Experiences of Women Activists: Implications for Community Organizing Theory and Practice

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I long to hear that you have declared an independancy - and by the way in the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors...If particuliar care and attention is not paid to the Ladies we are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation.
  - Abigail Adams to John Adams
    March 31, 1776

The field of community organizing would be wise to heed the words of Abigail Adams to her revolutionary husband, John. Contributions of women activists have been virtually ignored by the field of social work. Consequently, social work has a diminished knowledge base and has alienated large numbers of talented women. Ironically, both the past and the future of community organizing are tied intimately with the action of women. Foremothers include Jane Addams, Dorothea Dix and Lillian Wald. Current trends suggest that "women's issues," such as poverty, the family and reproductive rights, will be on national, state and local agendas for years to come. In order to prepare for the future, we need to understand the talents of the past and present.

This paper explores the experiences of women activists, primarily in the labor, peace and feminist movements. A number of salient themes, generated in interviews with and presentations by women activists, are identified. Suggestions are made as to how

and why these themes should be integrated into community organizing practice. Given that a personal research goal of the author is to generate a community organizing theory based on the experiences of women, the discussion of themes is preceded by a newly developed analytical framework for collective practice. This project also represents a preliminary attempt to weave qualitative research methods, feminist thought and women's experiences into an understandable and meaningful whole.

Such an apprach is a departure from traditional community organizing theory and practice for a number of reasons. First, critical attention is paid to the impact of gender. Second, women's experiences are considered legitimate and credible, an important factor given that the needs, thoughts and actions of women organizers are rarely addressed in the literature and in training. Third, the benefits of cross-fertilization are illustrated, since none of the women interviewed considered themselves "community organizers," yet their actions are quite applicable to the field. Finally, the analysis is from neither a community organizing model perspective (Rothman, 1979) nor a "how-to" approach (Alinsky, 1969, 1972; Kahn, 1982; Speeter, 1978; Staples, 1984). Rather a wholistic approach is presented that focuses on the "how" or process of organizing instead of the "what" or product of organizing. Important work along this line has been done by Brandwein (1981), Burghardt (1982), Freire (1974), Galper (1980), and Galper and Mondros (1980).

Background and Context

This project reflects much of the author's thoughts and experiences as a feminist activist. This experience includes legal advocacy for women, labor education and, currently, consciousness-raising workshops on unlearning or confronting the "Isms" - racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, ageism and handicapism. Much feminist analysis has been brought to bear on this project. A complete discussion on feminist scholarship, however, is beyond the scope of this paper. Nonetheless, the women's movement is a rich, yet uncultivated area for community organizing. The reference section of this paper includes a number of sources that ought to be incorporated into community organizing curricula. For the purposes of this paper, many basic tenets of feminist thought are seen in the identification of salient themes.

546

A non-positivist, qualitative research approach was selected because this methodology seemed best suited for women to define their reality, rather than it being imposed upon them. The analysis is based primarily on interviews with and presentations by women activists (listed at the end of the paper). The interviews were open-ended, and much of the richness in the material results from "chasing tangents." Five issues, however, were raised in all of the interviews: 1) Reasons for becoming an activist; 2) How organizing is accomplished; 3) Structure of the organization; 4) Gender dynamics within the organization; and 5) Type of training. Additional interviews and relevant material published in a variety of social change oriented journals supplement the analysis.

Although this paper focuses on the experiences of women activists, its application should not be limited to a female audience. The purpose of this project is defeated if the results are not considered in an integrative fashion. For a variety of reasons, including sex role sterotyping and "either-or" analytical frameworks, there exists the temptation to dichotomize the findings. By way of a warning, two dichotomies should be mentioned: male versus female styles, and process versus product orientations. Each shall be considered briefly.

There is a growing body of literature, particularly in the area of group development, on male and female styles of leadership, power and authority. Within this literature there is general agreement that masculine and feminine styles do exist. Furthermore, masculine styles are typified by aggressive, task-focused, and competitive traits and feminine styles are typified by passive, interpersonal-focused, and cooperative traits (Bokemeier & Tate, 1980; Brandwein, 1981; Gilligan, 1982; Hyde, 1983; Johnson, 1976; Reed, 1981; Van Wagner & Swanson, 1979). The community organizing field needs to be attentive to these different styles, for in varying degrees they have implications for the recruitment and training of both practitioners and constituents. Reed (1981) suggests three areas in which gender differences influence the training of group leaders: assumptions about gender-related behaviors, gender composition of groups, and a group's reaction to female leaders. It is her contention, shared by others, that these issues surrounding gender need to be brought to the forefront of a training experience. Failure to acknowledge or plan for them could undermine the overall goal of the group.

