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Tactical Decision-Making: Community Organizers Describe Ethical Considerations in Social Action Campaigns

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Social work curriculum on social action-oriented organizing methods is often devoid of content on the day-to-day role of the organizer in recruiting diverse participants, facilitating group decision-making, and planning and implementing campaigns. Little attention is paid to how tactical decisions are made and how the ethical implications of these decisions are weighed. In this study, professional organizers were interviewed about how they viewed their work, their relationships with their constituents, and the values and ethical principles used to make tactical decisions.

Key words: *social action, community organizers, ethics, tactics*

Community organizers engaged in social action often choose from a range of strategies and tactics that can include consensus-oriented actions to protests and civil disobedience (Staples, 2004). Contest or confrontation tactics are often used to dramatize issues, attract allies to a cause, and force an

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opponent to negotiate. They can also be used to intimidate targets and throw the other side off-guard (Homan, 2011). For example, some organizers believe that the seriousness of the issue (risk of death or injury to innocent populations) could require the escalation of confrontation-related tactics such as the use of civil disobedience (Mondros, 2005). Conway (2003) defines civil disobedience as “a specific form of extra-parliamentary political action involving the deliberate, principled, and public breaking of a law that is perceived to be unjust” (p. 508).

In some cases, participants may actually intend to put themselves at risk of arrest as a means of calling attention to social problems or political oppression (McAdam & Tarrow, 2000). In addition to arrest, participants in social action campaigns may also risk losing their jobs, harassment, or physical harm by opponents or the police. Given the possible ramifications associated with using these methods, little discussion has taken place in the social work literature about the ethical implications involved in applying these tactics. In addition, there are few resources available that assist newly employed organizers or social work students in reconciling differences between tactical procedures used in social action campaigns, personal values, and the ethical principles contained in the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics (2008). Curriculum in schools of social work on community organizing often excludes content on social action in favor of less controversial approaches that rely on consensus-building such as community development and social planning (Fisher & Corciullo, 2011). Consequently, social work students often have a limited understanding of how tactical decisions are made in social action campaigns and who makes them (Mott, 2008).

This is especially problematic for social workers employed as community organizers in grass-roots organizations that engage in social action. Often ethical reference points are limited to Saul Alinsky’s (1971) ethics of “means and ends” (Reisch & Lowe, 2000). Alinsky, in his description of how tactical decisions should be made, implied that efforts to put pressure on opponents are always justified if they are used to help disadvantaged communities gain power. However, most

contemporary community organizations influenced by Alinsky's approach define appropriate tactics much more narrowly, focusing on legal, nonviolent methods and using civil disobedience sparingly (Bobo, Kendall, & Max, 2010). Given that organizing work often involves complex issues and multiple individuals and groups, efforts to resolve ethical dilemmas are often made on a case-by-case or situational basis in consultation with the organization's constituents and coalition partners (Barretti, 2009; Ganz, 2009). However, for an inexperienced organizer, it may be difficult to determine "where to draw the line" in terms of risky tactics, especially when working with groups who may have different perspectives about using methods that may not be either safe or legal (Conway, 2003).

In this paper, the processes through which community organizers and their constituents make tactical decisions in grass-roots organizations are explored. Qualitative interviews were conducted with 13 community organizers. The research questions focused on how organizers employed in social action organizations make ethical decisions and what individuals and groups are consulted in the decision-making process. Participants were also asked to identify situations in which confrontation-oriented tactics should be used and to describe the ethical implications of those actions. Staples (2004) defines social action as "bring[ing] people together to convince, pressure, or coerce external decision-makers to meet collective goals either to act in a specific manner or to modify or stop certain activities" (p. 9). Grass-roots organizing originates in local communities and decisions about organizing campaigns include "those who are directly impacted by the issues that the group is fighting to change" (Schutz & Sandy, 2011, p. 27).

The Setting

All of the organizers interviewed were employed in the San Joaquin Valley in central California at the time of the interviews. This region is primarily rural, but contains a number of small and mid-size cities. The San Joaquin Valley has historically been an entry point for immigrants and refugees from Mexico, Central and South America, China, and Southeast Asia (Kohl-Arenas, Martinez Nateras, & Taylor, 2014). The primary industry is agriculture, with many large farm

operations located in surrounding rural areas; the majority of the population is Latino. However, the political establishment in the region is politically conservative and primarily White.

