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Publisher Routledge

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Journal of Community Practice

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t792303986>

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Online Publication Date: 17 September 2008

To cite this Article Dobbie, David and Richards-Schuster, Katie(2008)'Building Solidarity Through Difference: A Practice Model for Critical Multicultural Organizing',Journal of Community Practice,16:3,317 — 337

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/10705420802255098

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10705420802255098>

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Building Solidarity Through Difference: A Practice Model for Critical Multicultural Organizing

David Dobbie
Katie Richards-Schuster

ABSTRACT. Building solidarity is perhaps the most crucial, yet under-theorized, process in organizing for social change. Traditional models of union and neighborhood-based organizing associate solidarity with commonality, as opposed to difference. However, this traditional organizing model is being forced to adapt to an increasingly multicultural context, presenting a need for rethinking past practices and creating new frameworks for multicultural organizing. Theoretical work on the topic has been relatively detached from action on the ground, with few efforts to translate it

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The information for this article draws from the participatory evaluation of Lifting New Voices, a 5-year pilot project of the Center for Community Change, funded by the W. K. Kellogg and Ford Foundations. Richards-Schuster was the national evaluation coordinator, and Dobbie, a research assistant to the project. We are particularly thankful to Barry Checkoway, the national evaluation director of Lifting New Voices, for his guidance and support of this article. We are also thankful to the community organizations that participated in Lifting New Voices and provided much of the information for this article. Among the many who have helped develop the ideas in this article, we also would like to thank Maggie Aragon, Shakira Abdullah, Barry Checkoway, Lisa Figueroa, Amy Hammock, Sara Mersha, Robby Rodriguez, Sarah Phillips, and Michael Reisch, along with two anonymous reviewers.

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Journal of Community Practice, Vol. 16(3) 2008
Available online at <http://www.haworthpress.com>
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doi:10.1080/10705420802255098

into community organizing practice. This article develops a practice model for critical multicultural organizing drawing on a five-year qualitative, participatory evaluation of youth participation in grassroots community organizations. As well as offering insight into the efforts of young people to organize around neighborhood issues in largely low-income and racially diverse communities of color, the cases highlight inclusive practices that will help any organization become more sustainable and effective.

KEYWORDS. Multicultural practice, community organizing, critical theory, youth, organizational change

INTRODUCTION: UNITY, DIFFERENCE, AND THE SEARCH FOR SOLIDARITY

Imagine two scenes. In one, members of a labor union walk off the job and set up picket lines upon hearing that a coworker has been fired. In the second, a union meeting erupts in an angry discussion of the lack of women and people of color in leadership positions. At first glance, many organizers might say there was a lot more “solidarity” at work in Scene 1 than Scene 2. This article argues, however, that the two scenes should be seen not as opposites, but as two related examples of people who care enough about constructing common ground to put solidarity into action. Organizers have always faced challenges in bringing people together across differences, and how they attempt to do so directly impacts the form and success of social movements.

Building solidarity is perhaps the most crucial yet under-theorized process in organizing people for social change—an essential yet elusive component of any successful movement (Waterman, 2005). The slogan “Unity is Strength” communicates the concept’s most broadly accepted usage as the “glue” that creates a collective identity and holds a group together under pressure (Fantasia, 1994). Solidarity has most often been treated as a latent quality, implicit in shared interests or cultural backgrounds, waiting to be uncovered by an organizer who shows people how their self-interests are connected and how those interests can be achieved through collective action. In this traditional organizing model, *difference* signals a lack of unity and solidarity.

Many organizers systematically call attention to the differences between “us” and “them,” constructing solidarity on the basis of commonalities within the group opposed to an “enemy.” Differences within

the organization, whether of opinion, background, or identity, are minimized out of fear that they will distract the group from its common purpose and lead to fragmentation and divisiveness. Some justify this fear by linking “identity politics” (particularly the Black Power, radical feminist, and gay liberation movements) to the fragmentation and demobilization of the Left in the 1960s (Singh, 1998). Of course, those movements were never as internally unified as they are sometimes portrayed, especially for the women and people of color who struggled to be respected and heard in organizations that were ostensibly fighting for social justice and the liberation of all humanity (Beale, 1970; Sandoval, 1991).

