Social Action Organization Participation and Personal Change in the Poor: Part I

Robert D. Herman
University of Missouri, Kansas City

SOCIAL ACTION ORGANIZATION PARTICIPATION AND
PERSONAL CHANGE IN THE POOR: PART I

Robert D. Herman

L. P. Cookingham Institute of Public Affairs
University of Missouri-Kansas City

ABSTRACT

     Evidence bearing on the hypothesis that participation by the
poor in social action organizations results in personal change is
inconsistent and open to diverse interpretations.   This paper
first reviews that evidence and then takes the first step toward
a substantive reconciliation of the apparently inconsistent
evidence - the development of a typology of social action
organization forms.   The typology, which is derived from the
literatures on poverty and organizational analysis, incorporates
the elements of (1) inclusion of the poor, (2) resourse base of
organizational sponsors, and (3) output goal orientation.   The
typology will be used in Part II to order and interpret case study
evidence of the participation hypothesis.

Poverty and the Participation Hypothesis

     Why are some people poor?   Is it their fault, society's
fault or is that not an useful question?   What policies and
strategies should be pursued to eliminate, reduce or ameliorate
poverty?   Such questions were at one time of great academic and
public interest.   Poverty is not currently a politically impor-
tant topic, but it may again become so.   Though we've learned a
great deal about poverty in the last two decades, many important
questions remain inadequately answered.   Of these one of the most
central is: What is the impact on the poor of their participa-
tion in social action organizations?
     Social action organizations are those organizations, regard-
less of whether they are governmentally or privately sponsored,
in which the poor participate to some extent and which are
oriented to either changing the skills, attitudes or person-
alities of the poor or to achieving socio-political changes, or
both.   Included in this class of organizations are (were) most

local OEO organizations, welfare rights organizations, community organizations in poor neighborhoods, and some consumer or producer cooperatives. It is difficult to precisely define the limits of this class, and some might prefer other terms such as community organizations.

The question of the impact on the poor of their participation in such organizations is central for two reasons. First, it bears on important theoretical issues about the nature and causes of poverty in the United States.[1] Second, it is directly connected to issues concerning the design of social action organizations of the poor.

As many authors have demonstrated, the "War on Poverty" emphasized the idea, if not always the reality, of participation by the poor in OEO sponsored community action organizations (see, e.g., Austin, 1972; Kramer, 1969; Marshall, 1971; Rose, 1972). The "War's" emphasis on participation also helped legitimize and popularize the social action organization form of local political participation by the poor. The idea of participation by the poor derived from several sources. Experience with earlier federal programs such as urban renewal led social policymakers to emphasize the idea of participation by those effected (Cole, 1974; Van Til and Van Til, 1970). The political spirit of the times (the heyday of the civil rights and anti-war movements) favored participation.[2]

Moreover, sociological and social psychological perspectives on poverty at that time emphasized the "therapeutic" benefits of participation by the poor. There was wide agreement among social scientists that the poor feel powerless, are apathetic, fatalistic, present-oriented and generally unable to do anything to improve their life circumstances. Though there was disagreement about the extent of the psychological difference of the poor and about whether to conceive of those characteristics as a cause or result of poverty, nearly all social scientists agreed that participation in social action organizations would lead to positive changes in the personalities of the poor.

A number of studies (Gottesfeld and Dozier, 1966; Levens 1968; and Zurcher, 1970a and 1970b) have provided support for this therapeutic participation hypothesis. Gottesfeld and Dozier (1966) found that experienced indigenous community organizers in a New York community action program felt greater control over their lives than newly-recruited organizers. The two groups were matched on a number of demographic characteristics, leading to the conclusion that the organizational experience led to the personality difference. The study by Levens (1968) also employed a cross-sectional and matching design. Significantly lower feelings of powerlessness were found between participants and demographically similar non-participants in a welfare recipients'

-574-

organization. This result also is consistent with the interpretation that organizational participation caused the difference. Both studies, due to a lack of longitudinal data, fail to rule out an alternative hypothesis: differential selection. As Miller, Roby and Van Steenwijh (1970) and Curtis and Zurcher (1971) report, there is considerable evidence that OEO community action organizations tended to select the least disadvantaged poor. A cross-sectional, matching design can not disconfirm the hypothesis that organizational participants (or early participants) were initially different from non-participants (or late participants) and that there was no change in the participants.

