Introduction

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INTRODUCTION

One of the few promising developments within social work during the current era of Reaganomics has been the revival of interest in community organizing strategies and methods. During the 1970s, most of the vitality in the community organizing field came from outside social work--from the grassroots community groups Harry Boyte described in THE BACKYARD REVOLUTION, from training schools like the Midwest Academy and the Industrial Areas Foundation, and from social movement organizations among women, minorities, gays, the elderly and the disabled. Now, in response to the pressures of severe resource cutbacks, shifts in national ideology and culture, and a less hospitable environment for the human services, social workers are rediscovering the role of community organization in creating and sustaining support for the programs and values with which social workers have historically been identified.

For many social workers, inside and outside community organization, the concept of empowerment has become the holy grail of the 1980s. Hardly a journal issue passes without some reference to this theme. Consequently, what was a novel idea (or, at least, a novel formulation of an older idea) a few short years ago, has threatened to become a cliche. This would be a serious loss for social work as the ideas behind the concept continue to be worth striving for.

In their essay, "Community Empowerment as a Non-Problem," John Russell-Erlich and Felix Rivera address this problem directly. They suggest that social workers, including community organizers, have done little either to empower the poor or to foster the development of a radical consciousness (i.e. one which does not separate theory and practice and which enables people to understand the sources of their oppression in the political and economic systems.) They see the roots of this problem in the nature of social work as a profession and in the changing focus of schools of social work--particularly the shifting role of community organization in social work curricula and the absence of role models for students on social work faculties.

They propose certain tenets for a "radical community organiza-
tion practice" and a "meta-practice approach" to community or-
ganization. Finally, they suggest some future directions for com-
munity organization within such an approach. These include (1) a
more systematic evaluation of past and present organizing strate-
gies; (2) the development of support systems for individuals and
groups involved in community organizing; (3) the nurturing of
politicians within community organizations; (4) the creation of
community focused research organizations; (5) the use of sabbati-
cals to support theory-building in community organization; and (6)
a more conscious attempt to develop a futurist perspective within
community organization.

The subsequent articles by Ralph Woehle and Stephen Rose ex-
plore the implications of their practice experiences in client and
community empowerment through community-based programs in a con-
servative environment for the development of community organiza-
tion theory. Woehle examines the possibility of client empower-
ment in rural areas in which policy choices about resource alloca-
tion are determined by the interaction of business and governmen-
tal elites. While opportunities for influence are limited in such
settings, he suggests that by engagement in what he terms "program
politics" organizers can affect policy decisions, especially at
the associational level. He is skeptical, however, about the
likelihood of direct empowerment of clients through such activi-
ties, nor does he believe that the creation of new programs or the
survival of existing ones are in themselves empowering goals.

Stephen Rose examines similar questions within the context of
his experience as Director of a community-based mental health
after care program in Suffolk County, New York. Like Russell,
Erlich and Rivera, he argues that most social work theory ratio-
nalizes the social order and is, therefore, of little utility in
the development of a practice model whose goal is to transform
that order. Rose's Sayville Project employed, instead, an "ad-
vocacy/empowerment" orientation which was derived "from an ex-
planatory paradigm which takes as its central concept the necessi-
ty to understand the systemic relationship between a person's con-
text, history and identity." His detailed analysis of the proj-
ect's history demonstrates effectively that a community organiza-
tion strategy must include (1) the creation of community-based
constituency support; (2) political education; and (3) community
education regarding the service approach and problem definition

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held by the agency. Community organization can, in this man-
ner, develop as both "a desired and necessary activity...(which)
provides the political base for the organizational survival of an
agency more committed to the struggle for social justice than it
is to prevailing thought structures and interorganizational
networks."

The next "set" of essays analyzes several major issues which
confront community organizers in the 1980s. Jacqueline Mondros
and Scott Wilson focus on the recurrent problem of membership re-
cruitment and maintenance. Their article reports some preliminary
findings based on a subset of their larger sample of 45 organiza-
tions. Their conclusions reveal a gap between the recognition by
organizations that recruitment and retention of members are cru-
cial for organizational survival and the failure by these same
organizations to apply sufficient resources towards these tasks.
The study also indicates that grassroots organizations give little
thought to the reasons why people become involved in their or-
ganizations and stay involved. Different types of organizations
base their work on different operative assumptions. Mondros' and
Wilson's initial findings suggest, therefore, that an integrated
model for recruitment and retention needs to combine "both collec-
tive and individual instrumental benefits,...collective and indi-
vidual expressive benefits, and...the development of organization-
al attachment through commitment...to the organization and in-
group ties."