A certain current of pragmatism among organizers often rejects discussions that focus on dealing with difference in favor of “getting things done.” However, pragmatic organizers also care about building power, and most recognize that bringing people together across differences is essential to accomplishing their goals—reflected in the widespread use of the slogan “Unity in Diversity.” Although academics have produced libraries full of theoretical work on multiculturalism and the dilemmas of difference, the development of practical tools for organizers has lagged behind. This article presents the outlines of a practice model for critical multicultural organizing drawing on a 5-year qualitative, participatory evaluation of youth participation in grassroots community organizations. By synthesizing these case examples with the theoretical literature, we suggest five areas of focus to help organizations become more sustainable and effective in their efforts to bring people together to work for social change.

The Pluralist Dead Ends of Color-Blindness and Separatism

“The personal is political,” “diversity,” and “respect for difference” are such widely accepted buzzwords that further discussions of difference in organizing run the risk of banal sloganeering. However, movements and organizations continue to struggle with issues of inclusion and diversity, leaving many activists pessimistic about the feasibility of building broad-based multicultural and inclusive organizations or coalitions at all. This process is fueled by the pluralist assumptions most people bring to politics. The pluralist tradition of political thought emphasizes ever-shifting battles between “interest groups” of individuals pursuing their self-interests. Building solidarity in this model means convincing people that their common interests are more important than their differences, so while organizers might recognize differences between members, they work to prevent their public emergence. For example, an Alinsky-style organizer

in a working-class neighborhood with a history of racial conflict would likely avoid campaigns that would surface racial issues in favor of addressing issues that are less racially linked in the minds of community members. While this makes pragmatic sense, most community organizations have gotten stuck in this pattern instead of using the momentum of early wins to tackle potentially divisive issues, leaving a whole range of social justice issues generally off the table (Calpotura & Fellner, 1996).

The separatist, or identity-based, movements that many associate with the late 1960s and 1970s were an extension, rather than a rejection, of pluralism. Black Power and “women-only spaces” became symbols of an emphasis on difference but, in fact, simply chose an unfamiliar (and non-hegemonic) common identity to organize themselves around. These “separatist” movements did not solve the problem they set out to, instead discovering that searches for commonality follow a constantly receding target. Participants in all-Black organizations, for example, certainly enjoyed a less racist atmosphere but still faced conflicts along gender lines; Black feminist organizations split over questions of sexuality; and class remained an ever-present division within progressive groups (Combahee River Collective, 1977). Similarly, most current organizing efforts still employ either “color-blind” or “separatist” varieties of pluralism—downplaying identity-based differences while emphasizing ideological common ground or invoking identity to paper over ideological differences.

Critical Multiculturalism as an Alternative Model of Solidarity

“Solidarity does not mean that everyone thinks the same way, it begins when people have the confidence to disagree over issues because they ‘care’ about constructing a common ground” (Mercer, 1990).

Over the past several decades, a loosely knit group of theorists have worked to move beyond pluralism and develop an approach that refuses to isolate or ignore difference but embraces the complexity of multicultural interactions. This critical multiculturalist approach urges a rejection of assumptions of “natural unity” and starts from the counterintuitive notion that the differences among people can serve as the building blocks of solidarity.

Theories of multiculturalism begin with the premise that there are many cultures in the world. In its broadest usage, *cultures* include everything in society that is not biologically transmitted: all the learned behaviors and systems of meaning common to a group of people (Steinmetz, 1998). The term

multiculturalism suggests the existence of boundaries, however porous, between these systems of meaning. While “mainstream” multiculturalism often celebrates diversity while neglecting power dynamics and structural inequality, “critical” multiculturalists work to reclaim the radical possibilities of the theory by focusing on how cultural differences are linked to material conditions. Social workers and those in related fields will likely recognize the parallels between “mainstream multiculturalism” and approaches to “cultural competence” that urge practitioners to “understand and accept other cultures” without calling attention to privilege, oppression, and social justice.

Parekh (2001) emphasizes that we are all culturally embedded, growing up and living in a culturally structured world and placing value on our identities; that each culture provides different perspectives on the world, making a dialogue between them mutually beneficial; and that cultures are internally plural and dynamic in nature, changing as they relate to other cultures. “[Critical] multiculturalism doesn’t simply mean a numerical plurality of different cultures, but rather a community which is creating, guaranteeing, encouraging spaces within which different communities are able to grow at their own pace. At the same time, it means creating a public space in which these new communities are able to interact, enrich the existing culture, and create a new consensual culture in which they recognize reflections of their own identity” (Parekh, 2001, p. 337).

