that before the work of the NGO was social work, but now the NGO staff was comprised just of people who wanted a job. Meera explained:

The work of DPIP is on a contract basis. First we do the work, and then we get paid. As much work as we do, we get paid. Sunil, the other director, says that I am negative, but I say no. I can see how this will go. The GOR has no interest in people, just targets. They don’t understand the field reality. (interview, winter 2006)

Meera understood that Rural Power has become a contract worker of the GOR. She understood what this kind of funding means for Rural Power. It means that their work will

⁸ Mawdsley et al. 2002 found that English skills may determine an NGO’s ability to find and maintain funding.

be remunerated on the basis of the number of people they reach. Reaching a large number of people is how the organization will keep going financially. Meera also feared what this change means for individual people—their concerns and needs will be neglected by this approach. Originally the NGO served 18 villages, but as part of the DPIP had expanded to serve about 80 villages. Even though the staff had increased, fieldworkers covered more villages than they did before. There simply was not time to tailor the activities of individual fieldworkers to the individual needs of villagers. Villagers reported that the NGO staff wasted time “running around” putting money “here and there” and that no benefit would come from that (see O’Reilly 2010).

Over the two years that I studied the project, a struggle occurred between the two joint directors of the organization. The struggle between these two founders of Rural Power reflected a wider struggle within the NGO about its goals and the kinds of relationships that the fieldworkers were going to have with villagers. At the time of the research, both founders had been with the NGO for 10 years. Sunil, the male codirector, did not make the connections that Meera, the female codirector, made to relationships as a determining feature of NGO work. He offered a different definition of *contractor* and denied that Rural Power is a contractor.

Sunil: We don’t build ditches; we don’t collect garbage. We are not contractors [*thekedaar*]. We don’t believe in contract work. They encourage this from us, but we don’t believe in this. If we become contractors, we will never be an NGO. There is only one work we have to do—we have to do one or the other. (summer 2007)

For Sunil, Rural Power is not a contractor because it is not doing the government’s dirty work of digging ditches or collecting garbage. Rural Power does not do manual labor; fieldworkers do not do such filthy work. Sunil claimed a higher status for the work of Rural Power—it is service work, not manual labor. Despite the payment-for-services-rendered system that the GOR demands, Sunil maintained that Rural Power is still an NGO, performing social service. He acknowledged that Rural Power is under pressure from the government, but he defined the work that it is doing for the GOR as NGO work. In a later encounter, Sunil described the work of the NGO as “working with the poor.”

The differences between Meera and Sunil led to Meera’s slow ostracism from the organization. Although Meera founded Rural Power, by winter 2006, she had stopped collecting a salary, rarely came to the office, and no longer worked in the field. Meera and her vision of development work were marginalized, while Sunil’s ability to manage NGO finances and to communicate in Hindi and English with other donors and the GOR enabled him to run the organization without her (see Mawdsley et al. 2002 in footnote 8). His power within the organization grew in the following months when Meera’s supporters also left the organization. The dispute between the two leaders about the guiding principles for the NGO led to the departure of certain staff members. Sunil then replaced these staff members, and, as I show next, staff were selected differently than in previous years.

Staff Selection and the Making of the NGO

Leidner (1999) argued that when long-term relationships between individual service providers and customers are allowed to develop, the providers have an incentive to invest themselves emotionally. Management in such cases usually avoids manipulating employees’ emotional labor because employees regulate themselves as part of the ongoing encounters (Gutek 1995). This management style was reflected in the early years 1996–2005 of Rural Power’s operations. Villagers who had known the fieldworkers since their earliest arrival in the villages discussed the depth of these relationships. As one village

woman, Dapi, put it, “Meera used to teach (*siikhaanaa*) us many things with love and affection. She used to come and stay here.” The connections that villagers felt with fieldworkers were the outgrowth of years of personal investment by both parties. Dapi, speaking a mix of Hindi and Marwari, noticed a change in the recent work of staff: “There is some difference in the work because Meera and Priya, they made the NGO (*sansthaa banaayii thii*). Niti is just coming for work (*naukrii lagyaa*).” Dapi identified a change in the motivation of Rural Power employees: there were those who worked to build an organization and those who did a job in that organization.

