

Community Organizing: Past, Present And Future

by Cheryl Honey

wecare@familynetwork.org

on-line at: <http://comm-org.wisc.edu/papers2006/honey.htm>

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Introduction

There is no small coincidence that a group uniting for a common cause achieved their dream of democracy in America and gained freedom and independence from totalitarian rule by using community organizing tactics. The American Revolution served as a template for community organizers like Saul Alinsky to adapt strategies for their organizing initiatives. The irony is the conditions that precipitated the creation of democracy are now the root causes of community organizing efforts in America today as citizens' struggle for freedom and independence to restore social and economic justice, create sustainable communities and live healthier and happier lives. Will history repeat itself with another American Revolution?

Citizen initiatives are a process of self-determination, in which ordinary people engage in activities to better their lives and their communities. (McKnight, 1995 p. 156). This paper explores the political and economic conditions that have spawned community organizing initiatives over the past century. Due to the vast number of organizing efforts that span this period of our history for good and just causes, the scope of this paper is narrowed down to three community organizing initiatives that represent the past, present and future: The Back of the Yards (Alinsky); Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD); and the Family Support Network (FSN). Each of these organizing efforts utilized different tactics and strategies to engage citizens to better their lives. To enrich understanding of the history of community organizing and future implications, this paper details the paradigm shifts and the ideological underpinnings of past, present and future community organizing initiatives.

The techniques used by the well-known community organizer, Saul Alinsky, forged a path for many organizers. John McKnight, the co-founder of Asset-Based Community Development, is one of Alinsky's successors and is forging a new path in the field of community organizing. As an activist and professor at Northwestern University in Chicago, McKnight studied Alinsky's organizing practices and made a startling discovery. By shifting the focus from taking back power, which was at the crux of Alinsky's tactics, to focusing on the strengths and assets that already exist, then people would realize their power within. Herein lies the impetus for people to exercise their power from within to create the changes they seek to better their lives and strengthen their community. This notion has led to shift in community organizing paradigms from taking back power, which indicates a lack of power that must be compensated for by taking from a source outside of the self; to realizing the existence of power within to affect change. McKnight and his colleague Jody Kretzman (1994) confirmed their notion in a quantitative study they did in the late 1980's by collecting stories and publishing their findings in a guide for community organizing called, *Building Communities from the Inside Out*.

At the same time ABCD was being unveiled in Chicago, I was a welfare mother in Washington State who got fed up with the treatment and limited resources of the social service system. As a way to create a support system in my neighborhood and improve availability and accessibility of resources to enable people to help themselves, I organized a group of neighbors into a Family Support Network (FSN). The ideology of this loose knit group was that people had the power to improve their quality of life when they functioned within a system of support with people who shared common values. As the size of the group grew, it increased individual and group capacity, as well as the capacity of the whole community by being a valuable resource. I was surprised when McKnight referenced the FSN for its capacity building practices in the *Guide to CapacityBuilding*. (a.k.a. Blue Book) (McKnight and Kretzman, 1996 p.23)

Politics and Economics of the Social Service Industry

In John McKnight's (1995), book, *The Careless Society: Community and its Counterparts*, he indicates capitalists in this country have fostered a reliance on professionals and institutions by creating the illusion of a system of "care" to meet the "needs" of citizens as consumers to grow a service economy in America. McKnight believes communities have been invaded and colonized by professionalized services which have disempowered citizens and interfered with ways people can engage with one another. Because the gross national product is the sum of the goods and services produced each year, many policy experts have come to believe that our economy increasingly depends on the "services" that are produced by institutions and "consumed" by the people. (p. 162). He emphasizes this point by referencing "a 1984 study by the Community Services Society of New York who found that approximately \$7,000 per capita of public and private money is specifically allocated to the low-income population of that city. Thus, a family of four would be eligible on a per capita basis for \$28,000, which placed them in the moderate-income category. However, only 37 percent of this money actually reached low-income people in cash income. Nearly two-thirds is consumed by those who service the poor." (p. 164).

Rashi Glazer, Ph.D., a UC Berkeley business professor, agrees with McKnight. Robert Roth (1998) recounts a conversation he had with Glazer in his book, *The Natural Law Party: A Reason to Vote*. Glazer doesn't put too much faith in the two party system because he claims the policies they promote don't work.