Scholars of community organizing have begun incorporating multicultural frameworks by “recognizing and working to eliminate social injustice and oppression based on specific group membership” within work toward common goals (Gutierrez, Alvarez, Nemon, & Lewis, 1996, p. 502). In an analysis of the modern Industrial Areas Foundation in Texas, Warren (2001) suggests that the biggest hole in Saul Alinsky’s approach was his adherence to a static vision of self-interest, which led many organizations to start strong but fail to evolve and grow over time. Critical multiculturalism suggests that organizers can build solidarity in ways that do not ignore or minimize differences between members but recognize the complexity of multiculturalism and help people establish common ground and construct inclusive organizational cultures.

BUILDING A PRACTICE MODEL FOR MULTICULTURAL ORGANIZING

Moving community organizing forward requires not only theoretical discourse but also strategies for practice. However, there are few

examples in the literature of attempts to distill strategies and techniques from empirical studies of multicultural organizing efforts. This article begins an effort to identify and understand inclusive practices that will help any organization become more sustainable and effective.

The U.S. youth (for the purposes of this paper, “young people” refers to those aged approximately 15–21) organizing movement that gained momentum in the mid-1990s has included many multicultural, multiracial organizing efforts. Many of the groups emerged in increasingly diverse communities where racism and oppression form a common bond across different groups. Younger Americans in general tend to have more interracial friendships and express more openness to diversity than older generations (Briggs, 2007). In addition, youth organizing efforts often involve intergenerational coalitions in order to find necessary resources and allies. Thus, youth organizing groups provide an interesting lens through which to begin to explore a set of practical strategies for multicultural organizing.

This article draws on the examples of youth organizing efforts that were part of Lifting New Voices (LNV), a 5-year demonstration project coordinated by the Center for Community Change. LNV examined the effects of strengthening youth participation in grassroots community organizing on young people, the organizations, and the community (Checkoway et al., 2001). The LNV evaluation project utilized a participatory process that helped the youth and adults from each organization to document and assess their activities. Each organization hired a community-based evaluator to work with a committee of youth and adults, submitted quarterly reports to the national evaluators, and met with the other organizations at a series of national meetings. The national evaluators maintained regular contact through site visits, telephone, and e-mail. The information in this article draws from the national evaluation process and offers insight into the efforts of young people to organize around neighborhood issues in largely low-income and racially diverse communities of color. After a brief overview of each organization, we discuss potential practice principles for multicultural organizing.

Direct Action for Rights & Equality (DARE)—Providence, RI

Direct Action for Rights & Equality (DARE) was established in the late 1980s in the multiracial, multiethnic, low-income community of South Providence, RI, to organize for social, economic, and political justice for neighborhood families. Members of DARE sought from the

beginning to build an organization that looked across boundaries of race, ethnicity, language, gender, and age to develop a common vision for social change. In the late 1990s, DARE formed Students and Parents for a Real Tomorrow (START), a multigenerational campaign that brought together students, parents, and other adults to work toward a common vision for strengthening education (DARE, 1999).

In this campaign, DARE worked with parents and students from the local high school to develop an organizing campaign addressing issues such as school busing, school conditions, and funding. These issues emerged from the young people's experiences but were also issues that the adults felt were important to address. To support youth participation, DARE formed a separate youth group that met weekly to develop leadership skills, learn about other organizing efforts, and strengthen their voice in the overall campaign. While many of the parents had participated in previous organizing efforts, DARE provided training to orient them to working intergenerationally. DARE supported the work by hiring one organizer to work directly with the youth and another to work with the parents. The two organizers provided structure and support and served as liaisons between the youth and the adults, often helping to negotiate between the two groups. To reinforce the leadership role of youth, DARE also brought young people onto their Board of Directors and into other leadership roles.

Youth of Oakland United (YOU)/People United for a Better Oakland (PUEBLO)—Oakland, CA

People United for a Better Oakland (PUEBLO) was founded as a multiethnic, multi-issue organization working to help low-income people of color in Oakland “take back power” in their lives and community. From its inception, young people participated within PUEBLO by attending meetings and community events. In an effort to strengthen their participation, the young people developed Youth of Oakland United (YOU) as a space for young people to organize around their own issues and strengthen their leadership and participation within PUEBLO (PUEBLO, 1999).

