Community Organizations Behaving Badly: An Examination of Citizen Participation and Learning in and Through Community Building Activities

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Abstract: The paper presents findings from a critical ethnographic study that examined how the behavior of community organizations shaped participation and learning of community residents engaged in community building activities.

Maya's Story

My name is Maya. I am 27 years old, single and a mother to a 12-year old boy and 6-year old girl. My children and I live with my mother, a 48-year old life-long resident of Hatfield. Like my mother, I have lived in the Hatfield neighborhood all my life. At age 15, I dropped out of high school when I became pregnant with my first child. I have tried to go back to school to get a GED, but so far, I have not been successful. I support myself and my children through public assistance. Although I am not active in Jacaranda Garden and Literary Association (JGLA), I am quite familiar with the organization.

I think JGLA is really trying to do things to help children and youth in our community. Because I have young children, I would like to see more things available for them in our neighborhood. We really need something for the kids. We do not have any playgrounds, a library, or tennis courts for children in this area. Our children are not doing well. They are failing in school, dropping out of school and getting involved in drugs at an early age. The after-school program JGLA is trying to establish will be something that would provide support and recreation for our children.

I do wonder if the programs that JGLA has planned for our children will really solve the problem. It seems they just assume that an after-school program will solve the problems of poor academic performance, high school drop out rates, and drug activity. But how do they know that? How do they even know what is causing these problems? The organization does not make any efforts to involve the community in framing the problem and formulating the solutions. They haven't called a community meeting or anything like that. I only heard about the program because my boyfriend's sister lives next door to one of the board members. I wish we could have talked about it and maybe we could come up with some other ideas for addressing the problem. They make me feel like I have nothing to contribute to the process. And maybe I don't know a whole lot, but given the opportunity to participate in coming up with solutions for problems in our community, I might gain the knowledge and skills.

The organization does not seem interested in what other people in the neighborhood have to say. All the members of the board live on Jacaranda Street and four of the six members are related to one another. Because I do not live on that street and am not a close relative or friend of any of the board members, it will be hard for me to become part of the "inner circle." Even though JGLA's by-laws state that membership in the organization is open to all Hatfield residents above the age of 18, in reality, the inner circle is not open to everyone. But you know, once the program is underway, they will be looking for volunteers. At that time, the organization will welcome my participation. They will probably ask me either to volunteer my time for the program, or pay fees to assist in the administration of the program. That is how they ran the youth gardening program in which my son participated, a few years ago. They asked residents

like me to be fee-paying members of the organization. They would ask us to volunteer in specific projects but they did not invite us to participate in making any decision relating to the programs. I guess people like me just get to help them to do whatever they have decided. They had people come in from the city to teach the children different things about gardening. I wish I knew how they organized that; maybe I could organize something similar for the kids on our block for the summer.

I don't think they really want other people to get involved because, once other people get involved, it will shift the locus of control. Control is really important in this organization. I suspect maintaining control is important because of personal motives that drive the activities of the organization. The original members of the group, the "inner circle" want to make sure that they are around to reap the benefits of the organization when JGLA becomes a successful entity that brings in money to pay their salaries. If they lose control, other people may take over and push out the original members of the organization. The "inner-circle" members do not want to take that risk. Whatever the reason(s), the need for control makes it hard for people like me to participate.

Tamara (the program director) and Ms. May (the president) know the right way to run an organization. They are both well educated and, prior to retiring because of health complications, they worked in good jobs in places like banks, law firms, and at social service agencies. Unlike them, I do not know much about the proper way to run an organization. They are also really good at computers. I did not even graduate from high school and I have never had a job. I defer to Tamara and Ms. May because of the experience and skills they bring from their professional backgrounds. If I was to become more active in the organization, maybe I could learn from them. However, they won't invite someone like me because I don't possess the necessary skills. From everything I have noted, I don't think it will be possible for me to have an active role in JGLA. However, I will support JGLA in any of their activities. You know, just to help them out when I can.