"They're kind of phony solutions. Most money is spent on bandaging up problems that already exist, rather than solving or preventing them. But worse than that, many positions are anti-ecological – they have toxic by-products – and I don't mean just environmental, but also social, economic and political. They create another problem, which then demands another solution, which then creates another problem. So many products exist that are designed to clean up other problems created by someone else. Health care is an obvious example. So many health care products and services lead to other problems, which then create a demand for new products and services. It's a vicious cycle that doesn't end."

Another point Glazer makes that Roth (1998) references is "Entire industries are devoted to helping people overcome something that shouldn't exist in the first place. It's an enormous waste of knowledge and intelligence."

Overwhelmed by these social services, citizens have lost their sense of social responsibility to care about their neighbors in their neighborhoods and this has led to the fragmentation of communities, the collapse of families, schools failing, violence spreading, and medical systems spiraling out of control. Instead of more or better services, McKnight (1995) contends the basis for resolving social problems is contained within the community of the local citizens. This principle is the core of Asset-Based Community Development and demonstrated by practices of the Family Support Network.

Fewer citizens are engaging in participatory democracy activities because they are too tired and too busy with their own lives to be aware of the political economic conditions that are impacting their lives and communities. The irony is the political economic conditions of our society is the reason why people are simply too tired and too busy to get involved. (McKnight, 1995)

Factors Impacting Participatory Democracy

Local citizens engaging in the political and economic affairs of their communities was what intrigued Alexis de Tocqueville, the French Count, on his visit to the United States in 1831. He observed that groups of common citizens who formed associations to solve their own problems. What Tocqueville found so interesting was: 1) these groups had the power to decide what was a problem; 2) they had the power to decide how they wanted to solve the problem; and 3) they had the power to choose whether or not they participated in the solution. From Tocqueville's perspective, these citizen associations were the foundation of American communities (McKnight, 1995 p. 117).

Alinsky organized people to take back their bargaining power to choose what they wanted to improve in their communities. This indicates that somewhere along the line, the role of citizens in the democratic process was usurped between the time of Tocqueville's visit and the neighborhood organizing movement that began in the late 1800s.

An attitude about the citizen's role in political democracy was prevailing among the capitalists and social elite between Tocqueville and Alinsky. Mattsen (1998) references social theorist Joseph Schumpeter who wrote in his classic book, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (1942) that "politicians and administrators – not regular citizens - should be central actors in a political democracy." Schumpeter believed the role of citizen was to choose from a marketplace of political candidates during occasional elections. Many citizens rebelled against these ideas and felt they were being coerced into accepting this new form democracy that restricted them to a two party choice. Fifty years later Peter Bachrach and Aryeh Botwinick (1992) remind us that, "Participation cannot be delegated and it cannot be institutionalized. It can only be personally undertaken – and enacted and reenacted." It is disturbing to think that Schumpeter's notion is being realized in this new millennium. What is even more disconcerting is after the 2000 election and the exclusion of third party participation in debates, I believe democracy is due for a major overhaul.

Mike Thompson, a Harvard political science professor, feels the same way I do. "The democratic system innovated by our founders no longer operates effectively. The two party stronghold on our democracy – something not even implied in the constitution – has dangerously weakened the separation of powers. Almost all the people who now make up the legislative, executive, and judicial branches of our government are either Democrats or Republicans. If they are on the same side of an issue, such as access to the election process, then the separation of powers has broken down and no longer serves the public interest. And our elected leaders can't effectively represent the people." When conducting research Thompson found, "a member of Congress in the late seventeen hundreds represented ten thousand and fifteen people. Today that same office 'represents' six hundred thousand people." (Roth, 1995 p.139).

Conditions that Spark Community Organizing Movements

Social and economic injustices that directly impact the lives of families and communities give rise to community organizing movements. The organizers, residents, local conditions, and many other factors at the grassroots level combine to forge diverse organizing experiences. But while neighborhood based projects do have a significant origin, nature, and existence of their own at the local level, they are also the products of national and even international political and economic developments. To no small degree, the

larger political-economic context often determines the general tenor and success of local efforts.