The San Joaquin Valley of California is also home to the United Farm Workers (UFW). Although the UFW successfully fought for the right of farm laborers to form unions and for the implementation of state regulations to ensure that workers have access to good sanitation, clean water, and rest breaks, there is much work still to be done to ensure that farm workers and their families obtain economic security (Ganz, 2009). Many of the Latino farm workers are undocumented, have almost no legal rights, are at constant risk of exploitation and live in fear of arrest by local police or immigration officials and deportation to Mexico and Central America (King & Puntí, 2012; "Sober but unlicensed," 2011). While agriculture creates enormous wealth in this region, the farm labor force is paid subsistence wages. Kohl-Arenas et al. (2014) succinctly describe historic patterns of discrimination and inequality in the San Joaquin Valley:

Many immigrants first found their way to the region with the promise of finding a better life, working on valley farms and saving enough to support their families both here and abroad. Yet, since before the California Gold Rush racist immigration, land ownership and labor policies and practices prevented immigrants from owning land, marrying, educating their children, and participating in political life. (p. 8)

Undocumented immigrants may not legally work unless they have qualified for the temporary Deferred Action program implemented by the Obama administration in 2012 (National Immigration Law Center, 2013). While California has passed legislation that permits undocumented students to attend college and qualify for financial aid, few of these students actually complete high school and have access only to marginal, "off-the-book" employment (Gonzalez, 2011). Drop-out rates are high for most children of color, with many students attending segregated, underfunded schools that provide a poor quality of education (Stifter, 2013). Consequently, unemployment rates are high due in part to the continued

reliance on agriculture and the failure of local efforts to attract diverse industries. According to the California Department of Public Health (2014), the San Joaquin Valley contains census tracts with high rates of concentrated poverty, neighborhoods in which over 40% of the residents live below the poverty line. Poverty rates are highest in communities of color. While most of these neighborhoods are in rural farming communities in which most residents are farmworkers, some urban neighborhoods also have high rates of concentrated poverty (Cytron, 2009).

The San Joaquin Valley contains census tracts with high rates of concentrated poverty, neighborhoods in which over 40% of the residents live below the poverty line (California Department of Public Health, 2014). People who live in communities in which concentrated poverty is high are likely to experience numerous harmful effects:

Poor people are more likely to live in dangerous or under-resourced environments and to work in hazardous conditions, with greater risk of injury, and greater exposure to pesticides, lead, and outdoor air pollution. Low income people are more likely to be uninsured and to have limited access to quality health care; are more likely to suffer from chronic diseases like diabetes and heart disease, acute and chronic stress, and to die prematurely. (p. 1)

Indeed, Valley residents are assaulted by multiple sources of pollution in the land, water, and soil. According to recent data prepared by California's Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment (2014), about a quarter of the Valley's census tracts are among the most polluted and most vulnerable in the state. The San Joaquin Valley air basin competes with Los Angeles for most polluted in the nation, with its major metropolitan areas regularly ranking in the top 10 most polluted for particulate matter and ozone (American Lung Association, 2014). The eight-county San Joaquin Valley has some of the most contaminated aquifers in the nation (Dubrovsky, Kratzer, Brown, Gronberg, & Burow, 1998). Much of this contamination is from nitrates, which are linked to the agricultural sector's heavy use of fertilizers and flood irrigation, with

confined animal feeding operations also contributing (Moore et al., 2011). Thus the Valley's bountiful agricultural production comes laced with rampant concentrated poverty and high levels of toxic pollution, an everyday reality that organizers work within whatever the cause.

Methods

Thirteen organizers were interviewed over a six year period, 2005 – 2011. Although the study was originally conceptualized as using snowball sampling, few organizers referred to one of the authors as prospective participants agreed to be interviewed, due to the sensitive nature of the research questions. In the course of the study, the research team was expanded to include two local organizing experts. All three authors employed their personal networks in order to recruit participants for a purposive sample of urban and rural organizers in the region under study.