Zurcher (1970a; 1970b) was the first to utilize longitudinal data in investigating the participation hypothesis. He found significant changes among the poor members of an OEO board of directors on three of ten personality measures. Additional analyses which compared active and inactive participants and "stayers" and "leavers" among the poor increased the numbers of personality characteristics on which significant changes were found. This work provides the most solid support for the participation hypothesis. However, a study (Herman, 1970) of participants in independent (non-OEO sponsored) social organizations which employed both longitudinal data and a comparison group of non-participants found significant differences between the organizationally active and inactive poor on measures of personal, traditional and social control beliefs. Further, no changes in control beliefs were found among the participating poor. It is of course possible to reconcile the divergent findings of this series of studies by attributing the differences to the various methodological deficiencies of the studies.

There are, however, other sources of evidence - case studies of the organizational participation of the poor - that can be usefully considered before we "explain away" the differing results as methodologically determined. Reviewing the evidence in the case studies will help to provide a substantive reconciliation of the apparently inconsistent results noted above. Such a reconciliation will also help to answer some questions about sociological theories of poverty and the design of social action organizations. The review of the case studies will constitute Part II of this report. The remainder of Part I is devoted to constructing a framework for analyzing the case study evidence. The framework is a typology of social action organizations, which has been derived from the literatures on poverty and organizational analysis.

A Typology of Social Action Organizations

The typology to be developed here is limited and specific.
It is limited in scope to social action organizations and
specific in that it applies to the United States experience.
Practitioners and analysts of social action organizations and
community organizing have noted a number of dimensions along which
such organizations vary (Kramer, 1969; Zald, 1967; and Zucher,
1970b). Of the various dimensions usually noted, there are three
that seem most crucial and which are the basis of the typology.
    (1) Social action organizations differ in terms of whether
they are primarily oriented to socio-political change or to
individual service. (2) The extent to which the poor are in-
cluded in the organization and the power position of the poor
within the organization can vary. (3) Finally, social action
organizations can vary in the extensiveness of their sponsor's
resource base. Before constructing the typology on the basis of
these dimensions, a more thorough consideration of each is in
order.
    The first dimension might be labeled output goal orientation
(derived from Perrow's work 1961, 1970 on the analysis of multiple
organizational goals). This dimension combines both the target
of organizational activities and the orientation of the organiza-
tion toward the target. Usually these two elements have been
considered separately. The distinction between service
orientation and change orientation is very common in the anti-
poverty literature, particularly in the non-empirical literature.
The distinction is often difficult to make in a conceptually and
operationally rigorous fashion, especially when service and
change are conceived as applying to both individuals and
institutions. Should a job training program, for instance, be
considered a service to individuals or a change in individuals?
One can make a case for it being either or both. Though it might
be possible to distinguish service to and change in individuals
with the use of operational criterion that could be applied
across a number of similarly measured cases, that will not be
possible here. Given the uneven quality and variation in the
information available in the case studies and the conceptual-
theoretical difficulties in distinguishing between service to and
change in individuals, organizational activities directed primarily
at individuals will be defined as service. The issue of personal
change in the poor as a result of their organizational experience
will be considered, but not in terms of organizational goal
orientation. Thus, the first dimension has been dichotomized
into a) a socio-political change orientation versus b) an indivi-
dual service orientation. Undoubtedly many social action
organizations are (were) neither strictly one or the other

(Helfgot, 1974).   Nonetheless, it will be necessary to simplify
and order the complexity of social action organizations and
classify them as pursuing, at a given time, one or the other
orientation.