Dapi described the changes that were occurring within Rural Power with perspicacity. “Making the NGO” was a key motivation for early employees; that is, they sought to establish the NGO in the project area as a trustworthy group of people, who could be called on to offer assistance and who knew well the physical and social terrain of the NGO’s field area. Meera described the staff’s identification with the organization by talking about salaries:

In the beginning, everyone made the same money except Sunil and I, who made more. And in those days everyone knew it. When things were tight, we even negotiated over a few 100 rupees [taken from staff salaries], and nobody minded because they felt that it was their *sansthaa* [organization]. The budget was open, and people knew what was going on. (interview, winter 2005)

The staff identified with the other members of the organization and its goals; a small staff and openness meant a tightly knit group. Their performance and the relationships they had with villagers *were* the NGO—they had no building or vehicles as material proof that the NGO existed.

In the earliest days of the NGO, salaries were low; during one period, Rural Power could afford to pay all its staff only Rs.1000 (approximately US\$20) a month. That figure is lower than the minimum daily wage rate of Rs.100 for unskilled labor (Government of Rajasthan 2009), but it meant steady work. Long hours at pay so low that the work was practically volunteer work developed in the staff a sense of mission in the NGO’s beginning—they were doing *samaaj sewaa* (social service), the work of helping others. There was a feeling among the staff that NGO work was a “calling,” which helped justify the hardship. Later, when the senior fieldworkers quit, the salaries of new hires were considerably less (Rs. 2000–3000, or the wage of a low-level government clerk), than those paid to senior people (up to Rs. 5000–6000). (When combined with the incomes of other family members, Rs. 2000–3000 gives fieldworkers a tiny disposable income.) Sunil believed that NGO work was unskilled work, and many fieldworkers agreed. That the work was unskilled justified its low remuneration (see Ehrenreich 2001).

Competing Professionalisms

Gutek (1995) defined professionals as workers with the training, education, and/or experience that has prepared them to make sound, independent decisions. Senior NGO staff thought of themselves as professionals; their experience in villages (as residents and fieldworkers) and the training they received over the years through their association with the NGO caused them to feel confident and independent. One senior male fieldworker spoke of the necessary self-motivation of fieldworkers: “I am the person who is organizing and managing the work here for the past four to five years. I am working here. In my view, a lot depends on the person who is handling these things.” This fieldworker’s professional confidence jibes with Jenkins’s (2008) finding that grassroots health care workers’ understanding of professionalism was locally produced. Field experience,

informal training, and a professional attitude define their professionalism. However, Jenkins (2008) concluded that professionalism of this sort has a limited geography because it is locally derived. Next, I present evidence of the fieldworkers' responses to the competition between their grassroots professionalism and the donors' definitions of professionalism. Field experience, informal training, and a professional attitude abounded among Rural Power's senior fieldworkers, who responded in multiple ways, while the younger fieldworkers readily adopted the professionalism that international donors required.

218 The difference in the types of professionalism was obvious between senior workers and newer workers. In the case of two teams, one headed by a senior member with 10 years' experience and the other headed by a recently hired fieldworker with brief previous experience, their approaches to surveying eye health in villages were vastly different. The sponsoring organization wanted a survey of the overall eye health of the project area's population, so both men headed teams that each worked in half the project area. Both teams had been formally trained in eye care and eye health during a weeklong out-of-state trip. The team with the senior leader and team members called village meetings, held focus groups, went door to door, and sought particular people who had been referred because of an eye disease or blindness. The other team sat in a public place and solicited information from anyone who stopped by, including important sources of information, such as the village *anganwadi* worker (childcare worker, usually a woman) and the village *sarpanch* (headman, usually a man). The experienced team put in the additional effort of going to meet people in their homes and filling out the forms from a primary source. The team of new hires filled out the paperwork in the quickest, most efficient, but not necessarily most accurate way because their information was secondhand. The goal of the exercise was to fill out a certain number of forms and then write a summary statistical report. How the forms were filled out was not closely monitored.