Of the 13 organizers interviewed, eight were Latino, 1 was African American, and 4 were White. There were 4 females and 9 males. Three of the respondents were Mexican immigrants; 2 of these interviews were conducted in Spanish. One respondent held an MSW degree and all but three of the respondents had attended or graduated from college. Organizational affiliations ranged from employment in local chapters of national organizations to positions in very small, local nonprofit community organizations operated by one or two staff members. Two of the respondents worked on environmental issues, one was a union organizer, one worked with youth, two worked on variety of urban issues, and one worked primarily on behalf of African Americans. One respondent combined organizing on policing issues with a focus on immigration and three worked primarily with immigrants. Two of the respondents were retired from organizing work and spoke retrospectively; one of these organizers had been employed by organizations focused on Alinsky-style organizing, while the second had worked for the UFW during the early part of his career and was later involved in organizing in low-income, urban communities.

The poverty of the residents is directly related to the structure, stability, and financing of local community organizations.

While some of the organizers for this study have been or were previously employed by established community organizations, several of the respondents worked for poorly funded or marginal organizations and often raised their own salaries or worked second jobs to support their work. These itinerant organizers worked within their own ethnic communities to promote social justice and civil liberties.

The qualitative research questions focused on how tactical decisions were made, the people typically included in decision-making, ethical frameworks for making decisions, the consequences of making a bad decision, whether any tactical methods could be viewed as unethical, and whether and in what circumstances civil disobedience should be used as a tactical method.

A process of open-coding was used to organize the interview data into themes (Berg, 2009). In order to increase the trustworthiness of the data, an audit trail was maintained (Guba & Lincoln, 2001). Data were analyzed separately by two of the authors and differences among the two analyses were reconciled. Interviews were conducted until the data reached "saturation," the point at which the information collected became repetitive and did not result in additional categories or reinterpretation of the data (Padgett, 2008).

Results

Respondents perceived tactical decision-making to be an interactive and dynamic process, involving both the organizers and constituency group members likely to be involved in carrying out the action. However, the respondents had strong convictions about ethical decision-making and the role of organizing staff in making sure the preferences of constituents were respected and any risks to participants during organizing campaigns were kept to a minimum. Six themes were identified in the data: (1) Tactics are situational; (2) Tactical decisions should be made by constituents; (3) Tactical decisions should be made by consensus; (4) Morality, faith-based values, and personal principles are important for the success of the organizing process; (5) Ethical organizing involves minimizing risks; and (6) Civil disobedience should only be used when no other options are possible.

Tactics are Situational

Nearly all of the respondents described tactical decision-making as depending on the situation at hand, the context in which the decision is made, the resources possessed by the organization, and the amount of economic and political power held by members of the constituency group. Several of the organizers described the process as “strategic,” making sure it is going to be worth doing and that it “falls in line with the organization’s mission and vision.” An organizer working on environmental issues said:

To me, it’s kind of difficult to talk about tactics in a vacuum apart from broader strategies and the social situation. You figure out what you need. I’m sure that other organizers have talked about this. You have relationships to build with each other. You figure out what you need and what your goals are and a strategy to get there, escalating certain pressure tactics to reach those goals.

One organizer described her approach to developing tactical methods for an organizing campaign in the following way:

As far as the issue goes, I always try to focus on the need. Another thing is, when I try to choose an issue to organize, lots of times they are emergent situations, for example, when I find out that a law is going to be approved that is going to benefit or cause damage to a large group of immigrants, that is an issue for me to try and organize.

Although respondents emphasized that the choice of individual tactics should not be pre-determined by the organizer, several conceded that the organizing model used by the organization in which they were employed often served as a framework for making tactical decisions. For example, a union organizer described his organizing approach:

There is a certain set of standard outreach mobilizing tactics that we are used to, the places that we organize and the people that we organize. There is a certain standard, stock set of tactics that we are going to use to educate and agitate people... Beyond that I think

it depends... You have an actual target or opponent or some sort of outcome that you're trying to reach, a point you are trying to make with your action.

Assuring a successful outcome was also a consideration in the decision-making process. One respondent described his desired outcome as obtaining something "usually for people left out of the system or [who] should have got something that they weren't getting." Some of the respondents also spoke about weighing the costs or consequences of tactical decisions against the potential benefits of goal achievement. However, a few organizers felt goal achievement was not the only consideration that determined if the organizing effort were successful; the degree to which members of the constituency group were affected by their engagement in social change was also important. For example, one respondent stated that an organizing effort could be considered successful, "If I see that the people that participated in the organizing drive are much more empowered. If I see they are asking more questions."

