

March 1998

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Recommended Citation

Cousins, Linwood H. (1998) "Partnerships For Vitalizing Communities And Neighborhoods: Celebrating a "Return!", *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 25: Iss. 1, Article 5.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.2469>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol25/iss1/5>

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Partnerships For Vitalizing Communities And Neighborhoods: Celebrating a "Return"!

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In 1994, ten community and university partnerships joined the W. K. Kellogg Foundation to develop training strategies that would improve social systems and better serve families and neighborhoods. The partnerships and training strategies were to be based on what the Foundation refers to as the "assets model"—or seeing the strengths and assets of families and neighborhoods, rather than their deficits, as the primary building block for social systems (Parsons, 1997). Called the "W. K. Kellogg Foundation Families and Neighborhoods Initiative, Community/ University Partnerships," according to Beverly Parsons, a program evaluator, "Funding is provided for sites to demonstrate that partnerships can indeed be formed among community-based organizations and institutions of higher education to work on critical issues in the area of inservice and preservice education" (Parsons, 1997, p. 1).

In short, the initiative aimed to create partnerships through which the development of knowledge and effective human service training and practices affecting family life could flow in a circular direction between neighborhoods, communities, universities and colleges, and local human service agencies. The initiative aimed to resist a top-down approach in which knowledge is passed from universities and colleges to agencies and then to families, neighborhoods, and communities. At the conceptual center of these efforts is the assets-based approach to community development and organization developed by John Kretzmann and John McKnight in *Building Communities From The Inside Out* (1993).

The articles that I will introduce shortly are celebrations of this partnership and others like them all over our nation. They are written from different vantage points and describe a range of relationships between university- and agency-based professionals, working alongside neighborhood and community residents and leaders. Because we have chosen to sustain the goal of mutuality, the articles are also joint collaborations which vary as to the conventional norms and standards of presentation generally preferred in academic journals. However, within these articles are many important lessons and portraits, reflecting both the complexity and rewards of community organizing and development, and challenges to the enrichment of family life. In this brief introduction, I hope to contextualize the general richness and complexity of the tasks undertaken by the partnerships we celebrate here. But more importantly, I will attempt to describe the double meaning behind the concepts "return" and "vitalization" cited in the title of this introduction. These concepts have been chosen because they summarize and elaborate themes which are shared by all of the projects represented in this special Symposium. Furthermore, they aid in instructing us about the multifaceted and complex work and experiences of these partnerships.

Life in Communities and Neighborhoods: It's real y'all!

Communities and neighborhoods share an important responsibility with families for nurturing, supporting, and protecting its members. Yet, similar to families, communities and neighborhoods are complex places. In this regard, Robert Fisher (1994) and John McKnight (1995) force us to throw our illusions away by documenting the motion of community and neighborhood life, especially as these geographic and social spaces interact with rapid changes in the economic, political, and sociocultural spheres in the growing yet shrinking world at large. Fisher says, moreover, that communities and neighborhoods are territorial spaces whose values, goals, and activities are not inherent but rather they mirror the class and racial/ ethnic conflicts of the larger social, economic, and political system of which we are all a part.

In another way, communities and neighborhoods comprise "transclass groupings in which identity, community, and culture

become contexts through which people come to construct and understand political life; where the rationale of community participation is a reaction against centralization, bureaucratization, rigidity, and the remoteness of the state and related institutions" (Fisher and Kling, 1994, p. 10). Taken together, such characteristics make for neighborhoods and communities that are polyvocal and in possession of no single narrative that can characterize and explain the lives of its residents. Still, this is only part of the story.

Another part of the complexity and richness of life in communities and neighborhoods involves internal challenges and "counterfeits" which John McKnight says are related to the invasion of professionalized services—professionalism, medicine, human service systems, and the criminal justice system (1995, pp. ix-xi). In other words, neighborhoods and communities that are already challenged by a host of internal and external problems tend to be made even weaker and "more impotent" by service systems that are in a sense too powerful, too authoritative, and too strong.

Where do these factors lead us as professionals wanting to partner with neighborhoods and communities? I think that the articles in this special edition provide a few answers.

Partnerships: A Return!

