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BLOCK CLUBS AND SOCIAL ACTION: A
CASE STUDY IN COMMUNITY CONFLICT

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     A "Block Club" may be defined as a group of citi-
zens in a neighborhood who get together and work toget-
her to improve their neighborhood. Kahn defines "block
organizing as a highly manageable technique, usually
"an urban technique" (1970:36). In this context, "or-
ganizing may be viewed as a means of achieving and
guiding local control over problems that orginate else-
where in society" (Ecklein & Lauffer 1972:11). whereas
services focus on individual needs, organizing focuses
on the location of common problems and joint efforts
aimed at their solution. Community organizers have
generally used a natural leader-informal association
approach to organizing Block Clubs and their main con-
cern seems to be the enhancement of social relationships
in order to bring about a greater capacity on the part
of some target population to deal with common problems.

     This article illustrates the dilemmas, contradic-
tions and tensions underlying the work of Block Clubs
in a neighborhood during 1970-71; a neighborhood in
which the residents felt completely powerless to deal
with the consequences of a neighborhood bar. The Com-
munity Organization effort initiated with the assistance
of the author resulted in the closure of the neighbor-
hood bar. The material for this article was developed
from the author's personal knowledge.

          NEIGHBORHOOD CAFE: A Community Problem.

     The history of the problem, as reported by various
residents and home owners within the community, begins
when Mr. G, a first generation immigrant, opened a tav-
ern around 1940 in the residential section of the neigh-
borhood. It was a family owned business where neighbors
would gather to drink beer, talk and relax. within one

year it became a popular, busy spot in the neighborhood
and so, in 1941, the tavern was remodelled. During
World War II a large number of people seeking employ-
ment came to work for the companies within the city
and many of these people established their residence
in this neighborhood. This influx of new residents
changed the hitherto neighborhood character of the cafe,
weakening its community roots. The social control with-
in the cafe itself, previously maintained by the com-
munity members, became laxed, resulting in an increasing
number of fights in the bar. Affluent residents soon
began to abandon the neighborhood which was followed by
deteriorating public services and a chain reaction of
events ultimately helped foster slum conditions in the
neighborhood.

Mr. G decided to retire and his son took over the
management of the bar. The fights did not stop. The
bar's notoriety became known to the entire city and the
residents began to hear the familiar question: "How
can you live in that dangerous neighborhood?" Taxi
drivers often refused to take passengers to and from
the neighborhood and the servicemen showed reluctance to
come into the neighborhood at late hours. Mr. G's son
seems to have managed the bar for several years and then
suddenly decided to lease it. Mr. C and Mr. M leased
the business jointly in the mid-sixties at a time when
the bar clientele included people not only from neighbor-
ing cities but also from far away states. A few neigh-
borhood residents still continued to patronize the bar;
however, most residents were afraid to even visit the
bar.

Fuller and Myers define a social problem as "a
condition which is defined by a considerable number of
persons as deviation from some social norm which they
cherish" (in Rainwater 1974:1). Such a condition char-
acterized the response of residents in early 1970 when
they were asked to comment about the neighborhood prob-
lems. The cafe was their immediate and primary concern
but they were very reluctant to discuss any possible
solutions to the problem. The pressence of the bar had
created danger to life and property; drugs appeared to
be in plentiful supply; women did not pass the adjacent

streets alone; no one walked in the neighborhood after
dark. Bar patrons parked cars on both sides of the
streets, in spite of the NO PARKING signs, and the
street corner near the cafe became a hazard to traffic.

When the problem was discussed it was done in whis-
pers as most people believed that their views might be
reported to the bar patrons. Neighbors felt that the
very presence of dangerous men in the bar was reason
enough to keep quiet. A great deal of neighborhood life
involved the planning for defense against these various
dangers. The first line of defense, of course, is the
home. There was a desire to keep the house isolable
from its immediate surroundings; at the most basic level
it was essential to have a door lock that worked. One of
the frequent responses to the increasing crime in the
neighborhood was to "watch over each other" and "not open
your doors to strangers".

ORGANIZING: The beginnings.