Tactical Decisions Should be Made by Constituents

Nearly all of the respondents described how tactical decisions were made by focusing on the role of constituents. Constituents were often described as the primary decision-makers for most types of decisions. One respondent said organizing decisions were made by "the people who live in the community. I get feedback from them and basically they're the ones who make the decisions." Some of the respondents described the participation of constituents as essential because they are the people who carry out the action. Consequently, a good tactic was viewed as one that constituents were comfortable with or that "fit" with the experiences and values of participants. Tactics that did not meet with the approval of the constituents or were not appropriate to the situation were viewed as likely to backfire. One respondent described a "bad tactic" used at a rally that focused on [then] California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's decision to veto legislation allowing undocumented immigrants to have driver's licenses:

One thing that we believed to be simple, for example, to break piñatas that contained the governor's name, or to burn or throw away video tapes the governor

had been in, we believed it was going to be an action that would be morally accepted by the people. And we later figured out it was not as so; many mothers and children were frightened by that. They saw it as being very violent.

For many of the respondents, the facilitation of inclusive decision-making processes was viewed as one of the primary ethical responsibilities of the organizer. For example, one respondent felt it was essential that any campaign be “lead by the people for other people.” A number of respondents felt this principle was critical for recruiting and retaining participants because “when you do something that’s staff driven, the leaders don’t take it and you continue pushing it, it is demoralizing for leaders. You don’t build anything and you lose people.” A few of the respondents reported that they also consulted mentors or community leaders before making strategic decisions. One respondent gave a detailed rationale for the inclusion of constituents in decision-making and also described the role of the organizer in providing background information about the situation to be addressed:

For example, when we wanted to get the police to stop calling the border control. We have to change the policy. Having to get the people to understand how the system works. Having to get the people to the table to negotiate with the [police] chief. Having to come up with language for the policy. Having them understand the language so that they are able to change the policy. I would feel like they are the ones I work for. If I don’t explain to them what’s going on, how it happens, what is going on, the impact, I’m not doing my job. It’s easier to do it myself. But I want them to take over if I’m not around. They will be able to call the chief.

Decisions Should Be Made by Consensus

Most of the respondents described tactical decision-making as taking place in the context of dialogue among the organizer and constituency group members in order to achieve a consensus. One respondent provided a rationale for making collective decisions that focused on group maintenance: “What happens is that in reality, if one sole individual decides

what to do, then there is no organization." A youth organizer provided another rationale for constituent involvement as:

making sure that we're not putting them in jeopardy for any decision that is made on a tactic, discussing it as an organizer and the folks we organize so that we all have a good understanding and making sure we make a collective decision.

An organizer for a congregation-based organizing effort described the process as interactive; the organizer must balance the views of leaders and constituency group members. Respondents also indicated the dialogue process helped shape and refine the decisions made because there was often a diversity of viewpoints that should be considered. An immigration organizer felt that dialogue was essential because "[the] interchange of points of views, precisely helps to understand the problem in its totality or at least in its great majority. Why? Because different points of views can help to discover something that I do not see." Another organizer stated:

You know sometimes you may start out with an ideal decision, but once you open it up and have a conversation and everybody gets to discuss whatever that had to do with that decision or not even about the decision, but about the material, the topic, or the activity or the situation, then at the end of that you have a more "real" decision to make.

Some of the respondents described how they went about facilitating consensus-oriented decision-making. A former organizer who had a long career working for a number of social action organizations said:

We might involve advisors—other people from other organizations who had had similar experiences in how things would work, sort of trainers, consultants, that sort of thing—people from other neighborhoods or communities who had done that so that they could say yeah this can work. We could do this. The ultimate decision was with the people themselves.

Another respondent described the inclusion of additional groups in decision-making as a “long process” because “we dedicated time to inter-ethnic work. Bringing groups of immigrants and nonimmigrants together. We need the support of non-immigrant groups. Issues of non-immigrants need to be addressed.”