The senior team members continued their earlier work of making the NGO. They based their decisions and actions in the field on their insider's view of the NGO's best interests, which included facilitating relationships between NGO fieldworkers and villagers, spreading the name "Rural Power" in new areas, and spending time in villages. Those who were new hires did not see their actions as "making the NGO"; for them, the sheer number of forms that needed to be filled out was an incentive to gather information as expediently as possible. The junior team leader, Parvinder, wanted to get the work finished. The senior team leader, Bilal, wanted to do things the way he had always done them. The new hires whom Bilal supervised complained:

We want to work according to how we were told in our training. But Bilal is not, or does not want to be, flexible in different situations. Maybe, even if he knows how to be flexible, he does not want to be—that I can't tell. He wants to do PRA (participatory rapid appraisal)⁹ very differently from how we were told to do it in our training. (Sita, summer 2006)

Bilal refused professionalization, as offered in the training he received, and by his way of working, villagers and new staff got acquainted. As one new male fieldworker remarked, "Bilal taught me how to work with blind persons' rehabilitation. He also had more influence with the villagers and so he connected me to all those people whom I wasn't able

⁹ PRA was a technique advocated by Chambers (1994) to facilitate the gathering of information from communities that would be affected by development projects. The ideal was that the information that was gathered would inform a project's design. For Rural Power fieldworkers, PRA was an information-gathering technique only; neither they nor the villagers were designing projects from the data that were collected.

to meet myself.” In the team led by the senior staff member, new staff were brought into the personal relationships that the senior staff had developed with villagers over the years, and in new villages where the NGO was working the foundation for new relationships was laid. Besides “making the NGO,” Bilal was establishing Rural Power’s future client base.

The encounters that the junior leader facilitated were instrumentalist—village leaders were spoken to for the information they might impart about the other members of the village community. Instead of beginning relationships with villagers as they traveled across their assigned area, that team’s work became routine: arriving in a village, going to the *anganwadi* center, and asking the worker or anyone else who stopped by a series of questions in order as they appeared on the form. Routines are sets of tasks that move service interactions forward without requiring the employee to make decisions because they minimize variability (Leidner 1993). Routines also depersonalize encounters and allow for rapid information gathering. Although only the questionnaires were scripted, the fieldworkers did the same job day in and day out with little variation except to whom they might be speaking and in which place. Often their speeches became standardized, and even sounded like scripts at times, since they had been said dozens, if not hundreds, of times to different audiences. 219

When a personal encounter becomes routinized, management occasionally seeks to elicit emotional labor from the workers to disguise the routinization and make the encounter appear personal (Leidner 1999). In the case of the eye health project that had limited goals and resources, Sunil told the fieldworkers that when they could do nothing, they should

be sure to give sympathy. And in cases where the situation is bad, give preference to meeting those cases. If there is nothing that can be done—then go and give sympathy. We should not give medicine—talk to people affectionately but leave the rest to a doctor. If you show them to a doctor they will be happy, or go and visit them socially, they will be happy. Make lists of these cases and give them to your supervisor. There are two choices: for meds go to a doctor; for checking and social, this is your work.

Sunil simultaneously suggested that fieldworkers have an important job to do when they give sympathy *and* that they have few useful skills like an ability to dispense medicines. His words hinted at the deskilling that accompanies routinization—giving sympathy is all they are expected to do. They do not have training to do otherwise. Deskilling leads to a systematic diminishing of workers’ autonomy and the undermining of workers’ bargaining power and pride (Leidner 1993).

However, even filling out forms remains a service interaction—a face-to-face encounter. Villagers maintain certain expectations of service from NGO workers, even when NGO funding sources and motivations change (see O’Reilly 2010). The need to meet villagers’ expectations led the NGO leaders to hold training sessions at the main office in which new hires could practice speaking to villagers. In a training session, a senior fieldworker, a Meghwal woman, told a story about inspiring confidence in a man who criticized her work:

When you have success, then people will believe. There was a man who said I was just filling out forms. I told him, “I will put your feet on the ground” [i.e., because of me you will have independence and stability]. And then the buffalo came [purchased by the DPIP for income generation through dairying], and the whole village showed up to see.