The Community Organizer encouraged the community to
bring the problem into the open by actually making it
possible to talk about the cafe with residents in small
groups. People began expressing their feelings openly
and were surprised to- find that they were not getting
hurt. In fact, the cafe soon became the only topic for
discussion whenever residents got together. It also
provided an opportunity for the residents to vent their
bottled-up feelings and thereby relax. They began to
look seriously at the following options:
    (a)   Should the bar be closed?
    (b)   Should the bar manager be told to maintain
          his business properly?
    (c)   Should the State Liquor License Board be
          approached about revoking the license of the
          bar?

The community struggled with the formulation of a
workable strategy. Consideration of whether to use con-
flict or consensus figured largely in designing a strat-
egy. Most of the residents seemed to react negatively
to the idea of precipitating violent action; instead
they favored discussing the problem with the bar manager.

The residents felt that the bar manager would be hos-
tile to their decision to close the bar and/or request
the State Liquor Board to revoke the bar license.

The residents decided to invite the bar manager
to meet with the presidents of six block clubs from the
general area around the bar. The presence of the area
councilman was felt to be necessary in order that he
could hear the community's view and answer questions.
Mr. B, a local church usher and a home owner in the
neighborhood, compiled a list of cafe related crimes
and reported that killings, shootings, assaults, and
stabbings inside and outside the bar seemed to be the
most common crimes.

Nothing was done with the study for some time. A
previously scheduled block club sponsored training pro-
gram kept the issue alive by providing a forum for ex-
change of ideas among the participants who represented
six blocks in the neighborhood. The cafe was frequently
discussed, and the pressures for taking action grew each
time participants met. Many began openly talking of
conflict as a strategy. The most obvious argument in
support of conflict for organizing the community and for
accelerating the pace of social change was that it usu-
ally works (Schaller 1970:172). While many residents
criticized the means and others objected to the ends,
none denied that the use of conflict would cause niegh-
bors to rally to the cause and that it would hasten
change.

The majority among conflict strategists seemed to
be in favor of a more visible, open, and active conflict.
Although their views were not taken seriously, they did
succed in forcing the leadership to take action. It was
decided that the first step would be to write a letter
to the bar manager asking him to come to a meeting with
the community leaders. Reverend W, a non-practicing
minister in his seventies who had lived in the neighbor-
hood for 40 years, volunteered to draft the letter for
approval and to have it signed by all six block club
presidents. No "one" president would therefore be ex-
posed to the anticipated hostility of the bar manager.
No one expressed it publicly, but there was fear in the

hearts of the neighborhood people. Everyone felt more
secure in a joint approach; but even with the joint
signatures, some neighbors felt that the presidents
were doing a great service and had shown a high regard
for general community welfare at a considerable per-
sonal risk.

Discussions about the cafe became a rallying point
for the community to organize and a council of block
club presidents was formed. In its desire to do some-
thing good for the community, this council discussed
the cafe at its very first meeting and deputed Mr. B,
one of its members, to hand deliver the letter of in-
vitation to the bar management. This action produced
shock waves throughout the community and almost everyone
in the neighborhood got involved in debating the issue.
An apprehensive group predicted that the management
would ignore the letter. A sizable number of residents
believed that bringing the cafe problem into the open
would create new problems. A third group of residents
were terrified to the point of obsession, believing that
annoyed patrons of the bar would harm the neighbors.

During these "action filled days" residents kept
each other informed through telephone calls and created
a state of an undeclared, revengeful, fight between an
undefined group of bar patrons and the community. Once
the issue began to be analyzed another issue was born.
It was argued that the problems in and around the cafe
were not peculiar inasmuch as other bars in the city
had similar problems. Why, then, single out a local
business for liquidation and force people to pay out-
siders for drinks? The council leadership did not add-
ress itself directly to this issue but adopted a "wait
and see" attitude, hoping that the meeting with the bar
manager might be fruitful so that the bar could operate
as a legitimate business in the community.

CONFRONTATION: Meeting with the bar manager.

