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CORE CONCEPTS FOR COMMUNITY CHANGE

By Barry Checkoway, M.A., Ph.D.

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THE PROGRAM ON CONFLICT MANAGEMENT ALTERNATIVES

The Program on Conflict Management Alternatives was established in January, 1986 by a grant from the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and additional funds from the University of Michigan. These basic grants were renewed in July, 1988 and again in July, 1991. The Program supports an agenda of research, application, and theory development. PCMA also establishes links among other university research and teaching efforts relevant to conflict management alternatives, and maintains liaison and collaboration with similar efforts in other Universities and Practitioner agencies. The Program staffers own work focuses explicitly on the relationship between social justice and social conflict, specifically: (a) the use of innovative settlement procedures and roles for disputants and third parties; (b) the institutionalization of innovative mechanisms and the adoption of organizational and community structures that permanently alter the way conflicts are managed; and (c) the fundamental differences and inequalities between parties that often create conflict and threaten its stable resolution.

We examine these issues primarily in United States' settings, in conflicts arising within and between families, organizations and communities, and between different racial, gender, and economic constituencies. These specific efforts are supported by a variety of research and action grants/contracts with governmental agencies, foundations, and private and public organizations/agencies.

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CORE CONCEPTS FOR COMMUNITY CHANGE

Barry Checkoway

Core concepts are abstract ideas generalized from particular situations. They reduce such situations to their fundamentals, expressing their basic elements in a few summary words. When used in reference to fields like community change, they take on some of the qualities of "praxis principles" with potential to integrate information about "thought" and "action" in a new combination.

Core concepts can serve positive purposes for community change. First, they can form the basis for decisions about actions to take in the community. When people are faced with a decision among various possibilities, for example, core concepts can provide a reminder of purpose or an expression of vision that helps clarify the choice.

Second, they can cause an awakening that is truly transformational. Amidst the routine confusion of everyday events, people suddenly put the pieces together and make sense of their situation in a new way. When people "see" an underlying concept that sheds new light on their lives, it can "change their world" and motivate them for new forms of social action. In some cases, this awakening can be revolutionary (Fanon 1968; Friere 1970; Gatt-Fly 1983).

Where do core concepts come from? Ideally, people establish their own principles through a process in which they themselves participate. However, many principles instead come as traditions from the past, tenets from ideological movements, or commands from beneficent or repressive regimes. Such concepts may have power behind them, but their authority is always arguable when they do not derive from the people themselves.

Educators and trainers often communicate core concepts as a form of "do this!" knowledge with or without having a scientific basis for their statements. Some people are eager to have this type of expert information, but the potential for empowerment is greater when people think for themselves rather than to depend upon professionals. When practice wisdom derives from collective reflection, it reappropriates knowledge and promotes participation in the community (Brown 1993; Gaventa 1988).

Following are some core concepts for community change. They are based on research and practice in rural and urban communities in industrial countries and developing areas worldwide. If you question these concepts, or substitute your own, my purpose will be served.

STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY

Community is a process of people acting collectively with others who share some common concern. This is not the only meaning of the term, which also refers to a place where people live, or a group of people with similar interests, or relationships which have social cohesion or continuity in time. These other meanings may find expression in the process, but they are not the process itself (Checkoway 1991; Suttles 1972).

Strengthening community can take various forms, such as organizing a group for social action, planning a local program, or developing a neighborhood service. As long as people are acting collectively, then the process is taking place. Used this way, community is more than a noun or adjective, but also a verb that refers to the process as well as its product. Perhaps a better term for the process is not community, but "community-building."

Community is one of several levels of intervention in society. For example, there are personal or interpersonal interventions with individuals and families; organizational approaches to leadership and management of institutions; and macroscale efforts to influence public policy in the larger society. Community interventions are the ones that take collective action and mediate between the individual and the society. Community is an important level of intervention, but it is not the only one.