It remains valid that we (educators, social workers, agency representatives and related human service providers) must "Let the People Decide" their destinies in communities and neighborhoods (Fisher, 1994). However, abiding by this dictum does not mean that communities and neighborhoods must go it alone. Indeed, we must partner with neighborhoods and communities in a way that respects the *strengths* and *assets* that existed prior to our professional entrance; and we must respect and understand how these strengths and assets have been challenged, have multiplied, and have further developed through the struggles of daily life (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993; Adams and Nelson, 1995; Fisher and Karger, 1997). Undertaken in this spirit, a return to partnering is a *restoration* of the many beneficial liaisons in partnerships beginning with the settlement houses in New York and Chicago, The Back of the Yards alliances fostered by Saul Alinsky and others, to the work of COPS (Communities Organized For Public Service)

in Hispanic Communities in Texas, NTIC (National Training and Information Center) in Chicago, and ACORN (Association of Communities Organized for Reform Now) in very poor communities throughout the U. S.

On the other hand, a return must exceed mere restoration of meaningful partnerships. In its second sense, to return or re-turn means to turnover, turn around, undo, dismantle, deconstruct, critique, resist, and so forth, our ways of conceptualizing, interpreting, and otherwise doing our work in communities and neighborhoods. Such a return certainly applies to universities and other institutions comprising their own communities of official knowledge, and consequently, official solutions to social, economic, and political problems.

In all, returning requires an active stance by professionals, but not in the traditional senses of leadership models we have depended upon in varying degrees in many instances of community work. McKnight (1995) identifies and rightly challenges such approaches. Rather, we must make, as the partnerships in this special edition have done, a more radically beneficial return to partnering through a spirit of reciprocity, as well as mutual learning and strengthening. As one community-centered family practitioner has put it, rather than lead and take possession of and responsibility for the souls and destinies of people—which is a major temptation on the part of strong professional servers—we must “*join* with others in their current experiences so that we may accompany them into a new experience in life” (emphasis added) (Aponte, 1994, p.186).

Joining implies listening to the realities of others and letting them resonate in such a way that one’s own vision is temporarily given up for the sake of experiencing the vision of the other, in all of its nuances. When our professional visions do return, they are flavored by the complexities and realities of the lives of the residents with whom we share the task of change. In this regard, Fisher and Kling (1994) say that those who do community and neighborhood work must seek not only to understand the complexities of life there, but must, with community and neighborhood residents, search for new cultural orientations and a blending of insights from the old and the new. That is quite a challenge for professionals, but the partnering that is described

in these articles shares just such a spirit and attitude, thereby demonstrating the very real possibility for a radical return.

The Vitality of Partnering

Communities and neighborhoods are not the only ones benefiting from or needing to be vitalized by effective partnering. Generally speaking, the destinies of all peoples in the United States, not to mention the destinies of those beyond our borders, are intertwined: as local communities and neighborhoods go, so go the worlds around them. Speaking specifically, the professionals who partner with neighborhoods and communities can and need to grow, develop, and mature in their institutional roles. They can be made wiser and stronger because of what they stand to simultaneously learn about the people they work with and about themselves—the mutuality of life and change—as they participate in a purposeful, risky, life enriching enterprise. Vitalization, consequently, is no trivial matter and is, as it should be, at the core of the work of the partnerships represented in these articles.

The Articles

We begin the series of articles with a reprint of an essay by Mark Joseph and Renae Ogletree. They describe the dilemma faced by comprehensive community initiatives as well as principles for resolving it in their monograph "Community Organizing and Comprehensive Community Initiatives." Joseph and Ogletree elaborate on a key issue identified by McKnight (1995). That is, how can initiatives for community change that are formulated outside communities achieve "a level of genuine local participation and work effectively to build local capacity" (Joseph and Ogletree, p. 93). They carefully elaborate on this theme to outline the essential elements for facilitating community change initiatives.

In "Partners for Change: Community Residents and Agencies," Julie O'Donnell, James Ferreira, Ralph Hurtado, Ellen Ames, Richard E. Floyd, Jr., and Lottie M. Sebran (a professor, a director of a child welfare training center, a juvenile crime prevention agency director, a coordinator for an interdisciplinary

training project, and two community council representatives, respectively) speak directly to the issues raised by Joseph and Ogletree. By addressing culture, class, and language in a low-income and culturally diverse urban community in the area of Long Beach, California, they illustrate the components of collaborative processes that either facilitate or inhibit successful community outcomes through community—agency partnerships. Like Joseph and Ogletree, O'Donnell and associates find a way to strike a successful balance between committed residential and agency involvement and their dependence upon one another.