     The second dimension to be used in the typology focuses on
organizational constituency. The term constituency connotes
political representativeness, political responsiveness. Social
action organizations may vary in extent to which they represent
or are responsive to the poor. Even if people defined as poor
are part of a social action organization, this does not neces-
sarily mean the poor are a significant constituency of that
organization. Curtis and Zurcher (1971), in a review article,
have concluded that the poor have often been referred to as
participants or members of organizations when, in fact, they
were clients. The poor have been included in social action
organization in various degrees. Kramer (1969) has distinguished
four types or degrees of organizational inclusion of the poor (he
use the term participation): (1) social service consumers
(clients); (2) staff members (employees); (3) political
constituents ("full" participation); and with references to CEO
agencies, (4) members of agency boards of directors. Bachrach
and Baratz (1970) have made similar, though not identical,
distinctions.   The terms they use to classify the relation
between the poor of a city and an OEO organization are:
unexposed - those who have not been included, in any way or to
any degree, in the activities of the agency; nonparticipant
beneficiaries - those who receive benefits (clients); and
participants - those who are included within the agency in
policy-making and/or administration positions. As Pollinger and
Pollinger (1972) point out, these distinctions either leave out
or include in the participants category the poor who are hired by
the agency to fill non-administrative positions (e.g.,
secretaries, Head Start aides). Thus, Pollinger and Pollinger
add the category "participant beneficiaries" to cover that
distinct class.

     At any rate, moving from the unexposed through clients and
employees to decision-makers clearly represents increasing
degrees of inclusion and increasing degrees of (potential) power
within the organization. In the case of the poor as OEO board
members, the degree of organizational inclusion and the power
position of the poor will no doubt empirically vary. In some
cases, the poor on an OEO board may be very marginally included
in running the organization. In other cases, the poor on an OEO
board may, because of coalitions with other members and/or
because they represent an organized political group in the com-
munity or for other reasons, be fully included in running the
organization.

Though it is more realistic to think of the extent of organ-
izational inclusion of the poor as at least a trichotomous
variable, for reasons of keeping the typology fairly simple and
manageable, it is necessary initially to divide the inclusion
into high and low categories. While any particular case must be
analyzed on the basis of available information, in general we may
assume that inclusion of the poor only as clients and/or employees
is a low level of inclusion, and inclusion of the poor as poli-
tical constituents, a high level of inclusion. In attempting to
analyze any particular case, answering questions such as the
following will be important in determining the degree of organi-
zational inclusion of the poor. In the case of the poor as
employees, what percentage of the employees are classified or
defined as (formerly) poor? How many and what kind (e.g.,
personnel, budgetary, goals and policies) of organizational
decisions do the poor make?
     The final dimension to be considered is the resource base of
social action organization sponsors. Organizational sponsors are
conceived as those social groups that provide important resources
to a fledgling organization. Important organizational resources
include, but are not necessarily limited to, money and credit,
control over jobs, access to mass media, high social status,
knowledge and technical skills, legitimacy, social access to
community leaders, commitment of followers, and control over
interpretation of values (Clark, 1968; Coleman, 1971). Sponsors
may or may not be the creators or the dominant constituency of an
organization. We often expect the three to be one and the same.[3]
In attempting to analyze social action organizations, though, it
is a question that needs to be left open. For instance, it can
be argued that OEO community action agencies, were, by and large,
created and sponsored by the federal government, and often a
coalition of local politicians and public and private welfare
bureaucrats, with the intended constituency being the poor of the
city. While OEO sponsored community action organizations have
attracted most of the attention, some social action organizations
have been sponsored by universities, by the poor themselves, and
occasionally by "new left" radicals. To complete the typology,
the sponsorship dimension will be dichotomized into high resource
sponsors (e.g., OEO, universities) and low resource sponsors
(e.g., the poor, radicals).
     As is clear from the proceeding comments, focusing on
these three dimensions and their respective dichotomies simplifies
and reduces the buzzing, blooming confusion of "real" social
action organizations. Nonetheless, each dimension remains more
than one simple variable. Each dimension could be decomposed
into several "conceptual variables" and even more "operational
variables". Doing so now, however, is inappropriate and