Community-building is facilitated or limited by the unit that is selected for change (Eng 1988). Emphasis is often placed on the community as a spatial unit or physical place --- such as a village or a neighborhood --- whose boundaries facilitate or limit the organizing process. Some analysts argue that place is being replaced by "community without propinquity," facilitated by transportation or telecommunications technology enabling some people to join together in nonspatial ways (Catalfo 1993; Webber 1963). Nonspatial community is contingent upon access to technology, whereas place remains important to those whose resources are limited.

Some people care about the "general welfare" of the "community as a whole." Looking down from the municipal building, for example, they identify issues whose resolution will presumably benefit the whole community. However, most

communities are not monolithic; they include various groups whose differences call for more multicultural forms of intervention. People who care about the whole community often care about no one community and benefit some segments more than others (Erlich and Rivera 1992; Heskin and Heffner 1987).

Community-building also has limitations as a form of intervention. First, there are personal crises that require immediate action by an experienced professional. It is as inappropriate for individuals to take some of their personal troubles to a community meeting, as it is for community groups to seek solace for neighborhood problems in the office of a psychotherapist. Second, communities vary in their levels of readiness for change. Some "healthy" or "competent" communities create change with fervor, whereas others lack resources or are unsure how to proceed (Cottrell 1983; Iscoe 1974; Lackey 1987). Third, even the healthiest communities may have difficulties influencing the larger society in which it operates. Local communities should not be expected to solve problems whose causes lie elsewhere, or whose solutions are beyond their reach.

However, the forces which limit community-building do not diminish its significance as a "unit of solution" in the world (Steuart 1993). Indeed, obstacles are a normal part of the change process, and successful efforts to overcome

them amplify its potential as a form of intervention. What is your community? What is your unit of solution?

JOINING TOGETHER, IN SOLIDARITY

Imagine a series of "stick figure" drawings moving across a piece of paper. First there is a person standing alone, then the person is talking with two others, and then the three are bringing a group together in front of a hut in the village. Suddenly the whole group comes to life. They are alive with emotion, everyone wanting to speak in animated fashion. There is energy that could lead to a new level of collective action. It is like a fire whose combined ingredients give light and warmth; the fire starts with a single match, and burns because the twigs catch alight and the logs fuel the flame (Hope and Timmel 1984).

The concept is that a number of people joining together in solidarity can accomplish more than one person acting alone. It is the notion of "collective action," "strength in unity," or the Swahili term Harambee, "joining together."

Joining together helps people to realize that their individual problems have social causes and collective solutions. As individuals unite in solidarity, they reduce their isolation and interact with others in ways that have psychosocial benefits and contribute to their perceived and

real power (Bandura 1982; Checkoway et al. 1988). This does not devalue the importance of individual initiative, but instead recognizes the strength that comes from joining together.

Solidarity can build upon common concerns which arise from a place in which people live or work, or from preexisting social or cultural characteristics such as race or gender. These characteristics have potential for solidarity, but are insufficient in the absence of joining together. People who share common concerns still need some sort of process to make them salient for the purpose of community-building.

GETTING ORGANIZED

Community change can start with unplanned actions or random events, but it is only when people get organized that lasting change takes place.

"Getting organized" is the process by which people develop some sort of structure for joining together over time. It takes its most basic expression when individuals form into a coherent unity and establish a mechanism for systematic planning and limited effort. This "organizing moment" is a key dynamic in the process of community change (Biddle and Biddle 1965).

"Organizing" is the process by which individuals work together to accomplish more than any one of them acting along (Kahn 1991; Kendall 1991; Rubin and Rubin 1992; Staples 1984). It is illustrated by an image of individuals isolated together in a row of small cramped cells, then pushing against the walls that separate them, then breaking through the walls and touching others, and finally standing strong with their arms linked together in a single unit (Speeter 1978). This process transcends time and place, and finds its expression in sayings worldwide, such as in Mauritania: "Two eyes see better than one" or Madagascar: "Cross the river in a crowd, and the crocodile won't eat you" or Ethiopia: "When spider webs unite, they can tie up the lion" (Hope and Timmel 1984).