Introduction

Maya's story is based on the findings from a critical ethnographic study that examined the behavior of community organizations (COs). The story describes cultural and social processes that shape her participation and learning as a community resident. As sites and vehicles for community organizing, COs can facilitate or hinder local residents' (or specific groups of residents) involvement in directing the process of community change. What follows is a description of a study that addressed the following research question: How does the social structure of community organizations (COs) promote and/or inhibit citizen participation and learning in activities sponsored and/or supported by COs?

Literature Review

I regard COs as social actors whose actions promote and/or inhibit citizen participation and learning. A review of four bodies of literature—adult education, community theory, community development, and organizational theory—reveals that limited consideration has been given to the behavior of COs as social actors. Learning in and for community is an important and central theme in the field of adult education (Cunningham, 1996; Foley, 1999; Hugo, 2002). However, adult educators generally focus their attention on the behavior of individuals participating in community learning programs. COs are considered as mere sites for adult learning. The emphasis on the behavior of individuals is also reflected in studies that examine community or citizen participation. These studies generally focus on the motivations for,

characteristics of, and impacts on, participants of community activities (Metzger, Alexander, & Weiner, 2005; Ohmer & Beck, 2006; Zeldin, 2004).

In the body of literature concerned with community change, COs are treated as tools essential for community change (Bridger, 1992; Gaventa, 1980; Neme, 1997). The emphasis here is on how individuals and/or groups use COs to transform their communities; little attention is given to how COs behave. While the behavior of organizations is a central concern in the literature on organizational theory and behavior, COs are seldom examined (Hall, 1999; Scott, 1998; Selznick, 1966; Zald, 1969). This study examines the behavior of COs, with a view to sheding light on how such behavior shapes citizen participation and learning.

Theoretical Framework

The study employs a theoretical framework that combines theories from participatory development, organizational theory, community theory, and cultural historical activity theory (CHAT). COs and their activities are the primary units of analysis in this study. Drawing on the concept of community action from the interactional approach to community (Kaufman, 1959; Wilkinson, 1970, 1991), COs are defined as formal organizations for and of community: their primary goals are oriented towards the interests of the community in which they are located, and (2) local residents are encouraged to participate as decision-makers. As formal organizations, COs are comprised of five elements—goal, participants, social structure, technology, and environment (Scott, 2003). Of the five elements, this study places emphasis on the social structure, defined as the patterned or regularized aspects of relationships existing among participants in an organization. The social structure of COs is observable through human activities sponsored and/or supported by the COs.