impossible, given the present state of the field. Thus while
these dimensions may turn out to include "too much" and to
obscure discontinuous and conditional relationships, it seems
important to utilize categories that will maximize the comparson
of cases and the clarification of issues under the present
circumstances.
    The typology that results from dichotomizing and cross-
classifying these three dimensions is presented in Diagram I.
The organizational types that are most consistent with the situa-
tional theory of poverty are types 1 and 5.   During the 1960's
type 1 was probably the most favorec. In the early 1970's,
however, many situationalists, having concluded that the chances
of governmentally sponsored anti-poverty organizations accom-
plishing socio-political change were very small, seemed to favor
type 5 organizations (see, for example, several of the essays in
Pilisuk and Pilisuk, 1973). Situational theorists, by and large,
dismiss traditional welfare and social service organizations,
which generally fall into cell 4 of this typology, as superfluous
to the structural position of the poor.

        Diagram I--<u>Typology</u> <u>of</u> <u>Social</u> <u>Action</u> <u>Organizations</u>

		Socio-political Change	Individual Service
High Resource Sponsor	High Inclusion of Poor	1	2
	Low Inclusion of Poor	3	4
Low Resource Sponsor	High Inclusion of Poor	5	6
	Low Inclusion of Poor	7	8

Some situationalists argue that traditional welfare and social
service agencies function to maintain the powerlessness of the
poor.

        It is widely agreed that the traditional programs
    of the welfare establishment have proved inadequate.
    A principal reason for this is that these programs have
    not enabled the poor to act in behalf of their own
    interests, either individually or collectively.

Indeed, conventional welfare approaches have often had
the opposite effect of perpetuating and reinforcing the
dependency and powerlessness of the poor. (Valentine,
1968: 166).

Further, those situationalists who have most vigorously pur-
sued the anti-thesis theme, have not, for that reason, perhaps,
paid much attention to any type of social action organization.
Those situationalists - Haggstrom, Brager, Kramer, and
Specht - who have had administrative and/or research experience
in welfare and social action organizations, have not written
primarily about types 1 and 5, but generally about type 2
organizations. These situationalists have recognized the
"psychological maiming" (Liebow, 1967) that the poor have suf-
fered and view organizational participation as a kind of therapy.
In this brand of situational writing successful social action
organizations are depicted as combination of type 1 and type 2
(or 5 and 6). Haggstrom (1964), who served as director of the
Community Action Training Center of Syracuse University, contends
that a successful poor people's organization should engage in
actions that will have some effect on institutions defining the
poor and that demand much effort and skill or in other ways
become salient in major areas of the personalities of the poor.
Thus, the chief implication of the situational theory for the
design and operation of social action organizations is that the
poor participate in them in such a way as to both affect some
kind of external change and simultaneously achieve some kind of
positive personality outcome. For the individual, such organiza-
tional participation is thought to lead to important changes in
the causal sequence of poverty, since it is causally prior to the
other elements.
The implications of the cultural (or subcultural) theory
of poverty for welfare and social action organizations can
also be examined in terms of the typology. The traditional
welfare and social service agencies that deal with the poor
would, of course, generally fall into cell 4. Organizations in
cell 4 are those controlled by the not-poor and that provide the
poor with, for example, clothing, food, rent allotments, and
sometimes counseling or other therapy. Culturalists think these
(cell 4) organizations necessary, but often ineffective in pene-
trating the poverty subculture. It seems likely that some
proponents of the cultural theory would see organizations of type
2 as possibly useful for resocializing some individuals out of
the poverty subculture. Thus, the implications of the cultural
theory are not entirely dissimilar to the implications of the
situational theory, as Spilerman and Elesh (1971) have noted.

On the other hand, cultural theory seems to imply that socio-political change and full organizational participation are neither effective or desirable. Other degrees of inclusion - as clients or employees - may sometimes penetrate the poverty subculture. The cultural theorists have emphasized how powerful the subculture is, but they also hold out the possibility that some well-done interventions may have some effect (Lewis, 1968). Hiring poor people might, depending on the pay, bring those persons out of economic poverty, and in some instances such employees may learn new and transferable skills, as well as work discipline, and "escape" the hold of the subculture of poverty. In summary, the cultural theory implies that individual service and/or partial inclusion (as clients or employees) may sometimes be effective organizational design strategies, but that socio-political change and full inclusion will not be.

