

**Community Organizers not Activists: Responding to the
Social and Environmental Justice Movement**

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ABSTRACT

Incorporating community members into public decision-making is essential to reducing the social and environmental disparities suffered by communities of color. This can take the form of authentic involvement or tokenism, in which people are invited to take part of a decision making process, but their interests are not addressed, creating a sense of mistrust. Non-profit organizations are organizing communities of color to reverse this trend and increase authentic participatory action. Yet few of them have been effective at organizing people affected by the unequal distribution of resources. This study examines why community organizers undertake an active role in seeking to address social and environmental justice issues. I conducted interviews with paid organizers working with non-profit organizations in California. These organizations address issues of environmental and social justice in communities of color primarily composed of Hispanics, African-Americans and Asians. I found that organizers consider the social and environmental justice movement as a vehicle within the community that serves to bring people from various races and socioeconomic status together. Nevertheless, the most common motives that drive social and environmental justice organizers are the lack of citizen awareness of justice issues, the absence of power in these communities, disparities of race and income.

KEYWORDS

non-profit organizations, participatory action, life experiences, motives, interviews

INTRODUCTION

Social and environmental disparities in communities of color are linked to socioeconomic status. Environmental justice was born out of the social justice movement and like social justice seeks to engage and create equitable policies that protect the well being of disadvantaged people. Many studies have found that communities of color suffer the burden of unwanted toxic facilities, hazardous working conditions, residential segregation, unaffordable housing, unequal power relations, political misrepresentation, oppression, amongst other problems (Ledwith, 2007 & Petrie, 2006). Participatory action is considered the primary vehicle for mobilizing communities of color into the social and environmental justice movement (Taylor, 2002). Since Arnstein (1969) described the ladders of public participation, a great interest to incorporate community members in public decision-making has developed. As a result, two major components of participatory action have been described: 1) authentic involvement and 2) tokenism. For example, tokenism occurs when the people are invited to take part of a decision making process, but their interests are not addressed, creating a sense of mistrust (Gallagher, 2009). Authentic participatory action is committed to the practice of justice, with the objective of bringing change by binding theory and action and tackling the causes of social injustices (Ledwith, 2007). Showing a commitment to social and environmental change requires a drastic change in the way communities of color are approached and incorporated into the movement.

Community organizers working through non-profit organizations (NPOs) are organizing communities to participate in decision-making and reverse established mistrust and develop means of authentic participatory action for citizens. Pulido (2000) suggests that the efforts to increase community participation in the most vulnerable communities are being made with little success: meanwhile the situation of communities with a long history of environmental burdens, residential segregation, and social injustices persist. (Grineski, 2006). Yet community organizers continue to develop trust in the community and encourage political participation. It is important to determine the reasons that move community organizers to promote social and environmental justice in order to 1) understand how they can be more effective, and/or 2) determine how they can overcome resistance to participation in the community.

Apathy and the absence of education, account for a lack of citizen participation in social and environmental justice politics in many communities of color. Grineski (2006) states that to

make the participatory process more effective it is necessary that the effected communities start seeking out for support from the research academia and other groups interested in their issues. Despite the number of organizations currently working on promoting environmental and social justice, few have been effective at organizing people outside the issues of superfund sites, brownfields redevelopment, watershed management, and hazard mitigation (Petrie, 2006. Cited Bullard, 2000, & Gallagher, 2010). Few community leaders directly affected are involved in their community by educating others about the importance to participate in justice issues. This suggests the need for research on who is involved in environmental and social justice politics, why they choose to become involved, and why they sustain their efforts.

The few studies of community activism and procedural equity have focused on environmental disparities, which have been an important factor in increasing participatory action, but they do not reveal the detailed reasons why activist joined the environmental and social justice movement (Petrie, 2006). This study focused on determining the motives of community organizers who have undertake an active role in seeking to address social and environmental justice issues through NPOs working with communities of color in California, specifically in the Bay Area and the Central Coast. In addition, I examined the importance of addressing environmental and social justice issues in these communities from the organizers' point of view.

