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Participation and Learning in Community Organizations: A Theoretical Framework

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Abstract

The paper lays out a theoretical framework for investigating how the behavior of community organizations shapes the participation and learning of their members.

Introduction

This paper describes a theoretical framework for examining the behavior of community organizations as social actors that shape the participation and learning of their members. The voices of adult educators are among the many scholars and activists calling for local residents to come together to collectively define and address their community concerns. Accompanying the call for participation in collective action is the assumption that through participation, individuals learn to be empowered citizens. Learning in communities is a major focus in adult education (Cunningham, 1996; Hamilton & Cunningham, 1989). However, much of this focus is on the behavior of individuals and less on the behavior of community organizations as sites and vehicles that shape the process and content of learning in the context of communities. In community theory and community development literature, scholars have been primarily concerned with the behavior of individuals or entire communities, but not on the behavior of the community organization, qua organization. Studies on community change generally treat community organizations as tools for change (Bridger, 1992; Gaventa, 1980; Neme, 1997) and not as social actors whose behavior shape the nature of member participation and the process of learning. The behavior of community organizations has also received limited attention in organizational theory and behavior as scholars in this field have primarily focused on bureaucratic organizations (Hall, 1999; Scott, 1998; Selznick, 1966; Zald, 1969). Consequently, there is a need for a framework for examining the behavior of community organizations as it relates to member participation and learning. This paper aims to bring attention to community organizations as social actors shaping the nature of participation and process of learning. Drawing upon community theory, organizational theory, social construction theory and cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), I present a theoretical framework that is organized in three sections: 1) defining community organizations, (2) examining the behavior of community organizations and (3) investigating participation and learning in community organizations. I conclude the paper with a discussion of the implications of this framework for the field of adult education.

Defining Community Organizations

I consider community organizations to be a specific type of formal organizations. Later in this section, I will elaborate on how “community” qualifies “organization.” For now, I

focus primarily on the definition of formal organizations. There is general consensus in the literature on the distinction between social organizations and formal organizations. Formal organizations are collectives deliberately established for an explicit purpose, while social organizations emerge whenever people are living together and interacting (Blau & Scott, 2001; Silverman, 1971). By this definition, a family is a social organization while a household is a formal organization. Similarly, a community may be considered a social organization, and a community organization as a formal organization. I shall refer to formal organizations as organizations for the rest of the paper.

It is worth noting that the concept of formal organization is traced back to the concept of “corporate group” put forth by Weber (1947). In this paper, an organization is defined as a collectivity established for a specific purpose. It is comprised of five interrelated components—social structure, goals, participants and technology that are embedded in an environment which influences and is influenced by the collectivity. After reviewing several definitions of organizations proffered by classic and contemporary theorists such as Weber (1947), Pfeffer (1996), Hatch (1997), Hall (1999) and Scott (2003), I conclude that while there are variations in the definitions, there is generally a consensus with regard to the elements of an organization. Theorists often use different terms to point to the same concepts. For example, in Weber’s concept of organization, goal is implied in purposive activity. The five components of an organization are briefly described below (Scott, 2003):

- Social structure: refers to the patterned or regularized aspects of the relationships existing among participants in an organization.
- Participants: social actors who contribute to the organization and shape the structure of the organization.
- Goals: conceptions of desired ends that organizational participants attempt to achieve through their performance of activities.
- Technology: refers to the mechanisms used by an organization to transform inputs into outputs
- Environment: The physical, technological, cultural and social environment in which an organization is embedded that simultaneously influences and is influenced by the organization.

