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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 organization practice" and a "meta-practice approach" to community organization. Finally, they suggest some future directions for community organization within such an approach. These include (1) a more systematic evaluation of past and present organizing strategies; (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 sabbaticals 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 explore the implications of their practice experiences in client and community empowerment through community-based programs in a conservative environment for the development of community organization theory. Woehle examines the possibility of client empowerment in rural areas in which policy choices about resource allocation are determined by the interaction of business and governmental 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 activities, 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 rationalizes 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 "advocacy/empowerment" orientation which was derived "from an explanatory paradigm which takes as its central concept the necessity to understand the systemic relationship between a person's context, history and identity." His detailed analysis of the project's history demonstrates effectively that a community organization 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.
Community organization can, in this manner, 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 recruitment and maintenance. Their article reports some preliminary findings based on a subset of their larger sample of 45 organizations. Their conclusions reveal a gap between the recognition by organizations that recruitment and retention of members are crucial 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 organizations 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 collective and individual instrumental benefits,... collective and individual expressive benefits, and... the development of organizational attachment through commitment... to the organization and ingroup 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 Foundation. His essay looks at the following elements in the organizing process: (1) who initiates the organizing activity; (2) the degree 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
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 emphasis 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 successful results in community organizing. This is a simple, yet worthwhile 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 relational. Within these dimensions, Hyde presents nine themes most of which focus "on the emotional and interpersonal aspects of organizing," 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 citizen 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 programs as is grassroots organizing. Checkoway asserts that planners, therefore, "must go beyond rational models to apply sociopolitical methods to build support for planning at the community 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 organization. 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 critical 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 achievements 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
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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