The existence of masculine and feminine styles, however, does not mean that they are intrinsic traits (Brandwein, 1981: 189). Many feminine traits, however, do emerge in the themes presented below. Therefore, they receive whay may appear to be a lop-sided emphasis, especially given that the community organizing field is seen as having a masculine orientation. This study does not conclude, however, that women are the only people capable of nurturance, emotions and other feminine actions, nor that their behavior is limited to these traits. Such conclusions limit both women and men. As one woman involved in the peace movement states:

> The notion that women are more nurturing and, therefore, should participate to save the earth is usually sexist. That's our sex role sterotype. The fact is that everyone has the capacity to nurture.That women have been socialized to do so is a reality, and it's an asset we have going for us. But at the same time we recognize it as a strength, we must deplore it as a mandate. If that's done, then I think we're talking feminism.(Popkin & Delgado, 1982:40)

Community organizing would be enhanced if a greater integration of masculine and feminine characteristics occurred. For this to happen, organizers need to be aware of these different traits, to stop dismissing feminine traits as weak and ineffective, and to encourage both men and women to acquire a more integrative style in their organizing.

A second dichotomy, often viewed as a component of the male-female split, is between process and task (or process and product). Crow (1978) and Riddle (1978) provide thoughtful discussions on the damaging impact that this dichotomization has on organizing and social change efforts. A process orientation focuses on how things are accomplished and attention is paid to the development of trust, sensitivity, empathy and support among group members. A product orientation focuses on what things get accomplished and attention is paid to the efficiency, action, rational

order and task completion. There are strengths and weaknesses in
both approaches and a savvy organizer needs to determine a
balance. There is a distinct bias, however, in this paper towards
a process orientation. This is partly due to the emphasis placed
on process by the women activists. It is also a reaction to the
lopsided product/task orientation found within community organiz-
ing. Here again, the ideal would be an integration of process and
product.

Emerging Paradigm

As stated above, one goal of this project was to develop a
paradigm that would prove useful for future analysis. This
paradigm would emerge from and reflect the experiences of women
activists, suggest a wholistic approach to community organizing,
and relate all components to one another rather than force a
linear or causal ordering. The result is referred to as a Wholis-
tic Collective Practice Paradigm, illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: WHOLISTIC COLLECTIVE PRACTICE PARADIGM

STRATEGIC

STRUCTURAL

SUBJECTIVE
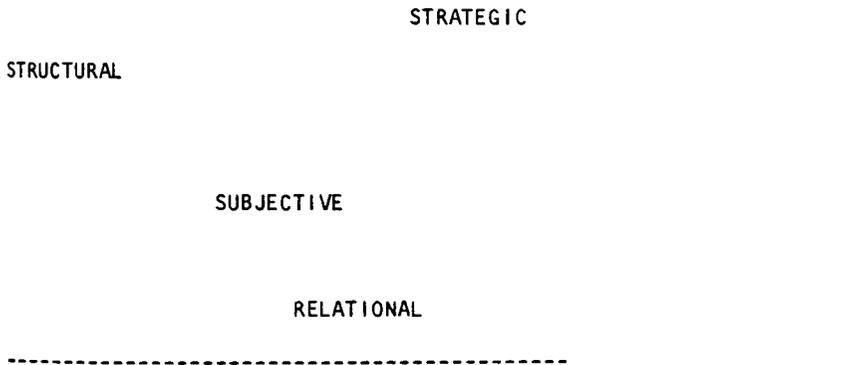
RELATIONAL

The four dimensions, subjective, relational, strategic and struc-
tural, represent different concerns or levels within collective
practice. Briefly, definitions for these dimensions are:

549

Structural: Focuses on the organization, its purpose, development, apparatus and positions. Also focuses on connections between organizations.

Strategic: Action aspects of practice, with emphasis placed on the strategy as a process. Tactical steps are considered a subunit of this dimension.

Relational: Focuses on the relationships between people-people and people-organization. Stresses the collectivity, its origin, maintenance and growth. Also focuses on the process of others engaging in strategies.

Subjective: Introspective or refexive statements by the individual (such as the organizer). Captures the assessments, interpretations and opinions of the individual. This transcends all dimensions.

