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# Re-situating Ourselves: Learning from Community Organizations' Stories of Conflict, Challenge and Failure

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# Re-situating Ourselves: Learning from Community Organizations' Stories of Conflict, Challenge and Failure

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**Abstract:** This paper presents a preliminary framework for examining a feminist community group's day to day conflicts, challenges and practical dilemmas, labeled as doublebinds. The research identifies the most commonly experienced dilemmas within a feminist community organization. It then discusses observed coping strategies of selection, vacillation, and source splitting.

## Introduction

One of the persistent challenges within both the adult education and feminist/social justice movement literatures is developing an understanding of organizational dynamics in ways that account for complex ideologies as well as practicalities. The tensions within social justice organizations are sometimes framed in terms of conflict, challenge, or even failure on the part of the activists, volunteers, and educators (English, 2004). This research resituates the questions we ask when reflecting upon organizational tensions, contradictions, conflicts, and dilemmas.

The narratives and data included in this paper come from a research study on feminist community organizations. It was originally conceptualized as a project to describe and explain feminist program planning and community education organizational issues. Currently, there is not much literature within adult education that specifically addresses feminist program planning within organizations (of any type). Sork (2000) poses a future research question, "What would it look like?", but does not address the issue. English (2004, 2005) examines feminist nonprofits as a way of understanding the organizational tension of relationship versus bureaucratic issues and better understanding power dimensions and relational learning aspects of feminist work. Birden (2004) presents the Boston Women's Health Book Collective as a case study or model that exemplifies Frierian coalition-engendered learning. My work examines the nature of feminist program planning within community education groups, asks questions about feminist individual/collective identities within groups, and studies feminist ethics as a lens for understanding day-to-day women's community educator dilemmas within program-planning practice (Bracken, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2006).

The analysis in this paper assumes that there is a working culture or a desire for a working culture within feminist community groups which values non-hierarchical, participatory, relational, interconnected environments and practices (Bracken, 2002, 2004; Buzzanell, 1994; English, 2004, 2005; Feree & Martin, 1995; Harter, 2004; Kaspar & Batt, 2001). In my opinion, negative issues are examined as power struggles resulting from the challenge of working in non-hierarchical ways, but not studied in other ways. In spite of many feminist and adult education writings about issues of diversity, difference, and social movement learning, our academic and practical understandings of the organizational or program planning issues faced within feminist groups appears to be limited at this time.

This research paper explores an alternative framework for understanding and studying the dilemmas and conflicts which can occur within feminist community action groups. The framework combines Urban-Walker (1998), Harter (2004) and Tracy's (2004) views that contradictions, tensions and dilemmas are a part of daily practice and are not necessarily, in and of themselves, problems that need to be solved or eliminated. Instead, they are inevitably occurring processes which, depending on how they are framed, can be problematic or positive and therefore need to be thoroughly acknowledged and understood.

## Theoretical Frameworks

I combined several frameworks for this study. First, Margaret Urban Walker's (1998) work on Moral Understandings serves as a conceptual framework for analyzing day to day ethical practice in feminist environments. In contrast to the theoretical-juridical model of morals and ethics, Walker proposes a feminist expressive-collaborative model. She states, "People learn to understand themselves as bearers of particular identities and actors in various relationships that are defined by certain values. People learn to understand each other this way and to express their understandings through practices of responsibility in which they assign, accept, or deflect responsibilities for different things." (Urban Walker, 1998, p. 9) Her model is based on four views: that morality itself exists in practices, not theories; the practices characteristic of morality are practices of responsibility; morality is not socially modular; and moral theorizing and moral epistemology need to be freed from impoverishing legacies of ideality and purity that make most of most people's moral lives disappear, or render those lives unintelligible. Thus, this research focuses upon the day to day practices of responsibility that activists experience, create, and re-create.