The national political economy affects community organizing in surprising ways. Many incorrectly assume, for example, that radical organizing occurs and thrives only during periods of national economic depression, or that conservative neighborhood maintenance groups form and succeed only in periods of national affluence. While such a theory appears accurate for the 1930s, a similar movement developed in the 1960s and 1970s during a period of economic growth. The late 1970s and 1980s was a period of economic decline, on the other hand, and yielded a conservative response.

Nevertheless, specific conditions at the national and local levels determine the approaches different groups use to restore social and economic justice. Usually external pressure on traditional communities and a breakdown of the routines of daily life trigger citizens to engage in activities to bring about changes to better their lives. Disturbances in the larger political economy create the momentum in which the powerless move the mass political insurgency.

Midgley, (1986) a social work academician, points out central to the rationale of community participation is “a reaction against the centralization, bureaucratization, rigidity, and remoteness of the state. The ideology of community participation is sustained by the belief that the power of the state has extended too far, diminishing the freedom of ordinary people and their rights to control their own affairs.”

The Historical Context of Neighborhood Organizing Movements

Thomas Jefferson recommended that wards be established where groups of citizens could gather and practice democracy in their communities. (Mattson, 1998 p.). Neighborhood organizing efforts in the past mobilized citizens in neighborhood around their individual needs.

Robert Fisher (1994) describes the history of neighborhood organizing movements in his book, *Let the People Decide: Neighborhood Organizing in America* and describes how social developments are part of a total economic and political system – a political economy - in which all strands of life, from the national to the local level, intertwine. History is full of examples of how government and corporate interests conspire to stimulate economic growth or economic recovery through injustices that impact the every day lives of ordinary citizens. Social inequities make way for organizing efforts in the workplace and neighborhoods and lead to social uprisings to restore justice. Fisher (1994) quotes Dowd’s (1974) historical recount of neighborhood organizing.

“The first neighborhood organization movement must be seen as one trend in the national liberation reform movement called progressivism. Progressivism grew out of the industrial relations of the years 1870 to 1895, a period characterized by fierce and unbridled competition among, as well as, between capitalists, on the one hand, and workers and farmers, on the other, over who would control and benefit from industrialization. The decade from 1895 to 1905 was a watershed in the transition from the industrial capitalism of 1870-95 to the finance capitalism and liberal reforms of the generation that followed. Around 1895 bankers like J. P. Morgan of Morgan Guaranty and Trust purchased controlling interest in corporations as diverse as the newly formed U.S. Steel and General Electric from industrial capitalists like Andrew Carnegie and Thomas Edison. Control of key industries began to be consolidated among an elite group of financiers. The period 1895-1905, for example, saw the merger of some 300

separate firms each year into highly centralized and powerful industrial conglomerates. As economic power became more centralized, many corporate leaders concluded that the social order, too, should be stabilized by engineering democracy through private and public social engineering." (Dowd, 1974)

Neighborhood organizing, community organizing, community building and community development are all aspects of social movements. In the early twentieth century, social democratic movements that arose in the U.S. were in response to the excesses of industrial capitalism. Saul Alinsky paved the way in this era neighborhood organizing. The locus of organizing was the industrial factory. By organizing unions around class issues and provided the working-class a vision for the future. They targeted employers, the owners of production companies, and leveraged changes in public policies. Alinsky mobilized workers through his neighborhood organizing method of sending in an organizer (a.k.a. catalyst) who taught citizens the skills to initiate action on their own behalf, then left to organize in another neighborhood.

Alinsky believed people organize solely for their own economic self-interests. Similarly, neighborhood improvement associations are rooted in maintaining property values, and liberal social reform of social services. Such material incentives are important, but they are not the glue that keeps neighborhood organizing efforts together. Victories are crucial; people seeing themselves and their power differently in their activities. In order to sustain long-range objectives, neighborhood organizing must be built around issues of personal development and an ideology that articulates a sense of purpose extending beyond individual advantage. It must be committed to developing knowledge, dignity, and self-confidence of community residents. And these people must see themselves as part of a larger cause. A focus on unity instructs that oppressed people must build relationships with other oppressed people. In doing so efforts affirm variety and diversity while working "to synthesize and build unity that transcends diversity." (Fisher, 1994 p. 228)

Alinsky's style of organizing falls into the category of neighborhood organizing. Solidarity movements and factions in neighborhoods and in factories are organized around a cause and demands. This approach trains citizens as radical activists and organizers on how to leverage power for their self-interests. Alinsky organized the Back of the Yards project during the depression for worker's rights and improvement of living conditions in "the Jungle" in Chicago.