Summary and Conclusion

Many "War on Poverty" efforts were based on the assumptions that (1) the poor were psychologically different (deficient) than the non-poor and (2) participation by the poor in social action organizations would lead to beneficial changes in their personalities. There have been a few studies that provide support for these assumptions, especially the second - that participation leads to psychological change. Other studies found few or no changes in personality that could reasonably be attributed to organizational participation. This apparent inconsistency may be due to failure to examine differences in the nature of organization participation. The poor's experiences in social action organizations are unlikely to be completely alike. Organizations differ and thus so does the nature of participation. Might not differences in the extent and kind of participation be related to differences in the personal impact of participation?

To begin to answer such a question, a typology of social action organizations has been developed. The typology incorporates the dimensions of output goal orientation, inclusion of the poor and resource base of the organization's sponsor. Though neither the cultural or situational approaches to poverty are completely specified, they do imply that certain types of social action organizations will be more effective.

In a forthcoming Part II the typology will be used to order a number of case studies of the organizational participation of the poor. That review will lead to several conclusions regarding the participation hypothesis.

Notes

1. As I see it there are two major groupings of sociological theories of poverty. One set are the cultural, or subcultural, approaches in which the poor are thought to lack money principally because they have been socialized in ways that lead to unproductive personalities and behaviors. Oscar Lewis (1959, 1968) is no doubt the most well-known subcultural theorist. The other major set of sociological theories of poverty are situational, or structural, in which the poor's lack of money is attributed to their social and political powerlessness and their powerlessness is created and maintained by the normal operation of the social system. Well-known situationalist authors include Ryan (1971), Valentine (1968), Leeds (1971), and Liebow (1967). Descriptions of the two set of theories can be found in Rose (1972); Possi and Blum (1969); and Spilerman and Elesh (1971).

2. Peterson and Greenstone (1977) have argued that OEO and its local CAAs moved from an emphasis on social service coordination to citizen participation in order to develop an identifiable organizational mission and political constituency. The origin of the participatory idea in the 1960's is of less importance here than the personal impact of social action participation on the poor.

3. Also see McCarthy and Zald (1977) for a theoretical examination of social movement organizations from a resource mobilization perspective that argues for the necessity of distinguishing among various categories of adherents, constituents and beneficiaries.

References

Austin, David R.
    1972   "Resident participation: polictical mobilization or
            organizational co-optation?" Public Administration
            Review 32:   409-20.

Bachrach, Peter and Morton S. Baratz
    1970   Power and Poverty. New York: Oxford University
            Press.

Brager, George A. and Harry Specht
    1969   "Mobilization the poor for social action". Pp.223-32
            in Ralph M. Kramer and Harry Specht (eds.), Readings
            in Community Organization Practice. Englewood
            Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.

Clark, Terry N.
     1968   "Community structure, power and decision-making."
             Pp. 15-126 in Terry N. Clark (ed.), Community
             Structure and Decision-Making: Comparative Analyses.
             San Francisco: Chandler.

Cole, Richard L.
     1974   Citizen Participation and the Urban Policy Process.
             Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath.

Coleman, James S.
     1971   Resources for Social Change. New York: John Wiley,
             Interscience.

Curtis, Russel L. and Louis A. Zurcher, Jr.
     1971   "Voluntary associations and the social integration
             of the poor." Social Problems 18: 339-57.

Gottesfeld, Harry and Gerterlyn Dozier
     1966   "Changes in feelings of powerlessness in a community
             action program." Psychological Reports 19: 978.

Haggstrom, Warren
     1964   "The power of the poor." Pp. 205-23 in Frank
             Reissman, Jerome Cohen and Arthur Pearl (eds.),
             Mental Health of the Poor. New York: Free
             Press.

Helfgot, Joseph
     1974   "Professional reform organizations and the symbolic
             representation of the poor." American Sociological
             Review 39: 475-91.