Collective practice, such as mobilizing or organizing, is the process of connection these four dimensions toward the goal of some form of intervention or social change. All of these dimensions are connected to or interdependent on one another. No dimension is more important to the process than another, although at a given point in time one may have greater emphasis placed upon it. This paradigm can be envisioned as a mobile trying to balance its parts.

Within each of these dimensions are themes that specifically relate to the experiences of women organizers. There is considerable overlap, in that a theme is not constrained to one dimension. In fact, the power of this paradigm is that it forces us to consider that an act has implications on a variety of levels. For example, when an organizer considers a fundraising effort, she/he needs to consider the organizational structure, pre and post effort, the steps involved, the opinions, desires, and skills of the collective and individual concerns. While the development of this paradigm is in its preliminary stage, it may provide a new frame of reference or a way of thinking about or analyzing community organizing efforts. It conveys the importance of considering a variety of dimensions simultaneously (a difficult notion to grasp, see Boulet, 1981). Futhermore, it suggests that the practitioner needs to allow the group to define its own reality, rather than imposing a predetermined, ordered plan upon it.

A number of themes appear consistently and without prompting in the descriptions of the experiences of the women interviewed. At the very least, these themes should be seriously considered in relation to current community organizing practice. A process by which these themes can be integrated into practice. A process by which these themes can be integrated into practice is important. Hopefully, these themes, and the dimensions, will serve as a foundation for the generation of a new community organizing theory.

Themes

1) <u>The Wholistic Organizer</u> - Many of the women activists stated that to be an organizer meant to involve oneself fully. One woman stated it quite eloquently: "What is my view of social change? It is a wholistic approach. It involves all, the spiritual, actions and intellect. It is engagement" (KL). This notion of total engagement or investment was echoed by others. Considerable attention was paid to personal investment and to the alienation felt when emotions were denied. Thus, an organizing effort should not focus solely on what is being done. It also needs to incorporate the intellectual and emotional needs of individuals and the collective.

The wholistic organizer should not be equated with the organizer who does everything. Alinsky believed that an organizer needs to be adept at all phases, yet this creates a power dynamic between organizer and group that many of the women felt unnecessary and detrimental. First, it places too much emphasis on the organizer as expert, a pressure that often leads to burnout and disinvestment. It also suggests that the group becomes too dependent on the organizer's expertise and will be unable to function once the organizers leaves the setting. Second, it closes a door for the organizer in terms of her or his own learning. There was overwhelming sentiment that while an organizer can offer something to the organizing effort, the effort serves as an educational experience for the organizer.

When one woman said, "...overall, the whole thing has been very enlightening" (TN), she was referring to the skills and insights she gained while being the facilitator to a selfhelp group. She, and others, also acknowledged that they do not know everything. Rather than limiting the group's development, this can free up the group to explore the skills and strengths of others.

Thus, delegation, support, interdependence and the acknowledgement
that everyone can contribute something, become focal points for
the organizing process.

2) Fulfillment through Organizing - Closely tied to the
wholistic organizer is the notion that organizing, aside from re-
aching a goal, can be a fulfilling process in and of itself. The
learning and support gained while organizing became as meaningful
as achieving the product. One woman described organizing as a
"natural high" (KG), despite the struggles and setbacks. In fact,
one way of overcoming disappointments was with support for others.
The encouragement of bonding and the development of support net-
works were considered of primary importance by the women.

3) Personal as Political: The Indigenous Organizer - A com-
mon image of a community organizer is the person who goes into the
community, helps people organize around an issue, and then leaves.
There is little sense as to the actual investment of the organizer
into the issue. This image did not apply to these women ac-
tivists. Their reasons for becoming activists varied, but the com-
mon theme was that they became involved because the problem or
issue was personally experienced. Reasons include:

> "It started with my own health. I was
> misdiagnosed"(TN)

> "I think I initially became involved
> because of self-interest. The neigh-
> borhood was going down andnobody was
> doing anything about it"(Hayes, p. 24).

> "Whatever it (project) is, it will have
> a lot of personal investment. Like
> Braun Court, this is important. It's
> our home (scheduled for rezoning). I
> am guided by personal issues, I need
> that kind of investment to
> organize"(FS).

> "Listening to the (women's)music is
> like being on dope without drugs. I
> had a lot of friends who were musicians
> and we would get together. It filled a

552

> need, it was something very   personal.
> And, I can't sing or anything, but I
> know how to organize and thought, why
> not organize an event that would fea-
> ture women performers" (KG).