A special neighborhood meeting with the bar mana-
ger was scheduled in the Community House. The leader
of the neighborhood group was a factory worker in his
sixties who was about to retire. The only women of the

group worked for the County Children Services Board.
The other members of the group included the non-prac-
ticing clergyman, an unskilled laborer (who had rec-
ently renovated his home and was very proud of it), a
retired company worker (who spoke of himself as a church
man and a family man), and a younger person in his for-
ties (who was working in a factory).

The woman member formally greeted the bar manager
and thanked him for coming to meet with the group. There
was a brief pause and then the manager spoke. He indi-
cated that he was in favor of maintaining peace and a
proper atmosphere in the neighborhood. He also stated
that he had done everything possible to run a decent bus-
iness. However, he insisted that he had no control over
his clientele and did not have the necessary police pro-
tection. He surprised the group by informing them that
he kept a gun for his own safety. To the apparent disbe-
lief of group members present, he also informed them that
he was willing to move out of the neighborhood if he
could secure a suitable place elsewhere. In the meantime
he promised to take all necessary steps to keep to area
clean and to try to prevent any incidents in and around
his business.

The general reaction of the group members was very
favorable toward the manager. The discussion that fol-
lowed was directed toward the councilman who was present
throughout the discussion. The group wanted to know why
this neighborhood was not getting the degree of police
protection that would ensure safety to the neighborhood.
Members also felt strongly that the city should fulfill
its responsibility to provide such essentials as trash
recepticles on the street corners and near the bar so
that the surrounding area could be kept reasonable clean.

As a result of this meeting community representa-
tives tentatively accepted the bar manager's description
of his position as accurate. A more responsive and re-
sponsible role by the councilman and other city officials
was desired. The meeting helped the group recognize the
need to meet with police officials and discuss with them
the lack of police protection and the increasing amount
of serious crime in the community. The confrontation

meeting became a creative force. The council leadership
was more confident of itself and pleased to discover
that the bar manager was himself a victim of running a
business in an area where the neighborhood was suffering
from deprivation of services.

MEETING WITH THE POLICE: A con-
flict ends without resolution.

Saul Alinsky of the Industrial Areas Foundation
argues that "controversy has always been the seed of
creation" (in Rose 1964:145). He insists that the use
of conflict can be justified, not only because it works,
but also because it provides the most fertile ground for
creative thinking.
Conditions seemed to improve in and around the bar
and the general feeling was that the bar managers were
demonstrating their genuine interest in running a good
neighborhood business. However, feelings against the
councilman ran high. To the neighborhood residents he
represented the city's power structure. "The structure"
Hunter wrote, "is that of a dominant policy-making group
using the machinery of government as a bureaucracy for
the attainment of certain goals coordinate with the in-
terests of the policy making group" (1953:102). The
councilman stated that it was his duty to do what a
broad section of the community wanted him to do. In
actuality, he was not taking any meaningful steps that
would have demonstrated his concern for the neighborhood
and its improvement.

Community leaders pursued aggressively for a meet-
ing with police officers. The council leadership be-
lieved that there could be no effective reduction of bar
related incidents unless these issues were addressed
openly and honestly with the police. Policemen and mem-
bers of the community are remote from one another, and
fear and hostility exist on both sides. The police rep-
resent what they perceive to be legitimate authority,
while the community all too frequently perceives this
authority to be misused at the very least, or illegiti-
mate, erratic, and oppressive at the worst.

The police officers did not seem enthusiastic about

coming to the neighborhood to meet with the community
leaders. however, a meeting date was mutually agreed
upon and the residents were invited to meet with the
police officers in the downtown safety building. The
community leaders accepted the invitation and appointed
a general committee in preparation for the meeting.
Each block club was encouraged to select a minimum of 5
residents for the meeting and arrange for their trans-
portation to downtown.

On the meeting day the residents assembled in a
big hall of the safety building. The hall had comfort-
able chairs and the residents took seats as they came
in. Three police officers arrived. The senior officer
positioned himself on a raised platform and welcomed
the audience. The other two officers stood on either
side of him. The senior police officer spoke at length
and used a lot of statistical information to explain
the crime situation in the city. He also described and
highlighted the problems that police officers face in
the discharge of their duties.