Rural Power, deeply in debt because of the DPIIP expenditures, needed to maintain community participation in the project even when bureaucratic red tape slowed the project to a crawl and continued to make demands for clients' time. The NGO needed its new hires to perform feelings they did not necessarily feel (e.g., confidence in DPIIP and, by association, Rural Power). Sunil said to the group that was assembled:

Dileep, Dinesh, and Sonu—people who look as young as you—you must go to people again and again and make them say “*namaste*” (Hindi greeting) to you by saying it to them time and again (*baar baar*). One thing is personality, and one thing is physique. Sanjay [a legendary NGO leader] was only four feet tall, but if he said “Ram Ram” (local greeting) then they always replied. *Iskii pakad acchii hai*. (His understanding [was] good.) You need to grab the field. You need to be commanding. Change your personality so that people will believe you.

220 Sunil exhorted Dileep, Dinesh, and Sonu (who were all in their early 20s) to “change your personality” so that villagers will believe their promises about NGO benefits and will participate in Rural Power’s projects. Sunil indicated that no matter what you look like, if you display the right personality, even if it is not your natural one, people will respect you (as indicated by their returning your polite greeting). This attempt to regulate the personalities of service workers is an extension of training—an attempt to enact a deeper transformation of the worker beyond training (Leidner 1993). Standardizing personalities for cheaper, less-skilled labor is an alternative to hiring better educated and more expensive workers (i.e., professionals; Leidner 1993). On the one hand, these young Meghwal men could be hired cheaply and, in lieu of experienced professionalism (defined as care and independence), could learn to emote properly in the field. On the other hand, the Meghwal men faced caste discrimination that devalued their work and made their emotional labor all the more important to perform for the sake of organizational prestige and their own status.

Discussion

In the early days of Rural Power, the staff had committed relationships to each other and the villagers they worked with. But as funding sources changed, their work was deskilled and depersonalized, alienating the senior staff and leading them to leave the organization (Gutek 1995; Kapoor 2005). The reduction of skills that were required for fieldwork and the low salaries that were justified by deskilling suggest the validity of Feldman’s (1997) critique of neoliberal development as the opening up of cheap labor pools in previously unexploited areas and, correspondingly, the extraction of surplus labor from the lowest castes of rural, marginalized populations. NGOs that operate in rural places may provide one of the few job opportunities that are relatively secure even though the pay is poor (Mawdsley et al. 2002). The data bear this critique out, since most new fieldworkers mentioned in their interviews that they joined Rural Power because of strained economic conditions at home.

As Rural Power hired workers to fill the positions of senior workers, a distinct pattern emerged: the hiring, at low salaries, of rural Meghwal (Scheduled Caste) men and women from the project area. By December 2007, of the 23 staff, 12 were Meghwal. Sunil described the Meghwal workers as being suited to the work because they grew up poor and could therefore identify with the needs of the poor villagers who were the NGO’s client base. Also true, but left unsaid, was that NGO work can be difficult and low paying, so often more qualified staff could not be hired or retained because of the meager salaries and poor working conditions of the project area. The change in the caste composition of the staff had to be justified because the villagers, staff, and researchers began to notice and

remark on it. As expected from the theories of embodied service work discussed earlier, the job of fieldworker was “created” as appropriate for the ones doing the job, in this case, Meghwals. The hiring of Meghwal staff was justified by arguing that Meghwals were the “proper” people for the job, and the job was the “proper” one for Meghwals.

As Harriss-White (2003) and Jeffrey (2009) showed, an emerging Indian lower middle class may seek jobs that enable them to play a role in the redistribution of goods and services provided by the state. I showed elsewhere (O’Reilly 2010) that NGO employment also enables low-caste fieldworkers to play this mediating role. Sunil himself was Meghwal, and the Meghwal and non-Meghwal staff members and villagers suggested that he was caste biased in hiring and firing staff. The staff and villagers reasoned that he wanted to help his own community by hiring them (instead of others) and making the associated benefits of Rural Power available to them. From his position as director, Sunil attempted to enable Meghwals to move up the socioeconomic ladder (see Jeffrey 2001) by enabling their access to resources. Arguably, he also maintained that Rural Power was not a contractor, so the fieldworkers could claim the prestige of social service work.