> "I feel strongly that what I'm doing is
> for them (her children)"(TL).

These personal reasons for being an activist stem from two main sources. One is the need to gain knowledge. Perhaps the best or, at least, most recognized example of this is the book Our Bodies, Ourselves. This book began with a group of women who gathered to discuss their health needs and how they were not being met by the current medical establishment. The outcome was the Boston Women's Health Collective and the publication of one of the most influential books regarding health care and self-help. Often, the need to obtain knowledge is accompanied by the need to disseminate any information so that it could help others. The women believed it was important that others have access to infor- mation and to demystify previously denied information so that it could be understood and used.

Another reason stems from a reaction to unmet needs and hos- tility found within male-dominated organizations. Both Freeman and Evans (1980) argue that early participants in the women's movement had endured degrading and humiliating treatment within the leftist and student movements of the 1960's. These women ob- tained important skills while working in the movements, yet were not given credit for their contributions and were not treated seriously. Demands for equality were scoffed at and ignored. Women caucuses began to be formed and experiences were shared, thus creating an environment that provided a springboard for the feminist movement. This analysis suggests, again, the importance of personal fulfillment and investment.

4)   Use of Emotions - In many of the organizing efforts, emo- tions provided the cornerstone. The Women's Pentagon Action (Lin- ton & Whitham, 1982; Popkin & Delgado, 1982) was mobilized around mourning, rage, empowerment and defiance. Every activity was tied into expressing these emotions (In my own work, I use an equation

Awareness=Pain=Healing=Growth, as a way of emotionally contex-
tualizing an anti-racism (or other ism) workshop. Exercises help
participants pass through these stages.)

Women stressed the importance of bonding, of people getting to
know each other so that they could work together in a way that was
mutually fulfilling and rewarding. Attention to emotional or per-
sonal needs improves the overall organizing effort: "I learned
that if a person feels important, they will help and get in-
volved"(EK). Not only does the acknowledgement of emotions and
bonding help people become invested, it also serves as a source of
reserve energy in the face of opposition. Knowing that others
care often comforts an individual when confronted with derogatory
comments, hecklers, etc. Fears and concerns can be addressed
within a supportive environment. This sounds obvious, yet it is
often overlooked because accomplishing the task has assumed a dis-
proportionate emphasis, to the detriment of the group. Rather
than denying emotions, emotions should be used as a way of build-
ing personal ties and as a context for mobilizing. When emotions
are used as a focus of organizing or as a source of strength, at-
tention must be paid to the building of support networks (they
won't happen spontaneously) and to the allowance of time so that
people can sufficiently express their feelings.

5) <u>Attention to the Environment</u> - The themes identified thus
far have stressed the importance of support, emotional bonding and
personal investment. Women stressed that a "safe" environment was
essential to developing these interpersonal sides of organizing.
A safe environment is one in which trust, respect, equality and
validation of an individual's experiences takes place. It was
viewed as a high priority among most of the women: "I want a
good, open working environment, where people are safe. A safe
environment is definitely one of my interests and needs. It's a
place where people trust one another"(FS). Most of the women said
that a safe environment was all-female, although all-female en-
vironments are not necessarily safe. One women suggested: "That
with all women staffs you have differences in power and control.
You don't have the male/female battles. It is a support and
sanctuary that you can invest in"(QZ).

A safe environment, however, is not an environment that is
conflict free. The creation of a safe environment allows for the
airing of problems, for the exchange of diverse ideas in a direct

554

manner. In building a safe environment, attention is paid to the creation of a process through which information, grievances, and thoughts can be heard. For one woman, consensus decisionmaking was the key. Her experience of being an organizer/participant in a local women's peace camp proved rewarding, in part because the planning group had taken considerable time in determining a consensus style that was accessible and available to all participants: "...(P)ositive stuff were tive stuff were that a lot of feelings got heard and a lot of subtle adjustments were made in the actual plan, that, because people were heard, ideas came forward and...it was very rich, very diverse...and that doesn't happen when you have an uncomfortable environment, when it's not a safe environment to talk"(MB). Taking the time to address the environment can pay off in the long run with increased commitment, greater group ownership for the project and organization, and different, creative ideas.