New Organizing Approaches

As issues arose over democratic participation, personal liberties, civil rights and quality of life, a new insurgence of grassroots associations and organizing approaches began in the 1950s. It wasn't until the 1980s that community based efforts began addressing issues impacting whole communities, constituency or identity oriented groups, and focused on self-help strategies.

The social movements of the 1980's have a vision of participatory democracy. They reject authoritarianism: in the government, leadership, party, organization and relationships (Amin, 1986). Class becomes part of - not the identify of the group (Brecher and Costello, 1990). The organizational form is smaller, looser and taps local knowledge and resources, to respond to problems rapidly and creatively, and to maintain the flexibility needed in changing circumstances (McKnight and Kretzman, 1984).

Another aspect of the more recent social movements is their community building aspect. The term community building in this context refers to the creating and strengthening of social bonds among group members. Community building approaches are based in self-help and empowerment principles and the

most effective efforts go beyond building community to targeting the public sector. Most community-based organizing seeks independence from the state rather than state power. They rely on a unitary conception of democracy within the community and de-emphasizes adversarial democracy, which challenges national, state and local politics and presupposes conflicting of interests. Community building is a natural focus of new social movement efforts, reflecting the anti-statist, decentralization trends of the postindustrial political economy.

Mary Weil, author of “Women, Community, and Organizing,” suggests consciousness raising and praxis give people the opportunity to “reflect on, re-experience, identify, and analyze the social stereotypes and environmental forces that have impeded their development” and help build both individual and collective strength. To make the personal political, which means being sensitive to the ways that “systemic factors result in problematic personal conditions” and recognizing that how people choose to live their daily lives is political as well. Community organizing emphasizes and works for structural change – to eliminate racism, sexism, homophobia, classism and other forms of oppression (Fisher, 1994). A vision of noncapitalist transformation has to be articulated in a broad ideology that addresses the causes of poverty and powerlessness, as well be attentive to such American ideals as equality, self-help, local self-reliance, participatory democracy, group solidarity, cultural pluralism, and grassroots insurgency (p. 229).

Asset-Based Community Development is a community development approach and is based on a paradigm of organizing different from Alinsky’s. ABCD is broad in scope, solution-based and community driven. The ideology behind ABCD is communities can drive their own development process themselves by identifying and mobilizing existing (but often unrecognized) assets, thereby responding to and creating local economic opportunity. Such unrealized resources include not only personal attributes and skills, but also the relationships among people that fuel local associations and informal networks. Mobilizing such social assets through training and asset mapping, activate more formal institutional resources such as government, formal community-based organizations, and private enterprise. In this way, the community development process is sustained and scaled up, while continuing to recognize local associations as the driving force – the vehicles through which all the community’s assets can be identified and then connected to one another in ways that multiply their power and effectiveness.

The principles of the Family Support Network are rooted in community building. and share the philosophy of ABCD in that individuals and their relationships are assets. The ideology behind the FSN is rooted in people helping people and empowerment where individuals take the initiative to help themselves and others to get their needs met and improve their quality of life. The methodology is based on social support, self-organizing and emergence theories. FSN provides people with a common purpose “To Save Our Children’s Future” and empowers individuals to create their own systems of support and grow social capital by providing easy access to resources, skill-building and recreational opportunities. The capacity of the group is expanded through association ties to other FSN groups that form in neighborhood, institution, business or broad-based community settings. Formal systems are an integral part of the FSN methodology.

Conclusion

All three community organizing approaches, Alinsky, ABCD and FSN, provide a framework to engage citizens in activities that empower people to help themselves. Unlike Alinsky’s confrontational techniques to take power from those in authority, ABCD and the FSN approaches view power as an outgrowth of the organizing effort, rather than something they “need” or “lack.”

The dramatic changes in the political, economic, and institutional context over the past two decades has impacted community organizing practices. Communities are struggling for survival and stretching their assets to unsustainable levels. According to Robinson (1995) there is an emergence of aspirations towards a new social order in which community is based on “face-to-face association in caring neighborhoods which retain individual liberty to act, open access to knowledge, and global interconnections” (p. 22) that sustain specialized small scale enterprise.