A full-time organizer, younger herself, was hired to work specifically with the young people and help them to develop skills necessary to run their own meetings. Because the organizer was also involved in other aspects of the organization, she helped the youth feel more connected to PUEBLO as a whole. PUEBLO also planned intergenerational programs

to provide opportunities for young people and adult members to connect across common issues. For example, they held a dialogue series bringing together members across age to discuss their opinions on a variety of issues facing Oakland. YOU meetings served as a space for youth members to have their own opportunity to dialogue and debate issues. Often the organizer would create training and education opportunities for young people to use their own racial, ethnic, gender, or class lens to discuss issues. YOU's campaigns emerged from youth issues overlapping with social injustices facing people of color, including efforts to increase funding for youth services in Oakland, fight gentrification, fight a proposed charter school, and stop police brutality (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003).

Jovenes Unidos/Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP)—Albuquerque, NM

The Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP) has been a longtime organizing presence in the southwest focusing on social, economic, and environmental justice. Since its inception, young people have participated in the organization, and young people and adults regularly gather together at SWOP functions. Seeking to be more intentional about their youth involvement in the mid-1990s, SWOP formed Jovenes Unidos to develop a new generation of leaders and involve them more centrally in the organization. Over the years, young people have worked in the cultural and political realms, producing several plays and launching campaigns against police brutality, racial profiling, and improving their schools (SWOP, 1999).

Jovenes Unidos was staffed by a SWOP organizer, often a former youth member of SWOP, and became a space for young people to discuss political issues, prepare for campaigns, learn about Chicano history and culture, and develop organizing skills. This education program drew on the expertise of adult SWOP members, many of who had been movement leaders for decades.

Youth Force—South Bronx, NY

Youth Force was founded by young people and for young people in the mid-1990s to serve young people and create community change in the South Bronx neighborhood of New York City. Youth Force stood in stark contrast to many other social service agencies and juvenile detention centers that populated the South Bronx area. Instead of seeing young

people as problems or victims, Youth Force saw young people as citizens and established a Democracy Multiplied Zone in the neighborhood with the goal of strengthening the role of young people in the community (Youth Force, 1999).

Young people were involved in all aspects of the organization, including serving on the board of directors, as committee heads, and staff. Youth Force often reached out to work in coalitions on issues such as to reducing the number of juvenile detention centers and improving education for youth. For example, Youth Force partnered with other citywide organizations in its “No New Beds” campaign to conduct rallies, meet with city officials, and push for changes in the juvenile detention system (Checkoway, Figueroa, & Richards-Schuster, 2003).

ELEMENTS OF CRITICAL MULTICULTURAL PRACTICE: BUILDING ON LIFTING NEW VOICES

While the LNV organizations in no way serve as perfect examples for critical multicultural practice, lessons can be drawn from their efforts to alter their organizational structures and cultures to become more fully inclusive organizations. We thus offer these examples to illuminate potential practice ideas, with the caveat that they are limited in their scope and information. It is important to note that we do not think that multicultural organizing is a unique or separate field—all organizing efforts face the challenge of bringing people together across differences, and an intentional approach within a multicultural framework can help groups do so more effectively. Five elements that appear to provide helpful “building blocks” for the LNV groups include: (1) forming inclusive leadership and organizational structures, (2) developing “bridge-building” leaders, (3) strengthening education programs, (4) creating spaces for informal social interactions, and (5) working on cross-cutting issues through a coalition framework.

Forming Inclusive Organizational Structures that Pay Attention to Differences

Social justice movements are enhanced by the development of democratic and inclusive organizations that build a mass membership and seek the full participation of those involved. In practice, this means challenging the insistence of our dominant political traditions that

differences be restricted to the private sphere and finding ways to recognize the differences people bring to our organizations rather than asking them to “check them at the door” (Taylor, 1994). At a formal decision-making level, the LNV groups use a variety of consensus models and employ facilitation methods designed to elicit as much participation as possible from members.

