

Does Community Organising empower or oppress?

Jayne Mills and
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explore some of
the equalities
issues around
Community
Organising

Currently there is huge renewed interest in the community organiser (CO) model widely heralded as radical and as the approach which helped carry Barack Obama into the White House against all the odds.

Given this apparently radical pedigree, some may wonder why the present Government has included this approach in its Big Society vision. This article sets out to show that community organising can lend itself to conservative and pluralist purposes and thereby can be used to reinforce, rather than transform economic and social inequalities. The article draws upon a case study of CO training delivered by The Gamaliel Foundation in the North East of England to demonstrate that unless it is underpinned by a framework of equality and social justice, the model has the potential to damage individuals and deepen divisions in communities.

The community organising model has its origins in the work of Saul Alinsky, a writer, activist and organiser, in the American Mid-West during the 1930s through to the 1960s. Alinsky organised poor communities, notably the 'Back of the Yards' community and founded a Community Organiser Training School, the Industrial Areas Foundation. Working largely in poor communities, although later with disaffected middle classes, Alinsky

built alliances and activated community and faith-based organisations, and labour unions. The Gamaliel Foundation (GF) is one of several organisations in the USA that has continued and built on the community organising tradition. The GF has a particularly strong focus in faith-based organising and is beginning to establish itself as a training agency for CO in the UK, where one of the sites of interest is the North East of England.

In the UK the community organising model is finding an enthusiastic audience emanating from the political language being used to describe the implementation of the Big Society. Many people of political, social and faith-based conscience have been disturbed by their inability to halt or slow down the widening social divide: namely the increasing exclusion of the poor from equal access to decent services and life chances; the demise of the voluntary and community sector, and the erosion of organised opposition to these trends. The latter including the dilution, distortion and appropriation of community development values and principles regarding social justice and equality. For some, the radical rhetoric of the CO model is perceived as a lifeline in a sea of despair – offering to release a powerful new force to fight for long overdue social justice.

Is it not curious, then, that a model with such a radical reputation should



be so warmly heralded by David Cameron as one of the pillars of his 'Big Society'? We would argue that, contrary to popular rhetoric, community organising is actually being harnessed to support a conservative model of community development with no critical analysis of the over-arching dominant economic and social framework, and an emphasis on self-help and self-financing. Alinsky's mantra of 'don't do for the poor what they can do for themselves' resonates with Cameron's rationale for cutting services to the poor, which, in his view, leads to dependency on the state.

Although having a number of localised successes such as the campaign in New York to pressure Eastman Kodak, the largest employer, to hire more African Americans, Alinsky's track record shows that in his lifetime his model was not widely successful.ⁱⁱ Some question whether the model is actually radical in practice, and argue that it is

fundamentally pluralistic because it has tended to leave capitalist control of economic infrastructure largely unchallenged.ⁱⁱⁱ The community organising model has been widely criticised because of an absence of analysis of how inequality is reproduced and maintained through the existing economic and social structures and processes. Indeed Alinsky makes clear that it is an ideologically and morally relative model, having a flexible standpoint related to where the shifting sands of power might be. In 'Rules for Radicals' he identified Lucifer as 'the first radical known to man who rebelled against the establishment and did it so effectively that at least he won his own kingdom'.

Some of us who have attended community organising training run by the Gamaliel Foundation are concerned by insights into how it could be used as a tool to oppress vulnerable individuals and marginalised groups. Methods used by the trainers included

bombardment of the participants with insults (on occasion personal and psychological), and even shouting into the faces of individuals. In a demonstration of the organising method called 'one-to-ones', the details of an individual's personal life and relationships were publicly explored – an uncomfortable experience for both participants and observers. One participant (who left part way through the training) observed that 'anyone with low self-esteem could end up feeling very upset by the teaching methods used by this training'^{iv} – hardly endemic of the intrinsic values of equality, respect, social justice and anti-oppressive practice that many community development practitioners have struggled for so many years to protect.

We are concerned that this version of the community organising training may be being presented as suitable for those who are prepared to be challenged and who are strong or brave enough to cope with it. Such value-laden messages may discourage participants from complaining or removing themselves from an abusive situation for fear of being labelled weak. In doing so, they could do a great disservice to those who have historically borne the brunt of the control that is the culmination of the culture created by this approach (e.g. women, children and those of non-white ethnicity). The CO model has long been criticised by feminist community development thinkers because of its failure to incorporate the personal in its analysis of the political or to analyse how power works at a micro level to maintain the status quo'. Parallel criticisms have been levelled by anti-racist thinkers.^v

Alinsky did not rule out any particular means if it achieved his particular ends. GF takes this one step further by arguing that although the personal is relevant in terms of identifying self-interest, it has no place in the 'real external world' where to display emotion is 'manipulative', and to respond to it is 'co-dependent'. This combination of 'rules' has potentially sinister connotations that could lead to the isolation of vulnerable individuals and dehumanisation of particular groups in communities whose needs and interests may be perceived by the dominant to be in conflict with 'the common good.' An example used to illustrate the 'success' of the community organising model in the North East involved young people perceived to be engaging in 'anti-social behaviour' being negatively targeted by adults in the community and increased surveillance placed upon them. Questions about how the CO model was addressing the marginalisation of these young people were angrily dismissed by the trainers and some of the participants.

Experience of this CO training raises critical questions for community development in relation to the GF's 'personal transformation' approach: Is it acceptable to employ oppressive means to achieve the stated aims of building power through organising people and money? Is it ethical to use personal and psychological insights about individuals to challenge their sense of self? How can we ensure that agencies providing CO training are primarily accountable to the communities they are working in and are not serving their own or different self-interests?

There is no doubt that the resurgence

in the community organising model is giving hope and renewed energy to community development activists and disadvantaged communities hungry to reclaim power, action and political enfranchisement. However, our experience raises deep concerns that the CO model can be used as a tool to oppress as well as to empower. We are aware that organisations such as Women Acting in Today's Society (WAITS) and Citizens UK have a long track record of using the CO model in the UK and we encourage exploration of the successes of these models in bringing about change for oppressed groups. We also aim to identify which of the CO methods, tools and approaches we can adapt and utilise within an anti-oppressive framework. Ultimately, our aim is to work with others to reclaim the passion, anger, confidence, resources and political edge of a community development practice which works towards social equality and justice through the transformation of structural systems, processes and relationships – for it is herein where radicalism really lies.

References

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