With this definition of organization, my task now is to show how “community” in “community organization” qualifies an organization. As stated earlier, I consider community organizations to be a specific type of organization. Not all organizations in a community are community organizations. Drawing on the notion of community action which is central to the interactional approach to community (Kaufman, 1959; Wilkinson, 1970a., 1970b., 1991), we can distinguish between organizations *in* community and community organizations. Community action refers to actions that are oriented to a specific locality. The concept of community action is discussed in relation to the notion of the community field. A community field consists of an arrangement of actions performed by persons working through various associations or groups to address local concerns (Kaufman, 1959). Using this concept of locality orientation, the interactional approach to community makes a clear distinction between actions taking place *in* a locality, and those taking place *for* the locality (community action vs. non-community

action). Applying the concept of locality orientation to organizations elucidates the distinction between organizations *in* communities and community organizations with the latter being organizations with (1) goals representing the interests and concerns of residents of the community (2) principal participants who are residents of the community. Like other organizations, community organizations are composed of five elements—goals, social structure, technology, participants and environment. Given that community organizations are a specific type of formal organization, I submit that theories that explain the behavior of formal organizations equally apply to community organizations.

Examining the behavior of community organizations

A major assumption made about community organizations in this paper is that they are active entities that are both products and producers of their interrelated institutional and material environments. Since this paper is primarily concerned with social and cultural processes (participation and learning), greater emphasis is given to the interaction between community organizations and their institutional environments. On the basis of this assumption, the institutional theory of organizations stands out from among the many organizational theories as being most appropriate for examining the behavior of community organizations as social actors that shape participation and the learning process.

Institutional theory (sometimes referred to as institutional approaches to organizational theory) recognizes and highlights the social and cultural elements in the environment of an organization (Hatch, 1997; Scott, 1995). The theory assumes that “socially constructed belief and rule systems” shape how organizations are structured and behave (Scott, 2003, p.120). This paper draws upon the neo-institutional approach which seeks to describe the processes by which organizational structure and processes become institutionalized (Hatch, 1997). The primary concern of this approach is the “ways in which practices and patterns are given values and how interaction patterns and structures are legitimated” (Hall, 1999, p.291). The neo-institutional approach is a specific application of Berger & Luckmann’s version of social constructivism (Hall, 1999; Hatch, 1997; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 2001; Zucker, 1977, 1988). Berger & Luckmann (1966) claim that the theory of institutionalization seeks to explain causes for the emergence, maintenance and transmission of social order. Applied to organizations, institutional theory, particularly the neo-institutional approach, seeks to explain how organizations are influenced by and influence their institutional environments.

At this point, it may be helpful to elaborate the distinction between organizations and institutions. There is general consensus in the literature that institutions are analytical entities, while organizations are empirical entities. Making this point, Bates (1960) maintains that unlike empirical entities such as organizations and communities, institutions do not have members or boundaries. Instead, institutions cut across concepts of group, organization and community to provide stability and meaning to social behavior. Scott (2001) describes institutions as “multifaceted, durable social structures, made up of symbolic elements, social activities and material resources” (p.49). Organizations represent one form of structure through which social institutions are produced and reproduced. Scott (1995, 2001) maintains that institutions are supported by

three structures: culture-cognitive, normative and regulative structures. The regulative structure constrains and regularizes behavior through explicit regulatory processes such as rule setting, monitoring and sanctioning of activities. Symbolic elements of this structure include rules, laws and sanctions. The normative structure defines desired objectives and appropriate ways for pursuing them. Accordingly, norms and values are the symbolic elements of this structure. “Values are conceptions of the preferred or the desirable...norms specify how things should be done” (Scott, 2001, p.55). Indicators of this structure include certification and accreditation. The cultural-cognitive structure consists of shared conceptions and taken-for granted understandings that constitute the nature of social reality and the frames through which meaning is made. “Cognitive systems control behavior by controlling our conception of what the world is and what kinds of action can be taken by what type of actors” (Scott, 1995, p. xviii). Compliance occurs because practices, routines and roles are taken for granted as “the way we do things” (Scott, 2001, p.57). For example, the treasurer of an organization is expected to handle financial matters of an organization. This is taken-for-granted role that one may find in organizations all over the world.