Often LNV groups sought to become more inclusive by putting young people in decision-making roles within the organization. For example, PUEBLO created youth representation on the Board of Directors and renewed efforts to increase intergenerational interaction and youth-adult collaboration. Similarly, SWOP involved young people as junior staff within the organization, which enabled their voices to be heard in programming decisions and ensured that youth members had a vote on organizational decisions. Youth Force went furthest toward putting a “youth run” ideology in practice. The voting membership was made up of youth under age 18 and decided issues such as the overall program direction, funding opportunities, hiring decisions, and outreach to the community and the press. Additionally, youth served as staff members and comprised 51% of the management team, which met weekly to help implement the day-to-day infrastructure for the organization (Youth Force, 1999).

While involving new voices in decision making and organizational management is one way to build inclusive organizations, it is also important to address power differences within the organization, which sometimes may mean creating separate spaces for new leaders to develop. For example, DARE brought youth and adults together in the START campaign to improve the Providence public schools in ways that tried to balance their power. One effective strategy was asking young people to take the lead in planning and leading campaign meetings. To prepare for this task, the young people met twice a week for trainings, discussion, and agenda planning, giving them space to grow and bond, as well as ensuring that they were ready to hold their own in meetings with adult members (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003). Years before, DARE had used a similar model to bring Latinos into what had been a primarily African American organization—setting up a separate *Comité Latino* for five years until Latino members felt they were sufficiently established in the larger organization (Toney, 1996).

Other scholars have suggested that creating parallel youth-only spaces alongside integrated youth-adult structures within an organization is effective in engaging young people, and many movements have a

tradition of encouraging members to organize internal caucuses to balance power differentials between members and build leadership capacity within traditionally excluded groups (Keleher & Morita, 2004). Inclusivity and the recognition of power differentials is essential to building a critical multicultural organization because it enables new voices to be at the table at the same time that it provides opportunities for those new voices to have the skills and support to be integral components of the organization. In building across differences, organizations need to concentrate on how to include new perspectives in a meaningful way that strengthen their voices rather than marginalize or diffuse them.

Finding and Developing “Bridge-Building” Leaders and Staff

Organizers always keep their eyes open for potential leaders, and the skill of connecting with a wide range of people is one of the most important leadership traits in multicultural settings. One of the key lessons from LNV organizations was the role of staff members who served as “bridges” between various constituencies and helped negotiate across and between differences. Gary Delgado (1998) theorizes that people of color, people with disabilities, gay and lesbian people, first-generation immigrants, and others who “don’t exactly fit” are particularly able to balance these tensions and respond flexibly to new situations. He emphasizes their ability to “see sideways”—across and through difference and similarity—and to integrate the knowledge of many cultures from their unique position.

Many of the LNV groups hired organizers to work solely with the youth. These organizers helped the young people strengthen their leadership and organizing capacity and, at the same time, helped the adult members and other staff understand the work of the youth and find ways to infuse youth voice throughout the organization. These organizers were often not much older than the young people themselves, and many had been youth members of the organization before being hired. The demographics of the organizers reflected the youth membership, which helped to create a natural buy-in and connection for the youth (Grossman, 2001). All of the organizers were young adults of color themselves, most were women, several were immigrants or first-generation U.S. residents, some were gay or lesbian, and most were bilingual. This natural relationality helped to create a space where young people felt comfortable developing their own skills and learning from the other youth participants. “When you are [an organizer working with young people],”

explained one of them, “you have to stay in concert with young people, listen to young people, watch their dress, catch their slang” (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003).

The organizers all worked passionately to strengthen youth voice in the organization, which won the loyalty of the youth membership. When young people felt that they had an ally, they would be more likely to come to meetings, engage in actions, and participate in the organization as a whole. At the same time, these staff members related to others in the organization that had not always recognized the importance of youth participation. Sometimes they had to “make the case” for why youth voice was needed, and at other times, they had to help adults recognize their own privilege and power within the organization. In some instances, organizers led trainings for adults on how to work with young people in nonoppressive ways (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003).

Developing leaders to help people negotiate across difference and forge commonalities is critical for fostering true multiculturalism. Integrating and cultivating new voices and perspectives within an organization is difficult and requires having individuals who can connect with multiple groups and help bring them together in ways that enable them to do their best work. These organizers need to be well prepared to continually push the individuals and groups they work with beyond their comfort zones—while they may “meet people where they’re at,” they also help them explore new ideas and actions (Calpotura & Fellner, 1996). Participation in a range of different movements, being a member of various identity groups reflected in the organization’s membership, and the ability to speak multiple languages (both literally and metaphorically) are some cues organizations looking to hire a bridge-building organizer might look for.