The Importance of Morality, Faith-based Values, and Personal Principles in the Organizing Process

When respondents were asked to describe ethical decision-making, in addition to the importance of constituent inclusion, many focused on the role of morality and faith-based values as well as personal principles. Four of the respondents worked with faith-based organizations and a fifth routinely worked with church groups. One of these respondents described how faith inspired the organization’s choices: “one of our pieces is going to be Micah which is undoing injustice so ... we are going to be asking officials to work with us, make a more just society, through scripture that speaks to us.” Another respondent spoke about her parent organization’s religious commitment to pacifism: “In general, people we work with are against violence. Based on that principle, we don’t want to perpetuate anything that we’re against.”

Additional values and ethical principles incorporated into the organizing process included liberty, justice, the NASW Code of Ethics, and personal commitment to help the poor, the oppressed, or members of the organizer’s own community. One respondent, an environmental organizer, talked about the values that motivated him. “You want the movement to show an example for the next generation and it’s all about dignity, it’s all about democracy and all about peace. It’s all about justice and you want that to be consistent in your actions.” The one respondent in the study with an MSW degree stressed the importance of professional values:

I know the Social Work Code of Ethics. The ones about doing no harm. The ones that are technical like confidentiality. I try to find ways not to be stymied by those. Organizing needs to be real open so that there are no hidden agendas. I try to get approval from them so that I can use their names. That we are all in agreement.

For several of the organizers, the negative effects of doing nothing about social injustices that harmed individuals and families or proactively “taking the side” of people who were marginalized were the primary motivators in taking action. Several of the respondents described their commitment to helping members of their own ethnic communities improve their economic status or overcome oppression. One of these respondents said that as a Chicano, he felt that “the strongest influence I will have will be with all those youth that I can relate to the most.”

Commitment to helping marginalized community members was universal among the respondents, regardless of ethnic background or length of time working in the San Joaquin Valley. One respondent, originally from the Midwest, described himself as utilitarian, believing in the greatest good for the greatest number. He described his views about the morality of tactical methods used in environmental organizing in the following way:

We knew the woman with five kids, all of whom had asthma, and she was having respiratory problems herself. She didn't need a study done to tell her to move She didn't want to be exposed to more trucks. So if you take all that seriously, the question of what's right or wrong; it's so clearly what's right. The only thing that's wrong is to choose the wrong tactic and mess up the strategy. I've never really thought about morality in terms of breaking windows or something. Everyone talks about that. That's never been an issue for me.

Another respondent also had an “ends justify the means” approach, describing his ethical framework in terms of tactical methods that he had used effectively in previous campaigns; “militant, nonviolence, noncooperation, and disruption gets results and wins concessions.”

Ethical Organizing Involves Minimizing Risks

The organizers identified a number of unethical tactics including violence, property destruction, slander, manipulation, degrading opponents, lying, name calling, and the use of profanity. Nearly all of the respondents talked about methods

they utilized to minimize or do no harm to participants in organizing efforts. The philosophy of “do no harm” had a dual focus, ensuring that *constituency group members* were fully informed about or protected from negative consequences associated with their actions and making sure *opponents* were not harmed in the course of the organizing effort, particularly when pressure tactics were utilized.

The organizers interviewed were especially concerned about ensuring that constituents were fully informed about any risks they may face in the organizing effort. Providing this information to members of the constituency group was viewed as the responsibility of the organizer; ensuring the safety of participants was also viewed by respondents as part of the organizer’s role. For example, one respondent said, “One is a bad leader, he who by his actions does not measure the consequences that they may have on the people.” Many of the respondents specifically mentioned potential manipulation by the organizer as a form of unethical practice, misinforming or failing to inform participants about both the positive and negative consequences. Another respondent stated:

It is anti-ethical for example, that you know beforehand that you are heading a protest and you know that up ahead there are a group of agitators or police agents waiting for you with clubs in their hands, ready to strike and you know that your people are unprotected [and] you nonetheless still insist on taking them to get beat.