Figure 1: Modified Structure of Human Activity (modified from Engeström, 1987, p. 78)
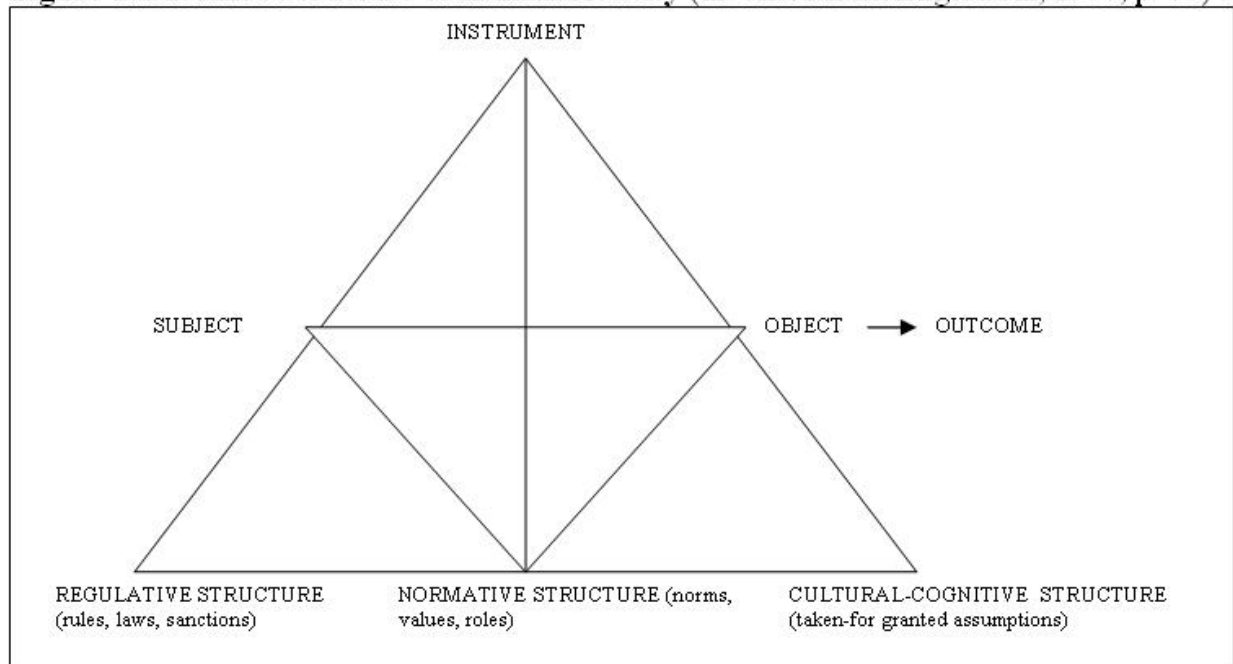
To examine these activities, I employed a modified version of Engeström's (1987) structure of human activity, depicted in Figure 1. My modified structure integrates two theories—CHAT and institutional theory of organizations. The study assumes that activities

consist of three elements—subject (actor), object (issue to be acted on), and instruments (mediating tools and signs) (Engestrom, 1987; Leont'ev, 1977). Activities of the participating organizations are grounded in cultural-historical contexts by way of three structures of their institutional environment—regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2001). The regulative structure consists of rules, laws, and sanctions that regulate behavior. Prescriptions for behavior (norms, values, and roles) are elements of the normative structure. The cultural cognitive structure consists of taken-for-granted assumptions that provide a common frame of reference for participants in the activities sponsored by the organizations.

Human activity, the study assumes, simultaneously transforms objects and subjects. Thus, learning (a relatively stable change in behavior or behavioral potential (Hergenhahn & Olson, 2005) occurs as people engage in activities. However, while learning occurs in and through participation, not all participation results in learning. I employed the foregoing theoretical framework in framing the study, collecting and analyzing data.

Method

I used critical ethnography as a research method to systematically examine the cultural and social processes in activities sponsored by COs. My goal is to expose the oppressive aspects of the practice of community building as a step towards formulating better forms of intervention. Key assumptions framing this study are: (1) community organizing is a specific form of collective struggle for social change, (2) citizen participation is political because it involves negotiation of power and interests between entities within and outside a specific locality, and (3) collective struggle promotes learning for citizenship.

The site of the study was Hatfield

1, a predominantly African-American, low-income neighborhood located in a major city on the US east coast. The neighborhood is home to approximately 5,000 residents. Hatfield is one of those neighborhoods that feel like a community. It is a place where people look out for, and respond to, one another in their everyday lives. However, as with other low-income neighborhoods of its kind, Hatfield experiences many of the social ills prevalent in similar neighborhoods: low educational attainment, high unemployment, high levels of poverty, decreasing population, and the deterioration and decline of housing stock. In addition, Hatfield is a neighborhood marginalized by race and class. Coming from Zimbabwe, I am familiar with the struggle against race and class marginalization. I chose Hatfield as the research site partly because I feel a sense of connection with the neighborhood based on these race and class struggles. Since 2002, I have worked with COs in Hatfield as part of a community capacity building initiative. Thus, my engagement with the neighborhood preceded the study and continues beyond study completion.