Strengthening Education Programs to Include Diversity and Intergroup Dialogue

Education programs can help people learn about one another and their differences in order to strengthen their overall work. A critical multicultural approach would emphasize enabling participants to explore issues of power, privilege, race, gender, and sexual orientation from both a personal perspective and larger institutional context. Organizations can contribute to this process by creating formal and informal opportunities for people to reflect on their experiences, infusing energy into change efforts, building relationships, and creating opportunities to examine and clarify ideas.

Each of the LNV groups conducted workshops about how the world is structured by power relationships, as well as how these structures can be changed. For example, DARE developed training segments on capitalism, gender and sexuality, and social change, and actively connected the work of the youth members to historical movements for social justice throughout the world—a version of history that is not often taught in schools. Youth Force developed a Street University—a series of workshops, trainings, activities, and events aimed at providing youth in the neighborhood a chance to build skills and develop their political consciousness. The classes ranged from topics such as “The Sweatshop Economy That Rules the World of the Poor and How We Contribute to It” to “The History of Public Education, Why It Was Created and Who Does It Benefit?” Most used a lens of diversity to examine how different identities connect to a larger institution and how to use experience for changing the system (Checkoway, Figueroa, & Richards-Schuster, 2003).

In 2001, SWOP instituted a formal, 8-week training program for youth members to complement ongoing political education during meetings. These weekend trainings typically involved discussions on the history of civil rights movements, environmental justice and racism, tools for direct action, and public speaking or media outreach. During one weekend, young people learned the philosophy behind direct action organizing and then used their knowledge to plan a mock direct action at a local hotel during an “in the field” session. The training “helped establish a stronger connection with the organizations as well as the social justice movement” and “integrate[d] youth into the organization as a whole” (Richards-Schuster, 2005). Youth participants who successfully complete the training became youth organizers at SWOP and served a summer internship working with experienced practitioners to gain hands-on skills in youth-led campaigns.

Critical multiculturalism tries to move beyond simply accepting cultural differences to explore how they are linked to struggles over the material conditions that structure everyday life. To understand and value our traditions but avoid static conservatism, we need frameworks that help us understand our cultures as the historical product of struggles, rather than something automatically deposited in us. While belonging to a certain racial or gender group makes it likely that we will have similar experiences as other members of that group based on our common relationships to systems of oppression and privilege, our identities are simultaneously something that we each take up as individuals (Young, 1995). Intergroup dialogues can play a role in developing this sort of

flexible critical consciousness. YOU raised issues of homophobia and ethnic and cultural differences before they presented themselves as conflicts. YOU also utilized games and activities to help young people interact and have fun while analyzing oppression and power relationships. For example, while playing “YOU baseball,” young people answered questions at different difficulty levels about PUEBLO, Oakland, racism, and capitalism, while the “Gentrification Treasure Hunt” sent them out into their neighborhoods to document examples of gentrification such as “trendy stores, yuppies, and too many cops,” to provide a lived experience from which to explore the relationship of class, race, and age.

Discussing cultural differences can, of course, be challenging. Often, activities bring up sensitive topics and require members to challenge their own ideas. However, these conversations about volatile issues are integral to learning how to work with and learn from difference. Most groups tend to avoid such discussions because of the potential for conflict, so organizers often need to jump-start the discussion and make sure all members feel welcome and respected (Anner, 1996). Well-facilitated discussions about differences of culture or opinion within the organization often surface feelings or conversations that already exist and can build solidarity by resolving these submerged conflicts and helping members connect on a human level.

Creating Spaces to Find Common Ground Through Informal Social Interactions

Along with formal education programs, organizations also create spaces where members can find common ground through informal social interactions. Through informal dialogue and debate, individuals can come to appreciate their different perspectives, experiences, and backgrounds and learn to build on those differences in the change-making process. For example, during 2001, PUEBLO held a series of intergenerational dialogues around issues such as social justice and political education, the history of Oakland, and the war in Afghanistan. Youth and adults discussed their different perspectives and ideas and learn to find ways to build common connections. These shared experiences helped PUEBLO members gradually build a uniquely intergenerational space where people of all ages together fight for social justice in their communities (Aragon, 2001). Similarly, in 2003, SWOP began holding summer *tardeatas*—afternoon barbecues that brought youth and adult members together to eat, talk, and hang out. These *tardeatas* provided an opportunity for youth and adults to discuss issues of social justice, share their perspectives, and

ultimately helped to strengthen intergenerational relationships within the organization. As one adult leader described, “they bring in the experience (of the youth) and issues that can be incorporated into the organization and fought for in a united way . . . then we have an intergenerational exchange” (Richards-Schuster, 2005).