Herman, Robert D.
     1976   "Voluntary organization participation and personality
             change in the poor: a longitudinal study." Journal
             of Voluntary Action Research 5: 95-105.

Kramer, Ralph M.
     1969   Participation of the Poor: Comparative Community
             Case Studies in the War on Poverty. Englewood
             Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall.

Kramer, Ralph M. and Harry Specht
     1969   "Introdution." Pp. 1-21 in Ralph M. Kramer and Harry
             Specht (eds.), Readings in Community Organization
             Practice. Englewood Cliffs N.J.: Prentice-Hall.

Leeds, Anthony
    1971   "The concept of the 'culture of poverty':
            conceptual, logical and empirical problems with
            perspectives from Brazil and Peru." Pp. 226-84 in
            Eleanor Burke Leacock (ed.), The Culture of Poverty:
            A Critique. New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc.

Levens, Helene
    1968   "Organizational affiliation and powerlessness: a case
            study of the welfare poor." Social Problems 16: 18-32.

Lewis, Oscar
    1959   Five Families: Mexican Case Studies in the Culture
            of Poverty. New York: Basic Books.

    1966   A Case Study of Slum Culture: Backgrounds for
            LaVida. New York: Random House.

Liebow, Elliot
    1967   Tally's Corner: A Study of Negro Streetcorner Men.
            Boston: Little, Brown.

McCarthy, John D. and Mayer N. Zald
    1977   "Resource mobilization and social movements: a partial
            theory." American Journal of Sociology 82: 1212-41.

Marris, Peter and Martin Rein
    1967   Dilemmas of Social Reform: Poverty and Community
            Action in the United States. New York: Atherton.

Marshall, Dale Rogers
    1971   The Politics of Participation in Poverty. Berkeley:
            University of California Press.

Miller, S.M., Pamela Roby and Alwine A. De Vos Van Steenwijk
    1970   "Creaming the poor." Transaction (June): 38-45.

Perrow, Charles
    1961   "The analysis of goals in complex organizations."
            American Sociological Review 26: 859-66.

    1970   Organizational Analysis: A Sociological View.
            Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth.

Peterson, Paul E. and J. David Greenstone
    1977   "Racial change and citizen participation: the
             mobilization of low income communities through
             community action." Pp. 241-78 in Robert D.
             Haveman (ed.), A Decade of Federal Antipoverty
             Programs. New York: Academic Press.

Pilisuk, Marc and Phyllis Pilisuk (eds.)
    1973   How We Lost the War on Poverty. New Brunswick,
             N.J.: Transaction Books.

Pollinger, Kenneth J. and Annette C. Pollinger
    1972   Community Action and the Poor. New York: Praeger.

Rose, Stephan M.
    1972   The Betrayal of the Poor: The Transformation of
           Community Action. Cambridge, Massachusetts:
           Schenkman.

Rossi, Peter H. and Zahara Blum
    1969   "Class, status and poverty." Pp. 36-63 in Daniel
           P. Moynihan (ed.), On Understanding Poverty:
           Perspectives from the Social Sciences. New York:
           Basic Books.

Ryan, William
    1971   Blaming the Victim. New York: Random House.

Spilerman, Seymour and David Elesh
    1971   "Alternative conceptions of poverty and implications
             for income maintenance." Social Problems 18: 358-72.

Valentine, Charles A.
    1968   Culture and Poverty: Critique and Counter-Proposals.
             Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Van Til, Jon and Sally Bould Van Til
    1970   "Citizen participation in social policy: the
             end of the cycle." Social Problems 17: 313-24.

Zald, Mayer N.
    1967   "Sociology and community organization practice."
             Pp. 28-51 in Mayer N. Zald (ed.), Organizing for
             Community Welfare. Chicago: Quadrangle Books.

Zurcher, Louis A., Jr.

   1970a   "The poverty board -- some consequences of 'maximum
           feasible participation.'" Journal of Social Issues
           26:   85-109.

   1970b   Poverty Warriors: The Human Experience of Planned
           Social Intervention. Austin, Texas: University of
           Texas Press.