This audience was perhaps different from most of
the audiences the police officers had handled. Primar-
ily, this was a group of well organized, concerned re-
sidents who were not here only to complain, but also to
demand decisive action be taken in relation to their
complaints. The police officers were apparently sur-
prised and seemed reluctant to tackle a group of citi-
zens who were not "angry" in the usual sense of the
term. This proved to be rather unfortunate.

After hearing a long lecture, the neighbors ex-
pressed their willingness to report and even help in
identifying any undesirable activity in the neighbor-
hood. Surprisingly, the police officers did not uti-
lize this opportunity to work out a joint program of
fighting crime in the neighborhood. Their main con-
cern seemed to be in highlighting problems and ob-
stacles of police work due to the techniques of so-
phisticated criminals.

Most of the residents liked the idea of sitting
down with the police officers and also appreciated

their willingness to hear what the community had to
say; however, they were dissatisfied with the outcome
of the meeting. One condition of the meeting that par-
ticularly annoyed the residents was the seating arran-
gements in the hall. The whole idea of turning the
hall into a classroom where the presiding officer took
it upon himself to address the audience seemed unneces-
sary. The community representatives felt that the
meeting would have been more informal and much more
would have been accomplished in a "roundtable" type of
atmosphere.

     Nonetheless, it was felt that everything was not
in vain. The community very ably demonstrated the lack
of adequate police protection in their neighborhood and
secured the number of police cars assigned to patrol
the neighborhood. The audience also got an assurance
that the police patrol in the area would be increased
if necessary. The cafe came into sharp focus for the
first time; at least a beginning in communications was
made.

<center>TRAGEDY IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD:
Change process is speeded up.</center>

     CS, a resident of the neighborhood, fatally shot
JS at the cafe and the community was horrified. Those
sections of the community who would have let the cafe
remain undisturbed reassesed their own thinking. Out
of this tragedy came an uneasy understanding: SOME-
THING MUST BE DONE TO STOP THESE SENSELESS KILLINGS!

     As a result of this unfortunate incident, the W
Street Block Club took the initiative and convened a
special meeting; an open discussion followed the trea-
surer's report. The lack of police protection and the
cafe problem were discussed at length. It was decided
by the group that in cooperation with other block clubs
in the neighborhood, steps would be taken to close the
bar.

     For the first time, a group of residents directly
affected by the problem (the street being very close to
the bar) had come up with a clear-cut decision. In

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pursuance of this important decision, Mrs. L attended the adjacent street's block club meeting as a guest and received overwhelming support for the decision to close the bar.

The new leaders took another important step; they encouraged the local newspaper to write about cafe related problems in the neighborhood. Consequently, a story was published in the Sunday magazine and the cafe problem reached practically everyone in the larger community. People from all walks of life and from all parts of the city called for further information and many people offered help. This further created an atmosphere of hope and the residents began to feel that they were not alone in this matter.

The councilman immediately informed the community leaders that a city official had been deputed to investigate and report on the possibility of revoking the license of the bar.

COUNCIL MOVES DECISIVELY: Close the bar.

The council of block club presidents met to assess the situation. Residents of two streets appeared before the community council, pleaded for immediate action, and promised their full support. The council deliberated at length and finally decided to proceed to close the bar. Reverend W was authorized to meet with the Director of the Board of Elections to explore the possibility of getting the issue on the November ballot as a local option. Legally, residents of the precinct in question and one adjoining precinct can decide whether beer or liquor can be sold by the glass in the precinct provided that:
  (a) 15 percent of the registered voters sign a petition from the precinct where the bar is located.
  (b) 15 percent of the registered voters sign from the adjacent precinct.
The petitions thus signed must be notarized and submitted 90 days before the general election. The Board of Elections review the petitions and if they are in order the issue is placed on the ballot as a local option.

The council leadership accepted the challenge and planned their actions very carefully. A person to person, decentralized campaign was agreed upon. The petitions were distributed among six presidents who undertook the responsibility to contact and canvass the registered voters on their streets. It turned out to be a superb organizational effort. Three streets alone had the requisite number of signatures.