Second, I applied Harter's (2004) study on cooperative ways of organizing. Her work theorizes that most alternative social action groups struggle with a dialectic of independence and solidarity as a lens for managing internal tensions and contradictions with their groups. The competing pressures to be increasingly efficient and the pressure to be participatory lead to particular ways of framing contradictions and dilemmas. This issue is echoed by English (2005) and Ashcraft (2001), referred to by Ashcraft as organizational dissonance. Harter focuses on the strategies groups use to solve these dilemmas – for example the issue of equal participation (one person equals one vote regardless of status) or equitable models of participation (proportional membership voting), or something she terms the 'paradox of agency' as members struggle with individual and collective agendas. Harter's study (2004) also identified something she calls the adaptation paradox where organizations balance ideological principles against overall organizational survival, as a perception that will influence individual and collective attitudes and behaviors. The adaptation paradox is illustrated in an article by Kaspar and Batt (2001) where they share a dialogue about the differences in their feminist ideologies surrounding the start-up of a women's breast cancer community education service. Kaspar makes the argument that when faced with the dilemmas a women's education group must face, ideological compromises need to be made in the hopes that those compromises will be renegotiated as the group stabilizes.

Third, I relied on work by Tracy (2004) which examines the concept of a perceived doublebind and the potential strategies that can result from framing an issue or

situation as such. Tracy's (2004) assumes that the organization in question will have certain conditions that predispose members to frame issues and conflicts as doublebinds. The conditions are: a) an intense relationship among the organizational members, b) A message surrounding an issue framed as a paradox (either/or), and c) The recipient(s) of the message perceive or are prevented from stepping out of the paradox to re-frame and comment about the issue; the recipient(s) cannot easily physically withdraw from the situation at hand.

Her research argues that once conflicts, tensions or contradictions are framed as doublebinds, they can be difficult to navigate, resulting in stress, burnout, withdrawal or isolation, or unhealthy reactions such as dualistic thinking, paranoia, paralysis, loss of confidence, guilt or discomfort. She identified other strategies such as selection, vacillation or source splitting as approaches educators/activists use. Both Tracy (2004) and Harter (2004) also rely on a framework by Stohl & Cheney (2001) that theorizes dilemmas can potentially be reframed into counter-narratives that emphasize flexibility, negotiation and thoughtful discretion.

## Research Process

The organization for this study was selected as a publicly self-identified community-based feminist organization, specializing in women's community health. The group had sufficient organizational maturity and longevity (40 years) that demonstrates both a history of past program planning practices as well as ongoing program planning and implementation at all phases or project maturity and with a range of program scope and sizes. The organization studied was located in Southcentral Mexico, which results in an additional international and north/south dimension to the study. I relied upon Narayan & Harding (2000) and Mohanty (1991) to reflect upon and apply a cross-cultural feminist reflective framework and to develop a localized context for understanding global theoretical discourse on women's issues.

The data was collected through daily observations of internal organizational functions as well as external events, programs and outreach efforts; face-to-face interviews with twenty-five of the volunteer and/or paid community educators; and, through extensive examination of existing supporting documents, archives, file notes, organizational artifacts, notes, and external press clippings. All of the data sources were combined and overlapped to construct an overarching view of the feminist educators' experiences as members of a community based organization.

## Discussion of Findings

*Perceptions of Doublebinds*

When piecing together the historical narratives as well as the contemporary observations and reflections of the group members in this study, several patterns emerged as regular sources of conflict or contradiction. Doublebinds, as defined by Tracy (2004) above, included criteria of a) an intense relationship among participants, b) message structured as paradox, and c) recipient(s) of message unable to step out to reframe or to physically withdraw.

One of the interesting questions incompletely answered in our literature, is what makes feminist community groups unique? What types of organizational issues do they face and how do they face them? I will first present a list of the most common

doublebinds which emerged from the data, and then pull out one of the concepts for further discussion.

*Most Commonly Perceived Doublebinds*
- Can non-feminists do feminist community work?
- How can we avoid tensions as good feminists/bad feminists within or across groups?
- How can I balance my own feminist/womanist ideas with the collective or official mission of our group?
- How can we balance our need for hierarchy/structure with participatory practices?
- How can we learn to become more comfortable and adept with our own uses of power while avoiding being corrupted by it?
- How can we deal with competing pressures to professionalize and sustain a grassroots environment?
- How can we better balance funding priority areas with our own areas of real need (women's issues)?
- How can we stay authentic in sharing our feminist ideologies across different audiences without watering down or diluting our own views?
- How can we partner across ideological or other lines without compromising our principles?
- How can we sustain a pedagogical stance of creating true empowerment balanced with the existence of pre-ordained and pre-planned educational projects?
- How can we better prepare for balancing unintended consequences of activist work with avoiding a politics of dependency?
- How can we address issues of scope/impact: In order to reach more women, we have to become more consistent and less flexible, lose intensity of relationship connections?
- How do we deal with honoring our organizational history balanced with changing contexts (founder's syndrome)? (Block & Rosenberg, 2002)
- How do we navigate developing and sustaining a culturally relevant 'feminism' while developing meaningful international feminist partnerships and alliances?
- How can we balance our need for committed, loyal activists with the burnout that comes from romanticizing social justice work?
- How can we partner across ideological or other lines without compromising our principles?