Four organizations participated in the study: a business association, a social service agency, a church, and a garden and literary association. I collected data over a seven-month period of fieldwork, employing standard ethnographic strategies (participant observation, interviewing, and document analysis). The data collected was analyzed with the help of grounded theory techniques. Prolonged engagements, triangulation, and member checks are some of the strategies I employed to enhance research quality.

Discussion of Findings

This paper presents findings from only one of the four participating organizations—Jacaranda Garden and Literary Association (JGLA). JGLA is a garden and literary association whose mission is to "enrich the minds of neighborhood youth." I use Maya's story (presented earlier) as a way to dramatically present my findings. Maya is a fictional character created to represent residents who rarely participate in community-building activities. Although fictional, Maya's character is a collage of characteristics typical of Hatfield residents. Embedded in Maya's story are descriptions of the CO (JGLA), its activities, and elements of the organization's social structure that promote and/or inhibit citizen participation and learning in community-building activities.

Some of the behaviors of COs that shape citizen participation and learning are:

Inhibiting tools and processes: Tools and processes employed in CO-sponsored activities impose pre-formulated solutions for pre-defined problems. This leaves no room for residents to consider alternatives, or to struggle to understand their conditions. In the absence of this struggle, the opportunities for local residents either to act as, or to learn to be, subjects that create alternatives are diminished. An example of a tool imposing, pre-formulated solutions for pre-defined problems would be the afterschool program that JGLA plans to establish to address challenges faced by neighborhood youth. The assumption is that neighborhood children are performing poorly academically and socially because their neighborhood is lacking. The after-school program (activities for youth) is presented as a solution to address a problem defined as inadequate recreational and educational programs for neighborhood youth. What is at issue is not the adequacy of the definition and/or solutions proffered. Rather, the real issue is the nature and types processes undertaken to define the problems and to formulate solutions, and the role accorded residents. In the activities described in this study, there were limited opportunities for all residents to participate in problem definition or in developing solutions. If COs are not

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[1] The names of places, organizations and people have been changed to protect participants.

creating opportunities for residents to participate in making such decisions, they are inhibiting the participation of residents as owners. Moreover, they are curtailing the opportunity for residents to learn through participation. In this way, tools and processes employed by the organizations support existing power structures.

Privileging education and experience: There is a taken-for-granted assumption in the neighborhood that people with more work experience or education are more qualified to act as citizens. Residents tend to let educated persons and individuals with much work experience take the lead in making decisions and directing activities. Residents do not see participation in the activities as an opportunity to learn or gain experience. Privileging education and work experiences supports the construction of residents of struggling communities as lacking the capacity to address issues in their community.

Personal motivations for community work: The desire to control the organization reveals a tension between personal and public motives driving community-building activities. Failure to find a healthy balance between these two motives results in limiting participation of all residents in decision-making. Plagued by these competing motives, the leaders of JGLA kept key decision-making roles within their purview, out of the influence of rank-and-file members and other community residents. Limiting participation in decision-making thus inhibits citizen participation of certain groups of residents. This behavior restricts opportunities for all residents to learn how to act as owners with responsibility and authority to direct community change.

Conclusion

The behavior of COs is only one of many factors shaping citizen participation and learning for citizen participation, However, I contend that it is a crucial factor because COs are in a unique position to provide community residents with citizen-, and community-, building opportunities. Citizen building was not a primary motive guiding the behavior of the organizations that participated in my study. In fact, the organizations in my study were content to treat community residents as clients—objects to be acted upon—rather than as subjects of their own destiny. More frightening is the fact that residents seemed contented with their client status. Ironically, the behavior of COs in my study mirrors oppressive cultural processes occurring in the broader society (both private and public arena) that serve to marginalize and make clients of the very COs and residents they purport to liberate. A few daunting questions remain for community educators like myself: What role can education realistically play in addressing cultural and societal oppression? In our current political climate, what activities are likely to foster values and dispositions of citizen in COs and community residents?

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