Organizing is an empowering process which enhances psychosocial well-being. It enables individuals to increase their individual coping capacity, personal confidence, and feelings of control. Its therapeutic effects are especially important for individuals whose alienation keeps them from organizing on their own behalf, or whose displacement causes them to "blame themselves" for the forces acting upon them (Minkler 1990; Rappaport 1987; Ryun 1976; Zimmerman 1993).

Organizing builds collective capacity and a "sense of community." Strategy can include stages in which people

form groups to win victories on initial issues which enable them to strengthen their structural and to take on more major issues. In one community, people organize to halt an expressway from encroaching on their area, form an areawide coalition of organizations, and plan programs of their own. In another community, they organize to protest slum landlords, rehabilitate abandoned housing, and develop services responsive to local needs. Sense of community is a catalyst for participation (Chavis and Wandersman 1990; McMillan and Chavis 1986).

"Organization" is the structure established for organizing over the long haul. It may include forms of problem-solving and program-planning, goal-setting and decision-making, role-definition and team-building, administrative structuring and organizational development. It may be informal or formal, collectivist or bureaucratic, horizontal or vertical, depending upon the situation.

What is the appropriate organizational form for community change? Will it differ among rich and poor, Black and White, men and women? There is no single answer to these questions, except that good practice fits the appropriate form to the particular situation.

STARTING WITH PEOPLE

A central tenet of community change is that it should start with people who have concerns and who know what they want to accomplish. The premise is that people are the best judge of their own situation, and that the process should originate in the experience of the people themselves (Tweeten and Brinkman 1976).

As part of their training, professionals learn how to assess the needs of their clients. For example, social workers take courses which teach techniques in how to approach their target populations, conduct interviews and ask questions about their lives, and gather information for diagnosis and intervention. The belief is that accurate information on client needs will make professionals more responsive to the people they serve.

However, needs assessment by providers for the purpose of service delivery is different from participatory assessment for the purpose of community change. Many methods of assessment are available, only some of which actively involve the community in the process. These methods take time and lack status of those that treat respondents like human subjects --- but they do start with the people themselves (Eng and Blanchard 1991; Marti-Costa and Serrano-Garcia 1987).

Also, the usual focus on the needs of people carries the risk of ignoring their substantial strengths, and making them dependent upon the professionals who assess and define their capacity. Endless emphasis on the deficits of people may result in losses of self-esteem or "learned helplessness" in which they feel unable to do things that otherwise are within their grasp (Garber and Seligman 1980). It is especially important to appreciate the strengths of communities whose overemphasis on their disadvantages can cause them to lose confidence in themselves (McKnight and Kretzman n.d.).

Are people the best judge of their own situation?

Werner and Bower (1983) draw two pictures, one of an expert standing over a respondent and asking preconceived questions listed on a clipboard, the other of villagers sitting together and discussing their common interests with the help of an indigenous facilitator from the village. The caption reads: "For local health workers and their communities, the need is not to gather information.... but to gather everyone together and look at what they already know."

Do people know what they want and what is best for themselves, including their actual needs and potential strengths? Democratic ideology says that the people are sovereign in this type of knowledge. But if consciousness

is a social construction that results from the form of a given society --- and if people's expressed beliefs are not always of their own making --- then what? Or if people have consciousness which may be viewed as harmful to them --- such as the villagers who believe that their children's worms are caused by angry gods rather than by bacteria in the water, or the residents who attribute neighborhood decline to their own cultural flaws rather than to disinvestment by the banks --- then what?

DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP

Who are the people? Are they the ordinary citizens, as in the Aristotelian sense that "the people at large should be sovereign rather than the few best"? This view gives primacy to the role of the average person, assumes that they are --- or are becoming more --- equal in their participation, and looks to the grassroots as the foundation for change (Kasperson and Breitbart 1974).