Each of these structures has corresponding mechanisms for legitimation. Legitimation is the process of explaining and justifying the existence of structures, practices and routines (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Hybels, 1995). Community organizations legitimize roles that are played and knowledge produced by their members. In so doing, they shape the nature of participation and the process of learning that occurs within this context. The literature suggests that there are three mechanisms of legitimation (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2001; Zucker, 1987): coercive pressures, normative processes and mimetic processes. Coercive pressures are pressures from an external entity that constrain or reward behavior. In the context of this framework, coercive pressures are processes by which community organizations validate behavior that conforms to stated rules and sanctions. In contrast, normative processes are mechanisms for legitimation based on criteria for selecting goals, and appropriate means for meeting these goals. These are processes used by community organizations to explain and justify participants, participation and knowledge that meet specific norms and values. The third mechanism of legitimation is mimetic processes. These are processes where an entity will model or adopt the practices of another entity when it is unsure of what to do. Here, community organizations legitimize their processes on the basis of common beliefs or taken-for-granted understandings about the participants.

Investigating Participation and Learning in Community Organizations

Participation in community organizations occurs through the performance of roles. Roles, sets of norms (behavior expectations), are a featured element of the social structure of an organization. The social structure of organizations is the patterned or regularized relationships amongst participants (Hatch, 1997; Scott, 2001). Performance of roles is manifested in the activities engaged by the members of organizations. Members of organizations draw on existing knowledge and create new knowledge as they perform these activities. Learning is not merely an outcome of participation. Rather, the two concepts are closely intertwined as people learn (i.e. produce knowledge) as they engage in activities. Cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) provides an analytical

framework for explaining how people learn through participation in activity systems (Engestrom, 1987, 2001; Witte, 2005).

The third generation of CHAT postulates that activity systems are composed of six interrelated elements: subject, artifacts, object, rules, community and division of labor. In the investigation of the behavior of community organizations as it shapes learning and participation, CHAT provides a framework that makes possible the examination of the process of learning as it unfolds in community organizations. Drawing from CHAT, Engestrom (1987, 2001) has developed a learning theory he terms, “expansive learning.” Unlike standard theories of learning that assume the existence of a stable body of knowledge to be acquired by subjects, the expansive theory of learning takes into account that “in important transformations of our personal lives and organizational practices, we must learn new forms of activity which are not yet there...they are literally learned as they are being created” (Engestrom, 2001, p.138). The major contribution of CHAT to our understanding of human activity is the emphasis placed on artifacts in activity systems (Witte, 2005). CHAT provides the tools that may assist researchers in examining member participation and learning processes that in the context of community organizations. With its emphasis on the creation and use of artifacts in human activity, CHAT contributes analytic tools for examining the cultural and historical aspects of the processes by which community organizations, as activity systems, shape the nature of participation and the process of learning.

Conclusion: Implications for Adult Education

In this paper, I have laid out a theoretical framework for exploring how the behavior of community organizations shapes the participation and learning of their members. The framework is developed using theories across various social science disciplines. I conclude this paper by addressing the question: Why is it important for adult educators to understand the behavior of community organizations? Ideally, community organizing is about promoting social justice, particularly for marginalized groups of people. It is about individuals working collectively to bring about a common good. Community organizations (as defined in this paper) are both outcomes and vehicles for community organizing. While social justice may ideally be the goal of community organizations, the behavior of these organizations might, in actuality, work against this goal. Thus instead of promoting social justice, these organizations may unwittingly perpetuate oppression and injustice through their behavior and structure. Consequently, adult educators who promote social justice need to be concerned with the behavior of community organizations. As scholars and activists, it is imperative that we develop models for intervention that promote learning for social justice. The development of such methods requires greater understanding of the behavior of community organizations. Furthermore, sustainable and effective community action depends on the development of strong, healthy community organizations. After all, while individuals are undoubtedly important to the process of community action, strong community organizations outlive individuals.

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