At their regular meeting, the Board of Elections reviewed and approved the petition and the council of block club presidents was informed. This news was received with joy and enthusiasm. For the first time, perhaps, the residents felt that they had some control over their neighborhood and its condition. The residents also felt that they now had at least some control over the value of their property, which was, after all, their biggest investment.

LOCAL BUSINESSES MEET: Interest groups threaten the outcome.

As the sample ballots became available, the community took a closer look. It became apparent that there were three grocery stores, a club, and two neighborhood bars selling and serving beer and liquor within the community. The club and two bars would have to close if the voters decided to vote the two precincts dry. The three stores would suffer heavy economic loss. Up until this realization, the political and economic elite of the neighborhood did not seem to be concerned about the problems created by the cafe. Now, however, they became very actively interested. They met and decided to organize a counter-offensive. Money for this objective was of course no problem.

A political party candidate running for election in the neighborhood associated himself completely with this private interest group. A deal was suggested: the local neighborhood businessmen would meet with the cafe manager and pressure him to keep his business under control and the candidate for city council would use his influence for immediate action if the cafe continued to remain a problem. In return the issue was to be defeated at the polls. The businessmen promised

that they would get involved and support neighborhood
programs. A section of the community leadership was
convinced and accepted the deal. "We are against the
cafe and not all the businesses" became their slogan.
The voters were encouraged to defeat the issue at the
polls.

    A few concerned residents did not accept this deal;
instead they got together and intensified their own cam-
paign. A door to door, person to person, friend to
friend, neighbor to neighbor contact was established.
"This is our only chance" became their slogan. Voting
was very heavy at the polls, but the community decided
to close the cafe by a small margin. The long history
of the cafe ended in early 1972 when the managers closed
the doors for good.

                    SOME POLICY IMPLICATIONS

    The foregoing account has policy implications for
(a) those planning social action at the local level;
(b) individuals and businesses with interests in inner-
city areas; (c) planners and legislators at local and
state levels; (d) social service agencies in inner-
city areas; and (e) those interested in better police-
community relations. Such policy implications are sum-
marized as follows:
        (a) Policy issues for those planning social ac-
             tion at the local level: Continued social-
             ability, coupled with lack of long term ide-
             ological committment, tends to weaken the
             progress of groups that undertake social ac-
             tion. Groups planning such action may per-
             haps see early progress if they seek expert
             advice, discourage excessive socializing and
             encourage ideological committment.
        (b) Policy issues for individuals and businesses
             in inner-city areas: Those with interests in
             inner-city areas may face social action there
             as soon as leadership for such action devel-
             ops. The demands of such leadership are
             likely to be for community control. Sudden
             changes may have harmful effects on local re-
             sources. Solicitation for funding from and

joint planning with local, state and federal
levels of government may help in peaceful
transition. Also, elected officials from the
area should be involved by the local leader-
ship in such aggressive solicitation.

(c) Policy issues for planners and legislators:
New legislation may be necessary to allo-
cate suitable sites for bars outside residen-
tial areas. The existing laws concerning the
closing of neighborhood bars need to be
changed so that neighborhood resident's ac-
tion against trouble spots need not be cum-
bersome or too inclusive.

(d) Policy issues for social service agencies in
inner-city areas: social service agencies in
inner-cities have traditionally depended on
middle and upper income groups for leadership
and resources. Citizen groups committed to
peaceful change in neighborhoods may provide
the future leadership of these agencies and
as partners they can he helpful in changing
the middle class image of the agencies.

(e) Policy issues for police: The popular view
is widespread that crime can be reduced if
only more police are put on the streets.
Preventive patrol, for so long the fundamen-
tal police strategy, means having officers
walk or drive through their beats whenever
they are not answering a specific call for
serivce or assistance. Their continuous,
moving presence, the theory goes, will deter
crime. Recent studies have indicated that
this is not necessarily true. "Community
service" approach strategy is suggested to
replace patrol strategy in inner-city areas.
It is based on the assumption that if offi-
cers become familiar with the neighborhoods
in which they work, and if they take larger
responsibilities for following through on
requests for assistance as well as complaints
of crime, they will win the people's confi-
dence and elicit their cooperation in solving
or preventing crime.

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