A growing awareness of the villagers that the organization was becoming Meghwal put greater pressure on the NGO to maintain its social service identity to preserve the reputation of NGO work because it was viewed as a Meghwal organization. The fieldworkers were involved in a performance that was related to both their “selling” of the services that the NGO had to offer and their presentation of an NGO image that ran counter to negative stereotypes about Meghwals (as dirty, poor, and uneducated). The NGO management had an interest in the fieldworkers performing in ways that presented a respectable image of the organization. Calling their work social service and performing emotional labor enabled the fieldworkers to mitigate insinuations that they were contract workers.

For Sunil and other Rural Power fieldworkers, being called contractors struck a nerve; their arguments against the idea that Rural Power acted like a governmental contractor were relentless (see O’Reilly and Dhanju, 2010). Even if they worked with low-caste people and the poor, there was still respectability in their work and, by extension, in the work of an NGO. For many workers in the social service sector, framing their work as social service provides a mental counterweight to their low salaries, poor working conditions, and long hours (Leidner 1993; Mawdsley et al. 2002). For the Rural Power fieldworkers, their emotional labor was elicited to reproduce the relationships that were absent because of donors’ demands for professionalization. But professionalization also played a protective role as *dalit* fieldworkers strove for status as workers even if they were socially marginal themselves. In contrast to previous research that depicted employees expending emotional labor to maintain their dignity in degrading jobs (Poster 2007; Otis 2008a), my research suggests that emotional labor is required when prestigious work is deskilled through market-driven policies and degraded as socially marginal workers are employed.

Leidner (1999) posed the question of whether the management of emotional labor in service interactions tends to undermine or reinforce inequality based on gender, class, caste, and race. In the case of Rural Power, the professionalism required by the DPIP generated a more distinct hierarchy within Rural Power. A combination of changes in funding, uncertainty of employment, and alienation led to the composition of the organization’s field staff as low caste. Alienation occurred for senior fieldworkers who could not do the work they previously enjoyed. Or in Bilal’s case, they kept working as before, regardless of the new procedures. Their identity and status as Rural Power fieldworkers depended on notions of NGO work as social service, but over time their work grew to resemble that of contractors. Rural Power successfully implemented the

poverty-alleviation project and other projects. It also experienced a transformation as an organization and a workplace over the two years I studied it.

Conclusions

This article has demonstrated that NGOs in Rajasthan engage in development contracting and have resorted to encouraging fieldworkers to perform emotional labor as a means of compensating for the growing routinization of NGO fieldwork. A framework of interactive service work highlights alterations in the extraction of emotional labor and begins to explain changes in the staff composition of the NGO and the staff's connection to clients. As with other forms of labor under neoliberalism, the case of Rural Power demonstrates that NGOs themselves are employers of low-wage, flexible labor. NGOs have access to remote, unemployed, and underemployed communities for the interconnecting purposes of implementing projects and assuring their own sustainability. Community participation, the need for a locally knowledgeable staff, and professionalization combine to encourage NGOs to hire cheaply out of local labor pools. This article has indicated that when unskilled labor is needed for fieldwork, those on India's social and economic margins form this labor pool.

Bryson, Daniels, and Warf (2004) argued, with respect to service work, that capital attempts to break free of the constraints of locally embodied services by attempting to standardize them, fragment them, and thereby disembody them. This article adds to the economic geography literature by demonstrating that despite their fixed locations and the importance of local knowledge, NGOs manage to alter their workforce, revise their organizational culture, and change their labor processes according to the demands of international donors. The NGO-ization of development appears at first glance to be based in stasis—the fixed location of an NGO and the NGO's familiarity with the population in its area. But this stasis is illusory, for it is the ability of NGOs to transform themselves that sustains their popularity with donor agencies. Part of an NGO's flexibility rests on the rural unemployment of socially marginal sectors of the population—the same conditions that are responsible for the NGO's presence in the first place.