Next, Carl Tjerandsen analyzes the issues which influence the
success or failure of self-help organizations, by evaluating the
programs sponsored by the now defunct Emil Schwartzhaupt Founda-
tion. His essay looks at the following elements in the organizing
process: (1) who initiates the organizing activity; (2) the de-
gree of compatibility between purpose and practice; (3) the nature
of participation in the organizing effort; (4) forms of membership
recruitment; (5) the nature of organizational strategies; (6) the
role of staff in the organization; (7) the level of organizational
resources; (8) the nature of organizational sponsorship; and (9)
the role of education and evaluation. Tjerandsen concludes that
some elements are more significant than others; but a persistent
theme is that social development and individual development must
go hand in hand. From a different perspective, therefore, his
analysis underscores the conclusions regarding individual/
community empowerment at which other authors have arrived. In   a

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similar vein, Charles Frost examines the experience of a single,
albeit massive, community organization project: the creation of
the Basque collectives in Spain over the past 40 years under the
direction of Father Jose Maria. Frost points out the features of
the Basque efforts that make them the most successful cooperatives
in the world: the philosophy of the program; the use of political
and community education as integral parts of the program; the em-
phasis on day-to-day details; and the ongoing integration of
philosophy, knowledge and tactics (what other writers have called
praxis). Anticipating some skepticism about the applicability of
the Basque experience to the United States, Frost points out the
similarities between Father Jose Maria's work and that of Jane
Addams a century ago. In an era in which complex problems are
over-simplified and the mass media have socialized us to look for
quick solutions, Frost cautions wisely that the Basque experience
also reveals how "the process of change is a long and arduous
one." While change is possible, even in circumstances far more
oppressive than those in the contemporary United States, it is
hard work and not rhetorical fantasies that will produce success-
ful results in community organizing. This is a simple, yet worth-
while reminder for the 1980s.

Just as community organizers can learn a great deal from the
experience of other communities abroad, Cheryl Hyde argues that
the male-dominated field of community organization in the U.S. can
learn a great deal about theory and practice from women activists.
Her thesis is that the field of community organization would gain
by incorporating a feminist perspective into its work. Not only
would this enable organizers to work more successfully on the many
"women's issues" which are currently on the policy agenda, it
would also produce "a more wholistic approach to organizing which
would focus on the...process of organizing instead of
the...product."

Based on interviews with women activists, Hyde develops what
she terms a "Wholistic Collective Practice Paradigm" that contains
four dimensions: strategic, structural, subjective and relation-
al. Within these dimensions, Hyde presents nine themes most of
which focus "on the emotional and interpersonal aspects of or-
ganizing," which she claims are generally ignored in community
organization literature.
While most of the essays in this volume emphasize grassroots
organization building, Barry Checkoway reminds us in his article,

"Building Citizen Support for Planning at the Community Level,"
that the changing context has also affected the nature of social
planning in significant ways. He argues that the creation of
cit:zen support for the concept and substance of planning at the
local level is a strategic approach that is every bit as viable
and important for the survival of progressive social welfare pro-
grams as is grassroots organizing. Checkoway asserts that plan-
ners, therefore, "must go beyond rational models to apply
sociopolitical methods to build support for planning at the com-
munity level." He sketches out a step-by-step framework through
which such actions might occur. While he does not assume that
citizen support is the sole answer to the dilemmas confronting
human service professionals, he maintains that such an approach
might make a difference in today's political environment. The
potential benefits exceed the potential risks.

The final two articles by Steve Burghardt and James Craigen
take opposite positions on another topic of considerable currency
for community organizers and social workers in general: the
viability of electoral politics as an arena for community or-
ganization. Burghardt asserts that electoralism is a misguided
tactic today, particularly electoralism which occurs within the
context of the Democratic party. He concedes that electoralism,
per se, is a valid tactical approach--provided that those groups
involved are connected to strong social movements and independent
of prevailing power structures. These conditions, however, do not
exist today, in his view. Consequently, Burghardt is quite criti-
cal of the activities of Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition, which
he consider counter-productive in today's climate. Instead, he
argues, social work strategies should concentrate on five arenas:
(1) legislative coalitions to fight for the preservation of social
welfare entitlements; (2) anti-gentrification coalitions to enable
low-power communities to survive; (3) rank and file trade unions;
(4) anti-racist and anti-sexist groups; and (5) anti-intervention,
anti-militarism coalitions.

Craigen, who was active in Jesse Jackson's 1984 campaign,
presents an opposing position. He stresses the positive achieve-
ments of the Jackson campaign as illustrations of the potential
benefits of electoralism, particularly for racial minorities. The
campaign, he argues, "went beyond symbolism to represent a real
and emerging power base or critical mass in the United States that
has significant implications for community organization theory and

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practice." Its achievements include the mobilization of the Black (and other minority) communities, especially those portions of the community which had previously been unmobilized and seemingly unmobilizable; the instilling of a sense of pride in groups whose self-worth has taken quite a beating in recent years; the training of a new generation of community organizers in low income and minority communities, in both urban and rural areas; and, perhaps of greatest significance, Jackson's candidacy placed "race and things racial back in public view where they belong."

Despite the rich history of community organization within social work, much of the ideas presented in this volume still appear fresh for at least four reasons: (1) the persistent belief of most social workers that individual forms of intervention are the key to enhanced professional status; (2) changes in community organization's terminology; (3) the impact of modern social movements and the development of alternative forms of social service delivery; and (4) dramatic shifts in the U.S. political-economy during the past decade. This special issue--comprised of papers first presented at the 1985 Community Organization/Social Administration Symposium in Washington, D.C.--addresses the last three of these factors. We hope that the essays which follow will stimulate thought, dialogue and action among community organizers and among social workers in general.

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