Much of the development of critical consciousness in these groups can be traced to physical settings like sitting around in a lounge or at an art workshop, where young people are simultaneously comfortable and pushing their own boundaries. For example, Youth Force’s office functioned as an informal community center where members would stop by and hang out, surrounded by shelves full of histories of social movements, writings by Frederick Douglas, Frantz Fanon, Paulo Freire, and others (Richards-Schuster, 2005). SWOP’s office, in what used to be a house, served as a gathering space for community meals. One African American YOU member described the intercultural effects of having informal space for hanging out, explaining “I would never really be kicking it with Mexicans or Asians if it wasn’t for [YOU]” (Aragon, 2001).

Through these informal opportunities for interaction, the LNV organizations provided spaces for different groups to informally learn from one another, establish norms of respect, dialogue, and get to know one another. Over time this helped LNV groups to openly acknowledge differences within, challenge stereotypes, and create their language and customs that make everyone feel respected. Across sites, they compared their groups to families and the importance of building respectful relationships between members that can sustain them past disagreements.

Working on Cross-Cutting Issues Through a Coalition Framework

All organizing efforts work on issues that are of concern to their members; however, some issues can provide a common denominator to bring together individuals from different perspectives. In some cases, this can be across constituencies within an organization, or it can mean organizations working together in coalitions. In either case, such cross-fertilization provides the potential for enrichment and transformation of individual and group perspectives (Ichiyo, 1993).

For example, YOU’s fight against Mayor Jerry Brown’s proposed military charter school in Oakland brought YOU together with a coalition of groups that would not normally work together. Older, mostly White, peace activists from organizations like the American Friends Service

Committee and the Central Committee of Conscientious Objectors came together with youth from groups such as Asians and Pacific Islanders for Reproductive Health, Asian and Pacific Islander Youth Promoting Advocacy and Leadership. The participation of the adult groups made it the first of YOU's campaigns in which young people and adults worked side-by-side for change, and, though challenging at times, the process led to insights and connections between the participants, with YOU members gaining insight into global peace issues and the older pacifists better understanding the constraints on the lives of poor youth of color (Aragon, 2001).

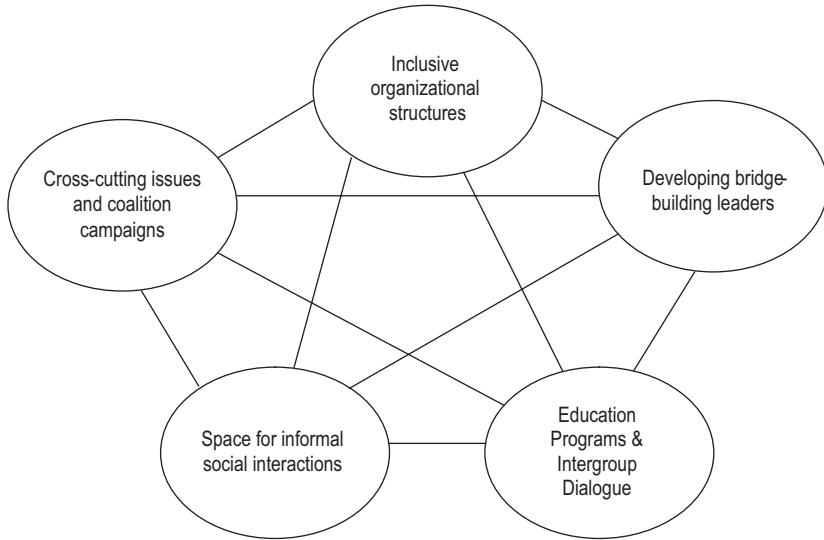
Similarly, Youth Force was a core member of the "No New Beds" coalition, which campaigned against a proposed plan to spend \$65 million to create 2000 new juvenile beds in New York City. Their search for positive alternatives was continued with Youth Agenda, a coalition of 120 community organizations working for public policies that promote education, employment, housing, and health care services that benefit young people. Youth Force members worked with people from across the city at marches, rallies, letter-writing campaigns, and advocacy days at city hall and the state house (Checkoway, Figueroa, & Richards-Schuster, 2003). Even within a single organization, finding cross-cutting issues and framing them in ways that attract a broad base of support can strengthen the effort. For example, DARE's work around the schools brought parents, students, and teachers together around common issues. When youth framed the issue of the lack of toilet paper in their schools as a civil rights and education issue, parents and sympathetic teachers rallied around the youth and worked with them to fight the issue.