Several respondents described the potential consequences of using confrontation-related tactics or civil disobedience as much more severe for low-income people and undocumented immigrants than middle and upper-income activists. Consequences for undocumented immigrants can include loss of employment, deportation, and potential harm to family members. A Latina respondent differentiated between potential consequences for herself and for her constituents:

It doesn’t affect me. It affects others. I have the privilege of being an American. I own a home. Other people don’t have those luxuries. The biggest [negative consequence] is being in jail without an attorney because we didn’t

plan it correctly. Being deported for them. Coming up with the fines. Missing work. The consequences for our people are greater than people [middle income activists] who got arrested for the [protest against a retail outlet chain that uses sweatshop labor]. Missing one day of work, when it's seasonal work.

A youth organizer who is also a person of color described his concerns when participating in civil disobedience that involved trespassing on private property and "people chaining themselves to things." He felt that potential repercussions would not be the same for all participants:

Especially 'cause a lot of us were like people of color and stuff like that and low income folks—But there were some other folks who were White and kind of affluent and they all were really down for it. But we were hesitant because of our backgrounds because we knew if anything was to go down we would probably be punished more severely than other folks.

Some of the organizers were also concerned about the well-being of their opponents; the respondents talked about making sure there were limits in terms of how they challenged or even spoke to those people who were the targets of social change efforts. For example, one respondent said:

We had a strong sense that even though we would personalize issues and even though we would have enemies [we wouldn't demean them]. Even though they would speak in that language, I never liked it. We always said 'Today's opponent is tomorrow's ally.' We never wanted, just pragmatically, we never wanted to depersonalize a person.

Another respondent stated he felt it was important to protect "by-standers or otherwise innocent people implicated or involved in the outcome of what you're doing." One respondent whose organization typically used confrontation tactics to pressure opponents described both ethical and pragmatic considerations given to various tactical options:

Are you in a point in your campaign where you have

exposed your target and now that you think that you should start putting their picture up everywhere and personalizing it or maybe slandering them a little bit more? Does that seem appropriate or is that going to backfire on you because a lot of people would be more defensive of that target? Another thing would be, for example, if you came up with an idea like "how about we do a hunger strike or civil disobedience directed at this target?" It would be unethical to force other people to do it if they did not believe in it because you are now asking people to put themselves at risk.

Use Civil Disobedience When No Other Options Are Possible

Respondents described civil disobedience as specific actions taken to challenge unjust laws. One of the organizers described it as "intentionally breaking a law for some sort of broader purpose, concern, [or] broader moral considerations." Most organizers interviewed felt civil disobedience was just one of the tools to be considered in the organizing process. Several respondents felt that civil disobedience should be used only "when you've exhausted all of your legal remedies and you've built a campaign where you've tried every respectable mechanism to get your point across." Other respondents believed it was necessary to use civil disobedience in order to gain leverage on opponents or force the opposition to come to the bargaining table. For example, one respondent defined civil disobedience "as breaking an unjust law....but at the same time accepting the consequences of breaking it, in order to call attention to that law and its consequences and its injustice and get it changed."

The former UFW organizer interviewed gave the following rationale for using this type of tactical method:

By and large, our society has a lot of laws promulgated or implemented by those in power. One of the reasons for that is to keep others from obtaining that kind of power. The only way you can fight against that is by some degree of civil disobedience.

An environmental organizer also focused on the role of civil disobedience in giving a voice to the powerless. He felt civil disobedience should be used:

When there's no other way, you know, when you can't negotiate because they're not listening, they are not letting you in to sit at the table, they're not taking you serious[ly] as a stakeholder, then you have to have a strong action that will gain attention to their unfairness.

Respondents repeatedly emphasized that they would need buy-in from participants before initiating any action that could involve arrest or any other type of risk. One respondent described how he would solicit support from members of his organization to take action to address issues related to the use of excessive force against persons of color by local police:

I would again call people to the table and explain to them the amount of time, the number of years that we have been at this. The lives of our children. The integrity of our community. We [the city] were losing millions of dollars in excess lawsuits and this and that. The civil rights violations. The time was now. That I would have felt [that was] the time [to act]. Even if we had to go to the International Court to prove our point.... We can't keep going like this. Something has to be done. I would have presented it like that.

Civil disobedience was also described as necessary because of the resource and power disadvantage often experienced by many small organizations representing people from low-income backgrounds. Several respondents talked about difficulties associated with obtaining permits or insurance for public marches or rallies that often involved fees that the organizations struggled to pay. In addition, they felt that public authorities were often uncooperative when they received requests for permits. This often made civil disobedience necessary. One respondent described a demonstration planned to protest the deaths of several farmworkers due to unsafe working conditions.