6)   Gender dynamics - In connection wih discussion on a safe environment were comments regarding gender dynamics. Most of the women saw clear differences between male and female styles of organizing that were in line with the stereotypes outlined above. These differences were particularly apparent in comments on power/ control and communication:

> Regarding Affinity Groups for a peace action and the lack of recognition given to a facilitator: "so they don't acknowledge what a facilitator is and it's the men that don't, I'm sure it is, that disrupt it because they don't have a sense of what collective work is and they're not trained...but they're not comfortable with having somebody who is the person, who is trying to help every one manage their feelings and their conflict"(MB).

> "Men and women are different as organizers. One of my major complaints is with men. Organizationally, they are always dealing with power issues. Women are more trusting, more sensitive, able to communicate and relate to others. ...Women intuitively use group process and interpersonal skills. Where men are rational and intellectual. ...very un-intimate, real "heady." Can't listen to others."(FS)

> "What I have noticed is that where men are involved, they end up being power hungry. Not cooperative."(TN)

555

"I was taught the Alinsky model. Charging white knight
saving the day. I knew that I couldn't do that."(TL)

In order to break down the walls that exist between men and women,
it is important that women's experiences and concerns are respect-
ed and treated seriously. It is also important that men become
trained in other methods of decision making, leadership and con-
trol, given the opinions against hierarchical, male-dominated,
aggressive, individualistic settings.

7) Bridging Differences - A common concern among these women
was closing gaps that exist along racial, sexual preference,
class, age and handicap lines. Consequently, confronting one's
own biases, rather than ignoring them, was seen as central to in-
dividual and group development. Before, or in conjunction with an
organizing effort, internal group prejudices are addressed.
Rather than hide these problems so that an illusion of solidarity
is created, these women stress the importance of raising these
issues directly as a way of furthering growth and opportunities.
Failure to do so will lead to divisiveness, anger, frustration
and, ultimately, disintegration.

8) Women's Culture and History - Virtually every woman had a
female role model who served as a source of inspiration and
courage. These were not necessarily famous women, but they were
women who helped make a struggle understandable and workable
through their actions. Some of these role models were known per-
sonally as they were bosses, friends, or other activists. Others
served a symbolic purpose, such as in the Women's Pentagon Action
in which women who died from the violent acts of men were remem-
bered in ceremonies. Still others represent feminist culture
(music and arts) and are viewed as a source of sustenance and con-
nection: "I turn on Sweet Honey in the Rock and understand Ber-
nice Reagan's meanings of social actions, consciousness raising.
Need this global meaning. You need emotional support"(KL).

Community organizing needs to rediscover the female organizers
of its past. It should also consider the life histories of women
in a variety of movements for they will suggest a different way of
mobilizing.

9) Training - There was no consistent view of the best
training. Many of these women received their training through

556

experience and not through any formal educational process. Some took advantage of available training opportunities presented by organizations, such as Settlement Houses, the Midwest Academy and labor schools. Of concern to the field of community organizing should be the resentment felt towards the increased professionalization of the field. One women, when asked why she went back to school, said: "It's time for the credentials"(KG); another said: "All I'm getting is a piece of paper that says I'm qualified"(FS). These women have demonstrated that grassroots experience, particularly if one is open to learning from others, is a valuable means of gaining an education of organizing. Community organizing needs to determine ways of tapping this knowledge and creating learning situations that are meaningful to women.

Conclusion

This paper has explored some common threads among women activists with the hope that these findings can be incorporated into community organizing practice. It presented an analytical paradigm that stresses a wholistic approach to collective practice. The paradigm's four dimensions - subjective, relational, strategic, and structural - comprise an integrated, interdependent whole; much like a balanced mobile. Within these dimensions are themes, nine of which were presented. Most of these themes focused on the emotional and interpersonal aspects of organizing, a view often overlooked or ignored in current community organizing theory and practice. I hope that serious consideration of these themes occurs and that community organizing, from training through the execution of efforts, changes in ways that accepts and integrates the experiences of women activists. In the words of Abigail Adams - "Remember the Ladies," and the future will be stronger and more vital.

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KG. Interview, June 1984. Involvement in consumer services, the arts, feminist networking.

KL. Presentation, October 1984. Involvement in peace work, civil rights, labor education.

LD. Presentation, October 1984. Involvement in labor organizing.

MB. Interview, May 1984. Involvement in peace work, environmental issues.

QZ. Interview, October 1984. Involvement in reproductive rights, labor organizing, neighborhood organizing.

SA. Presentation, October 1984. Involvement in desegregation, student rights, peace work.

TL. Presentation, October 1984. Involvement in women's economic rights, peace work.

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