Or are they the community leaders, such as the elected members of the town council or the officers of the neighborhood association? The politics of leadership is an admission of inequality rather than a reaffirmation of full participation, but it recognizes the role of representation, and is the prevalent form of democracy in the world today. Real leaders are indigenous and accountable representatives

of the people whom they serve rather than the ones who are assigned to them from the outside (Pitkin 1969).

Where are the leaders of the community? They are found by their formal positions in established institutions, although formal leaders are not always the real ones; by their reputations in getting things done, although perceptions of leadership are subject to change; by their influence in important decisions, although each decision may have its own patterns of influence; or by the scope of their participation, although the extent of participation is not necessarily a measure of its impact. It is possible to find them among the poorest people in the world, although this infrastructure is not readily accessible to outsiders (Tait et al n.d.; Werner and Bower 1983).

Which types of leaders are best? Should the leader be "authoritarian" by making a decision and announcing it to the community; or "consultative" by identifying the alternatives and asking the community for its input; or "enabling" by helping the community to identify its issues and facilitating its decisions? Again, the answers will vary with the situation (Hope and Timmel 1984).

How can a community develop new leaders? This question is so fundamental that most communities tend to ignore it. Instead, they tend to appropriate leadership by promoting

people who already hold positions in established institutions and who, as a result, are either unrepresentative of the community or unable to invest time for the job. However, community change offers opportunities to develop new leaders rather than to appropriate old ones --- to identify people with potential and encourage them to lead (Checkoway 1981).

AGENTS OF CHANGE

Community change has a history of voluntary action that arises from "the hearts and minds of the people," including indigenous individuals who emerge spontaneously and facilitate the process through their commitment to social values rather than through the promise of remuneration. Most of the world's great change-agents --- such as Jesus Christ or Mahatma Ghandi --- have been volunteers.

Recent years have witnessed an increase in the number of people with professional careers as agents of community change. This role is emerging in different ways in different areas --- for example, promotura de salud, community organizer, adult educator, cultural worker, social animator --- that together recognize some of the professional expertise and technical skills that are needed. In one or another area they can create community change. They can enter a community, bring people together, and build

a powerful organization. They can formulate an action strategy, build support for implementation, and generate one project from another.

There also are support networks that strengthen the work of change-agents. These networks include institutions with funding for proposals, communications vehicles to facilitate information exchange, interorganizational coalitions to develop alliances, and training programs to build community capacity. These networks are instrumental in the "resource mobilization" of some agents of change (Berger and Neuhaus 1977; McCarthy and Zald 1973).

One legacy of Saul Alinsky (1969, 1971) was to promote the role of the community organizer as a professional worker. According to Alinsky, community organization took trained workers with technical expertise and special skills. He distinguished among the "organizer," "leader," and "people," and sought to strengthen their collaboration. Professional expertise is no substitute for voluntary action, to be sure, but change-agents can contribute to the process (Horwitt 1989; Reitzes and Reitzes 1980).

SEVERAL STRATEGIES

There are several strategies, skills, and styles of community change. "Strategies" include approaches to

mobilize individuals around issues through highly visible demonstrations, or to organize grassroots groups for social action. They can involve people in policy planning through committees and meetings of government agencies, or advocate for groups by representing them in legislative or other established institutional arenas. They can raise critical consciousness through small group discussions, or develop neighborhood services of their own. These strategies are separable, each with its own empirical basis and practice pattern, but also with mixing and phasing among them (Checkoway 1991; Rothman 1987).

"Skills" include practical tools to enter the community, assess local conditions, and formulate plans for program implementation. They include efforts to make contact with people, bring them together, and form and build organizations. They include efforts to identify and negotiate with decision-makers, relate to other groups in the community, and develop the confidence and competence needed to keep the process going. There are various process models in community work which describe types of basic skills (Henderson and Thomas 1987).

"Styles" affect the manner in which strategies and skills will be received or supported by the community. Conflict style assumes that power is scarce and that confrontation may be necessary for its redistribution;

campaign style assumes that it is possible to persuade people to see things in a particular way; and consensus style assumes that power is abundant and that people are in relative agreement on how to share it (Warren 1972). The selection of a style that fits in the community is sometimes more important than the issues themselves. People who are conflictual or consensual may taking action on an important issue if the tactics are inappropriate to their style.