"Reclaiming Communities and Languages" is an article that extends the arguments and experiences of O'Donnell and associates. Comprising a partnership between the University of California-Berkeley and the New Mexico Office of Indian Affairs, Rebecca Benjamin, Regis Pecos, Mary Eunice Romero, and Lily Wong Fillmore (two university professors and two leaders of the Indian community) chronicle the story of a small community (about 900 members) whose indigenous resources were disrupted by a seemingly beneficial and progressive externally driven project—the building of a dam by the Army Corps of Engineers to control the flow, and, consequently, flooding, of Albuquerque by the Rio Grande River. The "Dam Story" is a sort of meta-narrative (i.e., a process story) through which we can grasp the dissolution and restoration of very important community resources and cultural components and processes, such as language, that give meaning and purpose to the lives of community members. Beginning and ending with language as a central focus, we are taken on a journey through a maze of traditional and non-traditional social services, interpersonal and inter-generational processes within and between families, and the consequences of all of these processes for community revitalization and reclamation. Clearly, the university partners learned a lot from this project as they gave themselves over to their partners in the community.

Alongside the narrative of Benjamin and associates is another vitalizing community experience centered around small, rural communities in the Appalachian region of Tennessee. Comprising a partnership between six social service agencies and the Tennessee Technological University, this article describes the challenges and successes associated with assisting small communities

in improving the quality of child care. This story reaches into the heart of the welfare reform debate by addressing issues related to parents who are in the process of moving from dependence on public assistance to economic independence. The partners attempt to tackle the ideological and practical problems involved in helping poor people who are heavily clothed in their own sociocultural systems of beliefs and practices regarding family life and child care, while they are also in the choking grips of interlocking economic, political, and social conditions beyond the borders of their communities. In the midst of successes and failures, this partnership has sought to facilitate the construction of community structures that have the potential to live beyond the life of the partnership.

Finally, the last two articles center on urban communities (the physical, economic, political, social, and spiritual eyesore of our mainstream American conscience). Their stories and experiences interact with current welfare reform debates and initiatives as well, and generate passionate challenges and practical knowledge for a radical return to community organizing and development and the vitalization of family and community life.

In "Interfacing African American Churches With Agencies And Institutions: An Expanding Continuum of Care with Partial Answers to Welfare Reform," Barbara Rogers and Douglas Ronshiem (A director of a Christian Life Skills program and a director of a pastoral institute, respectively) call for reconsideration of how we define, understand, and employ faith-based services in the context of low-income black communities and initiatives driven by welfare reform. These authors tell the story of a Pittsburgh, PA community through the lens of a program for the delivery of social services to families and youth. The philosophical basis of the authors' partnership with the community generates two radical moves. First, they recognize the limitations of faith-based services for filling the void resulting from welfare reform, while at the same time demonstrating how to structure an effective continuum of care. Secondly, they present the community and their experiences with collaboration there in such a way that exposes parallel processes—they call this isomorphism—in other communities and institutions facing racial and related sociocultural issues in terms of mainstream-generated inequalities.

The two sides of return and vitalization are also reflected in the actions of a partnership between the Dudley neighborhood of Boston and the city of Chelsea, Massachusetts, and two universities, one private and one public. In "Welfare 'Reform': 'Com'in' Up On The Rough Side of The Mountain'," Loretta J. Williams, Rolanda Ward, and Attieno Davis (a professor, a graduate student, and a community activist, respectively) passionately write about the inequalities of economic and political racism, while at the same time describing the internal work that was required within the context of their community and neighborhood partnership. The authors mark their return by providing a multifaceted description of the problems and solutions in their neighborhood and community work, and an interrogation of the historical and contemporary basis of the problems they addressed. In addition to the positive outcomes for community residents, the professionals involved in the partnership have clearly benefited from a strengths-based and assets-based approach to their work. These professionals are indeed well served by experiencing the living context of the ways in which meanings constructed *within a spirit of meanness* among legislators and others have been appropriated and reappropriated to shape perceptions of low-income black people (and other poor people of color) and the problems they faced. In the final analysis, we are reminded by this article and all the others that community and neighborhood partnering begins and ends with commitment in the face of unrelenting problems and disingenuous leadership.

In concluding, I believe that the implications of the efforts of the partnerships these articles describe are multifaceted, yet singular: We must return to partnering! We must partner, however, in ways that overturn and vitalize, as well as generate and increase wisdom, maturity, and practical knowledge and resources for communities and neighborhoods. Of course, that almost goes without saying. On the other hand, we, as professionals and institutional representatives, must also take a vitalizing and overturning stance to guard against good intentions gone awry. Hence, as professionals, community residents, and concerned others, let us embrace the seriousness of these challenges as we also celebrate what we have attempted to achieve and what we stand to learn

from the experiences of these partnerships in communities and neighborhoods.

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