METHODS

In order to determine why community activists are involved in social and environmental justice work, I conducted interviews with paid organizers working with non-profit organizations (NPOs) in low-income California communities primarily composed of Hispanics, African-Americans and Asians. These organizations work in issues around affordable housing, fair wages, health care, green development, polluting source reduction in low-income neighborhoods, and others. The organizers that I interviewed are working for Berkeley Organizing Congregations for Action (BOCA) based in the city of Berkeley, the Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment (CRPE) in Delano, the Central Coast Alliance United for a Sustainable Economy (CAUSE) in Oxnard, and Asian Pacific Environmental Network (APEN) in Oakland. I conducted semi-structured interviews to understand why organizers participate in the environmental or social justice work and provide insight into the everyday life of organizers. I

asked subjects about their life histories, how these related to their motivations to work on social and environmental justice, and their life as organizers. I elicited descriptions of motives and experiences that lead them to their active participation in social and environmental justice work. Specifically, I asked interviewees questions concerning three topics 1) personal life histories, 2) motives and 3) life experiences as organizers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The social and environmental justice movement constitutes far more than engaging in campaigns and seeking justice for underrepresented ethnic groups. I found that organizers consider the issues of social and environmental justice movement as a vehicle within the community that serves to bring people from various races and socioeconomic status together. The most common motives that drive social and environmental justice organizers are the lack of citizen awareness of justice issues, the absence of power in these communities, disparities of race and income.

Prior to their work as organizers they saw themselves, their families, and their communities impacted by social and environmental disparities. One organizer for instance, said that the work as an organizer is full of obstacles and mainly apathy from the community, which in some instances the victories, the motivation and the momentum, serves as a feedback to counterbalance the apathy they often experience. But it is most important to build relationships to not only win campaigns, but also to bring a sense of community and reassurance to the people. In addition, organizers experienced a growth from the moment they started addressing social and environmental justice. Their change of identity from activists, as they described themselves during a period in which they worked alone, outside of an organization, to organizers working collectively through NPOs.

Personal histories

Social movements require an energizing myth to create group solidarity and to give meaning to collective action. A highly successful myth can move beyond a movement's adherents and become part of a larger culture. By "myth," I do not mean a false or illusory account, but a narrative with enough moral and emotional force to give clarity and inspiration to an account of events. The

largely nonviolent civil rights movement worked so well as moral drama in part because of the violence with which it was met and in part because the vision of an oppressed people struggling for freedom evoked themes of existing American cultural narratives. (Bankston, 2010, p. 170)

For all organizers that I interviewed, life experiences, particular social injustices that affected them directly, underpin a sense of critical thinking and have served as a stepping-stone to activism in their communities. Community activism was the first step they took toward what they consider themselves now, community organizers. I found that five of the six study subjects I interviewed were exposed to community activism through a high school or college groups, such as Future Leaders of America, student government, and activists groups advocating for immigrant rights. One organizer was influence by her father who was an active member of the United Farm Workers Union. He often took her to rallies and meetings. One organizer with no formal education was a farm worker who experienced maltreatment by foremen, low wages, pesticides spraying while working, and no lunch or bathroom breaks. “I was exposed to activism through a union, and realized that I also had rights [neither] did my co-workers, so I became representative of my crew before the ranch owner. Later I was invited to become a part-time organizer for the farm workers and I left the fields” said one organizer. He decided to devote his time and energy to community organizing. He knew the struggle he was fighting and organizing for.

Their racial identity, their impoverished and disempowered communities, the lack of representation, organization, language, education and low income were factors they considered relevant to start organizing. One subject lived the hardships of not being educated, poor and working in the fields. The other five subjects experienced that through their parents, educated themselves and now are giving back to their community. The conditions the subjects experienced were among many reasons pushing them to take action. For example, at the time that the five educated subjects were exposed to community activism they did not understand why they were doing it, in comparison to the farm worker who was experiences maltreatment. It was until they got more involved with the NPOs they started to volunteer that they came to deeply understand the struggles their community was going through and how affected their neighborhood of color was compared to relatively wealthy white neighborhoods. This was experienced by one organizer that said, “I realized that this environmental hazards don’t just happen, they are planned that way. There are also ways to not have them in our neighborhood, but we have to be

aware of the process in order to get rid of them.” This brings up the concept of environmental racism where nonwhites are largely exposed to polluting sources and extensively explained in six studies conducted by Sadd, Pastor, Boer, & Snyder, 1999; Boer, Sadd, Pastor, & Snyder, 1997; Pulido, 1996; Burke 1993; Szasz & Meuser, 1993; & UCC 1987 (Pulido, 2000). It is linked to the white privilege, the social system that works to the benefits of whites. Whites might not intentionally distance from industrial pollution and nonwhites, but according to Pulido (2000) malicious intent to privilege one group and putting at disadvantage other group/s can easily be proven from the decision-makers part. The tool to get rid of “them” is best explained by Cole’s (1992) “client empowerment.” This process enables individuals to participate in collective and effective efforts to solve community issues.