In this north Indian case, members of a *dalit* caste were socially elevated by employment with an NGO, but their presence had to be justified within the new context of the NGO hiring out as a contractor. Meghwal staff were argued to be professionals by nature because they had grown up poor. Definitions of who were the right people for the job of fieldworker had to be reworked. Sayers (2007, 447) argued that “affective labor is necessary to establish and maintain economic and social relations.” I discuss this point to reinforce the significance of emotional labor in the production and reproduction of existing social relations, which connects to recent work on the role of consumers in structuring the emotional labor demanded by workers. Drawing on a Chinese case study, Otis (2008a) found that local consumer markets play a significant role in forming the types of emotional labor that female hotel workers must perform, whether it is to identify themselves as separate from other workers or to perform an extroverted femininity that Western guests expect. In the Indian context, Poster (2007) similarly found that the preferences of consumer/callers in distant locations affect the emotional labor demanded of call center workers, specifically that they “give up” being Indians and “become” Americans (see Bryson 2007 for a discussion of the complex geographies of international service work). American callers want to speak to Americans, so American firms that employ call centers require managers to train workers in performing (a near total) American identity. Similarly, this article has given attention to the competing roles of international donors (NGO employers) and local consumers in changing the character of

NGO provision of services. I have shown that the need for emotional labor arises from the competing interests of global and local consumers. NGO labor processes are simultaneously embedded in local consumer markets and influenced by international donors, who should also be seen as consumers of NGO services. Donors' demands are changing NGO labor processes, and so are local clients when they maintain expectations for NGO fieldworkers' caste presentation, bodily comportment, and effective service delivery. Fieldwork cannot be disembodied; it requires personal interaction for the purpose of garnering community support and the successful completion of projects.

More than simply adding empirical and ethnographic data, this article has highlighted the significance of caste in transformations of workplaces and has called into question neoliberalism's claims to empower marginal groups and generate greater equality for castes (Kamat 2004). Research on South Asia found that those in the Global South are not passive in the face of global changes and neoliberalism, but neither do the so-called opportunities of development necessarily mean a radical overturning of structural inequalities. The work of Dyson (2008) made plain that although neoliberalism enables new forms of income generation for marginal populations in India, gender and caste continue to set limits on these populations' ability to take advantage of economic opportunities. Neoliberalism may be providing opportunities for *some*, both in terms of identity building through work and access to resources (including resources provided by NGOs to employees and clients), but the opportunities do not include unmitigated access to resources or the collapse of caste-based restrictions and discrimination (Chari 2004; Dyson 2008; Jeffrey et al. 2008). Furthermore, Jeffrey et al. (2008) recognized that for other forms of work, some jobs provide access to a basic salary and other resources (e.g., social networks) but may also increase the immersion of the job holder in neoliberal forms of governmentality. This article has contributed to the literature on the contradictions of neoliberalism and globalization for workers in a region where recent economic growth means that the struggles presented in this article are not unique, but affect many.

The findings presented here contribute to research in economic geography on neoliberalism's global effects on workers, employers, clients, and providers in the service sector. Theoretically, the study has contributed to the literature on interactive service work, the labor process, and caste reproduction by exploring the implications of neoliberal development and globalization. It found that caste is an additional signifier in service encounters, and one that encourages the extraction of emotional labor from fieldworkers. Complicating the extraction of fieldworkers' emotional labor is fieldworkers' positionality as Scheduled Castes who are attempting to take advantage of neoliberalism's opportunities and as workers who are dependent on the success of contracted projects for their own continuing employment. This article has demonstrated that the processes behind the growth of emotional labor as work is deskilled and that workers are hired from the social margins.

Finally, this article enhances debates on professionalization in development (Mawdsley et al. 2002; Townsend, Porter, and Mawdsley 2002; Jenkins 2008) by investigating NGOs as workplaces and using the frameworks of interactive service work and emotional labor to add greater depth to our knowledge of what constitutes the multifaceted work of fieldworkers and the changes wrought by neoliberal development policies. There is much to be learned from the Indian NGO sector because, like other NGO sectors in the Global South, it simultaneously provides occupations for the middle class and serves to redistribute resources to the middle class but also continues to employ the poor and marginal, providing new opportunities for the rural poor. These jobs are not without drawbacks, as I have shown in this article. As an element of the global spread of neoliberalism, the donor-driven professionalization of fieldworkers has changed the labor process of service

work within Indian NGOs and reconfigured local labor markets in places where NGOs are working.

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