**Discussion**

In looking at this feminist group's historical and contemporary practice, the issue of partnerships and alliances frequently arose and group members often described it as an area that caused stress, guilt or discomfort. One project in particular, Maternity Without Risks, began as an outreach project with indigenous midwives, who bear significant healthcare responsibilities and leadership roles within communities but are not generally treated with respect or inclusion by traditional healthcare providers. Further, the issue of contradictory ideologies looms large in the Mexican culture, where motherhood is culturally revered. Over time, the community activist group members built relationships

by reaching out to individual midwives, forming regional midwifery circles who engaged in peer education. Next, the group connected the midwives in a women's health partnership with local, more traditional volunteer groups and state health care agencies. Many of the group members experienced dilemmas or conflicts about how to navigate the different ideologies and values held by the various partners. Applying Urban Walker (1998) and Tracy's (2004) work to the data led to identification of three strategies group members used: selection, vacillation, and source splitting. In this case, all three strategies were observable as intentional strategies for working through what was initially perceived as an impossible collaboration. On the surface, some described these as positive strategies leading to successful partnerships. Yet the employment of these strategies may have, in fact, simply submerged important issues in order to lessen tension for individuals.

Selection is a process where a group member will decide to uphold one norm over another as an intentional strategy for resolution. In this case, the community health worker who founded the project convinced the other partners that the issue of women's community health, particularly maternity care was more important than any ideological differences they might have. Their process included learning about what views they had and informing each other through dialogue about what misconceptions or additional information might lessen the conflict or contradictions in views. Next, they moved to an official strategy of bracketing, or agreeing to disagree by removing certain issues as bargaining or discussion points. As an example, the midwives had some specific legal issues that would make them vulnerable if they shared certain types of healthcare information openly but in realistic practice, they needed to be able to share these practices with their partners in order to be more effective. In turn, some of the state agency partners acknowledged their own complicity in providing differential or inequitable health care services. The parties agreed that while these issues were a source of contradiction and conflict, the only way to work towards resolving them to 'bracket' the areas of disagreement and work on what they labeled the larger good.

Vacillation is a process where group members may change the ideology or criteria used from situation to situation, or person to person. In this case, many of the midwives were pro-life and many, if not most of the feminist community educators were pro-choice. Their alignment was dependent upon their willingness in this case to not use their competing values on this issue as a barrier to successfully working together to improve women's access to woman-friendly maternity and reproductive health care. They chose to look for the issues they had in common. On the other hand, when the situations arose, both partner groups would see each other at community rallies, protests or gatherings, each speaking out for their side of the issue.

Source Splitting is a process that Tracy (2004) describes as a good cop-bad cop approach where organizational or group members adopt differential roles so that they can individually adopt a desired position and defer views or practices to another member of an organization. This can happen within an individual or spread across several group members. Examples of this were when a group member said at a partnership meeting, "Look, I know that you are against having the midwives involved in medical testing without supervision, and I agree with you (no midwife present) ....but we need to focus on....." Later, when with the midwife, the same group member said, "Look, I know that her position on your participation in medical testing is unrealistic, and I don't agree with

it, however, we need to focus on.....", thus playing both sides of the issue while maintaining the peace.

## Concluding Discussion

The discussion of the organizational dilemmas that are uniquely present in feminist or other types of social action community groups within the adult education program planning literature is fairly limited. This research paper offers early or initial application of feminist frameworks as a lens for identifying dilemmas and analyzing the actions and reflections of group members in dealing with those dilemmas. Perhaps with continued research, there can be a keener understanding of this part of the program planning and social action process.

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