The organizing ideology for our times must combine new demands for autonomy and identify with older ones for social justice, production for human needs rather than profit, and a spirit of connectedness and solidarity rather than competition.

The basis for such an ideology can be found in the themes of ABCD and FSN. Feminist theory instructs the need to build relationships, make connections, and accept responsibility – connecting the public and private, challenging patriarchal and hierarchical forms of domination, and recognizing the importance of solidarity across differences of class, ethnicity, race, religion, and sexual orientation.

Day to day organizing, if it is to move beyond the received wisdom of traditional values and cultures, must be informed by this sort of challenging politics and feel the tensions of the intellectual discourse of our era. Individual freedom cannot be achieved without sustaining and nurturing connections to the greater whole, be it humanity, nature or the planet. Robert Fisher (1994) believes local organizing efforts must include not only a critique of global corporate capitalism but a demand for a responsible public, from the grassroots to the state apparatus. (p. 232) The Family Support Network is an innovative social architecture that manifests a more responsible and responsive public that increases social capital by growing social networks and strengthening relationships that improve quality of life of community members. The FSN methodology instigates a paradigm shift in service delivery systems by creating a resource pool of trained volunteers who self-organize into an integrated system of support that formal agencies tap to increase their capacity to empower clients toward self-sufficiency. By engaging citizens in community service in this manner, formal service delivery is augmented with an informal system of care that is self-sustaining.

“Ironically, global capitalism destroys community at the same time it forces people back into it as their primary source of defense. Such structural contradictions mobilize opposition and lead, in the short run, to social disorder, spontaneous rebellion, and grassroots organizing around a wide array of issues and concerns. The task for community organizing is to tie people’s understanding of their grievances to an analysis that expands as well as addresses the problems affecting their lives and communities. The challenges that lie ahead are immense when taking the problems we face to the global scale. A consciously ideological, grassroots leadership committed to opposing the privatization of life and to building larger organizational forms is essential.” (Fisher, 1994 p. 232)

ABCD has created the gateway through which new initiatives are emerging. The FSN is a mechanism that creates a new social order and orients people to becoming an integral part of an informal system of care. Alinsky's approach will be useful in leveraging systemic changes in service delivery approaches and cooperation from formal institutions. These broad scale initiatives will assuredly be met with resistance as consumption of social services declines. Confusing as this may seem to those who feel entitled, institutions will slowly give over the duties and communities will regain the right to take care of their own. We must start now to train people on how to care for themselves and one another. The Family Support Network is one of many new structures being designed to make this America’s new reality and put democracy back into the hands of the people. Jacob Needham (2002) points out in his book, The

American Soul, Rediscovering the Wisdom of the Founders, “The hope of the democracy we know is that it allows – and, to a certain extent, calls us all toward – the life of conscience, of respect for one’s neighbor, that is rooted in the teachings of wisdom about the actual and potential selfhood of humanity (p. 19).

At the core of all initiatives no matter how altruistic they seem, Saul Alinsky left behind these words of wisdom, “The more power the neighborhood organization secures, the better it serves the interest of its members. It is self-interest rather than exalted ideas that motivate people to act.” (Fisher, 1994 p. 54).

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About the Author

Cheryl Honey, (cheryl@communityweaving.com) Certified Prevention Specialist and President, Excel Strategies, Inc. She founded the Family Support Network, International (FSNI), in 1993 and has been a volunteer with the organization since its inception. Community Weaving practices emerged out of her grassroots experience growing the FSN across the country. She received recognition from the Asset-Based Community Development Institute and the Institute for Civil Society for her innovative approach to building individual and community capacity. Cheryl graduated from Antioch University-Seattle in Transformative Community Building and Human Services. She is a Daily Points of Light Honoree; the recipient of the Giraffe Award; and Ambassador for Peace and Excellence in Leadership Awards from the International and Interreligious Federation for World Peace. She trains Community Weavers around the world who grow Family Support Networks at all levels of community. Cheryl is a keynote speaker, lecturer and writer. She is currently working on her new book: *Saving Our Children's Future*.