We had all of the documents; we tried to submit to them in order. We had the check they had requested. We told them, you did not want to let me march, you do not want to let me practice my right to express myself

publicly, here are all the documents of all the agencies that we went to speak to and nobody responded, so let us march. That is what you wanted to do and we marched. That is a form of disobeying. Our pain was greater and our desire to demonstrate, what we felt, than the fear of being arrested.

The on-going oppression of communities of color was also referenced by one of the Latino organizers interviewed:

Civil disobedience/direct action may be the tactic to take and people may feel uneasy about it, but that may be for fear of pushing the 'envelope' or ruffling some feathers, but I say we need to push that envelope and ruffle feathers because working 'within' the system has its limitations and just working 'with' the people that are oppressing us just doesn't make sense.

Conclusions

The organizers interviewed for this study used very clear ethical principles to guide their work, especially in terms of their responsibilities toward constituents and how organizing campaigns are planned and carried out. All of the respondents described the ethical dimensions of their actions as incorporating principles similar to those contained in the NASW (2008) Code of Ethics: self-determination, respect for the individuals and community they served, empowerment, informed consent, and risk minimization. They also described how they developed organizing campaigns and selected tactical methods in response to situational demands and in consultation with the constituents responsible for carrying them out. Such consultation promotes innovation, helps constituents develop leadership skills, and builds collective identity and a sense of personal empowerment among group members (Ganz, 2009). The group process also builds on the previous knowledge and experience of constituents and ensures that constituents are comfortable with the strategies and tactics chosen for the campaign. In this way, too, all participants are fully informed about the consequences and potential risks of social action. For all the organizers interviewed, civil disobedience was to be used when no other options were available or

when social class, ethnic background and/or the lack of political power narrowed their tactical choices. For financially strapped organizations, risks to participants were viewed as necessary in order to challenge authority.

The findings from this study may be somewhat unique in that the organizers interviewed represented marginalized groups from one region of the U.S., with a quarter of the respondents running small, resource poor organizations; 9 of the 13 respondents were persons of color who were organizing in their own communities and identified heavily with the struggles experienced by their constituents. Although most of the respondents were college-educated, only one held a social work degree. However, the diversity of educational backgrounds among the respondents is consistent with research documenting the education and training of professional organizers. According to Mott (2008), most organizers have limited, if any, professional training or received their education from public health, urban planning, or other professional programs.

Recently, Boehm and Cnaan (2012) advocated for the development of an alternative model of community organizing to be used by social workers that focuses on constituent strengths and assets. This model is also designed to involve constituents in deliberations concerning strategies and tactics and to construct organization-specific models of practice. However, as demonstrated in this research study, such a framework for practice is often used by grass-roots organizations engaging in social action and has been described in a number of studies of organizing practice by non-social workers including Ganz (2009), Polletta (2002), and Swarts (2008). More importantly, the principles and practices described by respondents are part of the "professional culture" associated with organizing work, disseminated in training institutes and through personal interactions and meetings with others, on the job-learning guided by supervisors and mentors, or through praxis-based knowledge (Conway, 2004; Freire, 1970).

The findings from this study suggest that social work educators should develop curriculum that is consistent with and respectful of the day-to-day activities and knowledge held by both organizers and their constituents, incorporating best practices used in community organization and disseminated in training institutes with formal academic knowledge. In

addition, community practice instructors should not simply focus on such tasks as research, planning, and evaluation, but also teach organizing students the relational skills such as assessment, interviewing, motivating people to take action, negotiation, and group work that are needed to recruit constituents and engage in organizing campaigns (ben Asher, 2003).

There are only a handful of recent studies in the social work literature that involve interviews or surveys with community organizers about what they actually do (Bayne-Smith, Mizrahi, & Garcia, 2008; Mizrahi, 2006, 2007; Rothman & Zald, 2008). Consequently, more research is needed that documents the actual practice of community organizing by social work practitioners as well as organizers without social work backgrounds. Researchers should also pay more attention to how organizing work is conducted in communities of color and how tactical options may vary based on the ethnic backgrounds or social class of participants (Young Laing, 2009).

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