Bernice Johnson Reagon (1983) has proposed thinking of all social change efforts as coalition work because the idea of a coalition explicitly allows people to retain their original identities while working together as part of a larger whole. Whether across or within organizations, a coalition-building framework can illuminate differences and conflict between constituencies within organizations, help activists find unity in diversity, and create a healthy setting for democratic discourse (Bystydzienski & Schacht, 2001). Anyone who has been part of a negotiation process knows that the internal debates that go into platform development are often as intense as anything that happens at the bargaining table. Having these discussions, with space to play out and potentially "transform" conflicts, is the single best predictor of longevity and goal achievement in movement coalitions (Chavis, 2001; Rochon & Meyer, 1997).

As we suggested in the anecdote at the start of this article, such emotionally charged discussions are vital sources and indicators of

solidarity within organizations as well. Indeed, vibrant interactions with some friction seem to be precisely the spaces in which organizations and coalitions are transformed into “more than the sum of their parts.” As represented by Figure 1, these practices are all interconnected, implying that change efforts might best take place slowly across all dimensions rather than one at a time. The literature has shown that change efforts often fail because they focus too much on either structure or culture rather than the ways each reinforces the other (Bate, Khan, & Pye, 2000).

FIGURE 1. Five Building Blocks of Multicultural Organizing.



CONCLUSION: THE FURTHER DEVELOPMENT OF MULTICULTURAL ORGANIZING AND COALITION BUILDING

Although “multicultural organizing” has emerged as a distinct area of practice and scholarship, it is not readily distinguishable on the ground from “good organizing.” Monocultural organizations—whose members have no differences across race, class, gender, age, or sexuality—do not exist in the real world; all organizing requires the negotiation of differences and could be called “multicultural.” However, recent work on multicultural

organizing provides more than a trendy new label but reflects a new perspective on the core questions of organizing for social justice. The creation of solidarity is an immensely complex process that begins (but does not end) when people come together to construct common ground from which to take collective action. Too often, it has been treated as a “black box” by organizers and theorists alike, and the ability of movements to bring people together across difference has suffered as a result. Critical multiculturalism represents a theoretical attempt to come to terms with the lessons of past movements and apply them to the present moment. This article documents how one group of community organizations searching for practical solutions has arrived at similar conclusions. While their experiences certainly do not suggest a “cookie cutter” approach, organizations might consider evaluating themselves by asking a set of questions raised by this article:

- How do we pay attention to the differences within our membership in terms of organizational structure and leadership development?
- Do we explicitly search for “bridge-building” staff by looking beyond the usual suspects and valuing experience in a wide range of movements and venues?
- What are we doing to help our current leaders and staff become better bridge builders?
- Does our internal education program help people learn to discuss their cultural differences, link them to material conditions, and find common ground?
- Are we creating welcoming (physical and metaphorical) spaces for people to “hang out” and get to know each other?
- When working in coalitions, to what extent do rank-and-file members develop meaningful connections with members of other organizations and movements?

Academics could also play a role in the development of coalitional multicultural organizing. This article has highlighted the continuities between a group of youth organizing efforts and critical multiculturalists working in separate arenas. Researchers and organizers working together directly on projects could provide even more insights and hone the practice model more than is possible in this initial effort. Those based in universities can help develop political education and reflection opportunities to help people understand how difference and unity work within their organization. Studies of how organizations develop and implement new

models of solidarity would help better understand organizational change efforts and the challenges facing them. A chicken-and-egg problem emerges for efforts to move toward this approach. Organizational change efforts tend to succeed in high-trust environments, but most groups struggle to build strong bonds across differences—what kinds of interventions might be successful sparking such substantial changes, which will then hopefully foster stronger relationships? Finally, collaborative work by activists and academics could shed light on questions of how real people negotiate differences and develop identities in the intensely multicultural settings often found in social justice organizations.

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