Strategic choice is a key diagnostic step in various fields of practice. For example, a teacher listens to the classroom discussion and asks an awakening question; a chess player conceptualizes the board and makes a move; and an athlete senses the action on the playing field and finds an opening. Just as these people diagnose their situation and take appropriate action, so too does an agent of community change. And some do it with more or less skill than others (Schon 1983).

Like other fields, community change also has people who misdiagnose their situation and proscribe inappropriate action. For example, they are the ones who convince villagers to pray for forgiveness from the gods when the real cause of problems is the urbanization of the society; or who convince residents of their responsibility to sweep the streets when the real cause of litter is neglect by the

sanitation department. Misdiagnosis can have harmful effects in any practice field.

Selecting an appropriate strategy, skill, or style is central to community change. Some people do it naturally, others learn by trial and error, and others ignore it altogether, although these last are ignorant indeed.

BELIEVING IN CHANGE

Basic to the process of creating change is a belief in its possibility. This belief is instrumental to the process, and also is an end in itself.

Believing in change has an uneven distribution, which Werner and Bower (1983) view as levels on a continuum. At one level are people who strongly believe that change is possible. They perceive that community problems have solutions over which they have control, show confidence in their own ability, and take decisive actions that produce results. These people are relatively few in number and tend to have disproportionate power.

At another level are people who are weaker in their orientation to change. They are aware of community problems, but only periodically try to do something about them. They participate in the community to a limited

extent, but this is only occasional in occurrence. They are many in number and sometimes susceptible to mobilization. When this happens, it can be revolutionary, but it does not happen very often.

At another level are people who do not believe that change is possible. They face problems in their personal lives, but generally do not view them as issues around which to organize. They have informal support from family and friends, but often feel alienated from formal participation in the community. They appear to lack the consciousness needed to create change, although appearances can be deceiving and awakenings can occur when conditions are right.

What explains the differences in beliefs among people? Some analysts attribute them to characteristics of the people themselves, praising or blaming them for their own orientation. Others attribute them to the uneven distribution of resources that permits some people to organize more powerfully than others. Yet others attribute them to institutional patterns of privilege and oppression that discriminate among groups and shape their consciousness, which is not independent but instead results from these patterns. It is tragic when institutions rob people of their spirit and cause them to blame themselves

for situations which are not of their making, but this "false consciousness" is a powerful force in the world.

How can people help others to strengthen their own belief in the possibility of change? Friere (1970) describes a pedagogy in which individuals discuss the root causes of problems and strengthen their capacity for concerted action; Werner and Bower (1983) a process in which the facilitator asks "but why?" questions about the chain of causes and about the specific steps needed to alter the situation; and Horton (1990) a school whose workshops draw people together to identify individual problems and develop collective solutions. For them, community change is an awakening process motivates people for action (Hope and Tisdale 1984).

AN EMPOWERING PROCESS

Empowerment is a multilevel process by which people perceive that they have control over their situation. It can refer to an individual who feels a sense of personal control over his or her life; an organization that engages its members and influences the community of which it is a part; or a community in which individuals and organizations work together to solve problems and create change (Rappaport 1987; Schulz 1993; Zimmerman n.d.).

Some people experience personal transformations as a result of community change. Charles Kieffer (1984) describes several such people and finds that first they feel powerless and alienated from the world ("You feel powerless, you feel helpless."); then an immediate threat or violation of their integrity has sufficient force to spark their initial participation ("No! I'm going to stay here and fight...!"); then they develop supportive relationships with an outside organizer or community counterparts in a collective structure that contributes to a more critical understanding of social and political relations ("It was so important that someone cared enough to be there encouraging me, pushing me...no matter how afraid I was."); then they sharpen their skills and strengthen their sense of themselves in the political process ("All of a sudden I grew up..."); and then finally they view themselves as leaders and search for personally meaningful ways of applying their new abilities and helping others in the community ("It's changed my whole life --- personal, professional, everything. My values have changed. Everything has changed.").

Empowerment is commonly viewed as a process that operates on a single level of practice. Thus some social workers claim that if a person feels empowered, then empowerment has taken place even if the person has no actual influence in the community. However, there is an emerging

notion of empowerment as a process with multiple levels. For example, Gutierrez (1990) reviews the social work literature on empowerment and finds that the goal of empowerment is most often expressed as an increase in personal power, that it tends not to distinguish the individual perception and actual increase in personal power, and that it tends not to reconcile personal and political power. She suggests that the goal of empowerment is not individual but multilevel and concludes: "It is not sufficient to focus only on developing a sense of personal power or working toward social change, but efforts to change should encompass individual, interpersonal, and institutional levels of practice."

Empowerment thus can be viewed as a multilevel process which includes individual involvement, organizational development, and community change. Any one of these elements has potential to serve positive functions. At its best, however, empowerment includes all three of these levels.

MULTICULTURAL, NOT MONOCULTURAL

Community change builds on the notion of community as a form of intervention, but what happens when community is viewed as multicultural?

In a society in which people seem similar in their social or cultural characteristics, or in which a majority group has dominance over minorities, it is possible to understand the existence of "monocultural" institutions which emphasize assimilation, ignore diversity, or permit powerholders from the dominant coalition to promote the status quo (Chesler and Crowfoot 1993; Jackson and Holvino 1988). As society becomes more socially diverse in the number of "other" groups, however, these changes challenge institutions to recognize differences and reformulate their practice.

Multicultural community change is a process which recognizes the differences between groups while also increasing interaction and cooperation among them. It assumes that there are intrapersonal and interpersonal differences among individuals, intracommunity and intercommunity differences among groups, and opportunities for conflict or collaboration among them. Multicultural community change is neither "culturally-sensitive" practice which makes change more responsive of particular groups (Lewis and Gutierrez 1992) nor "anti-oppressive" organizing which mobilizes people to deal with their enemies (Crowfoot and Chesler n.d.), but a new form which recognizes differences and builds bridges at the community level.

When the community is viewed as multicultural, it raises questions about each element of the change process. Does the organization represent the social diversity of the community? Do the leaders show commitment to the multicultural mission? Do meetings facilitate the verbal and nonverbal communications differences among groups? These are the types of questions whose answers require new forms of intervention in most communities.

Multiculturalism is neither "normal" nor "politically correct" in societies where prejudice and discrimination prevail, or where people from the majority coalition use their power to prevent their displacement by the growing number of others. It is problematic when the concept of community does not keep up with changes in society.

WHAT ABOUT YOU?

These core concepts provide perspectives on community change as a process of joining together, in solidarity. It includes efforts at starting where people are, awakening the need for action, and developing a structure for change. It views the community as a unit of solution, and community change as an awakening process based upon several strategies and skills.

These concepts are based on a belief that creating community change is an empowering process. It assumes that power is a present or potential resource in every person or community. There is always another community that can become empowered. The key is for people to recognize and act upon the power or potential that they already have.

Core concepts integrate thought and action in a new combination which contributes to the change process. This may seem simplistic, but many people are quick to react to a crisis rather than to reflect upon their principles first. "Take care of the crisis first" is a common notion in professional practice, but it would be as mistaken to act without thought as it is to reflect without taking action.

People would benefit from developing their own core concepts for community change. The concepts expressed here are one version, and cannot substitute for your own formulation. If you question these concepts or substitute -- which I sincerely hope you will --- your own, my purpose will be served. What are your core concepts for community change?

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CORE CONCEPTS FOR COMMUNITY CHANGE

Strengthening Community

Joining Together, in Solidarity

Getting Organized

Starting with People

Developing Leadership

Agents of Change

Several Strategies

Believing in Change

An Empowering Process

Multicultural, Not Monocultural