While respondents had different life experiences that moved them to promote social and environmental justice only three factors stand out 1) educating the community, 2) developing leaders, and 3) giving back to their community. For example, one of the subjects started his career as a high school counselor. Speaking of how many kids he saw not attending school and families that were having problems, he said “It was not the fact that the kids did not want to show to school but they were dealing with other issues back home, and the parents as well.” He decided to quit his profession and devote his time to advocating for his community. He saw that the struggles that affected parents back home also affected the kids at school. Others started right away as organizers. For example, one started organizing high school students and educating them about the importance to become more involve in the community, in terms of social and environmental justice. Her own experience as a voiceless high school student made her realized that there are many students who have a lot to contribute, but few take the time to encourage and educate them about theses issues. Others made sure that parents have a voice in the school system, and could get affordable housing, fair wages, and access to a healthy environment for everyone. Making reference to Cole’s (1992) “client empowerment,” it is important for organizers to recognize the community residents as experts and validate their experiences as well. These are more democratic dynamics of decision making, accountable and self-determined ideals under which we want to create an equitable society. These organizers personal backgrounds motivated them to start their work as organizers, but what keeps them motivated to continue their work depends on particular conditions.

Motives

Based on their personal experiences giving back to their communities is a constructive way and a strong reason that motivated organizers to work in social and environmental justice. Even though they do not consider themselves activists at this point in their life, they all agree that in order for them to become organizers at some point along the process they were activists. One interviewee said that, “in order to become a great organizer at some point we all have to bear an activist within ourselves.” Seeing all the inequalities in their community, such as residential segregation, unfair wages for farm workers, toxic polluting sources in poor neighborhoods, parents not involved in their children’s education, and many more issues motivated these organizers to return to their community and start working to lessen the intensity of these issues. Some of these leaders returned to organize around these problems because they were personally affected. Corburn (2007) describes that the work of the activists, in this case the organizers, not only influence the assessment of lay knowledge, but also generates policy solutions. The idea that they could make a difference in the community motivated them to return and the response from the community boosted their motivation. One organizer vigorously described that, “At one point in my life I was in their shoes. And seeing the entire time and effort one community member after another puts into a campaign they hold close to their heart. Also, the personal growth that individuals have experienced throughout this process motivates me to continue my work”.

The social and environmental justice movement ultimately does not depend on the work of the organizers, but on the response from the people, the community leaders. A community member willing to give his time and effort to the cause is referred to as a leader. Usually this is a person who has been affected by the issues about which community members have organized. Developing leaders is the primary role that organizers do and they expressed it to be “the most important reason why [we] organize.” The formation of leaders, often-ordinary people with little education, is one of the biggest rewards mentioned by organizers. Better explained as increasing “local knowledge/participation,” here the community raises previously ignored distributive social and environmental justice questions. Forcing science and government officials to examine who are being affected and properly act to solve the inequities (Corburn, 2007). The organizers feel motivated and proud to know that ordinary people are finally realizing they have a stronger

voice, with which they can make themselves noticeable. “If there was no response or hope in the community I would have already give up,” one organizer told me. All of the organizers described the emerging leaders as passionate and serious about their role in leading their community to achieve social and environmental justice. This has become a fundamental reason for community organizers to continue their work. One organizer summarized it in one sentence. “I organize, where I see the pain, and the willingness to act.”

Involvement in decision making for community leaders is the third most significant motivation for organizers to work in social and environmental justice. According to Petrie (2006), scholars have recently begun to pay attention in how community involvement influences the social and environmental justice remediation process. This is grounded in the notion that grassroots organizing is an important mean of pursuing equity and involving the community in the decision making process. Respondents considered their work almost complete when they see that leaders have reached the level at which they are taking over important campaigns in the community and are able to involved others. The role of the organizers at that point is to guide them and do the administrative work needed to start a campaign, but the turn out for the campaigns and the involvement of others is responsibility of the leaders. The organizers said that it evokes great pride in them when the community becomes independent and can organize campaigns without their complete supervision. One of the organizers mentioned that “once we reach that goal, I consider we should move on to another community where people are not well organized and needs to step out and demand their voices to be heard.” The main reason why organizers work in social and environmental justice is to build leaders that can stand on their own. Also, it creates the notion in the organizers of giving back to their respective communities. It is an opportunity for them to pass on the knowledge and power that at some point they did not have, and now they are sharing with the community.

Life as a community organizer

Life for community organizers largely depends in building relationships with elected officials, the community, organizations and others. Organizers work within the network of relations that they have developed through their specific methods of organizing. They build these coalitions to link local insights with the meta-policy structures to employ intermediaries that can

better assists lay people in their attempt to alleviate their social and environmental inequities (Corburn, 2007). In this study I found that one on one communication is the primarily method through which both organizers and the others engaged to find the mutual personal interests that can get them to work collectively. Another method for building relationships involves educational sessions with groups, in which the organizer educates the subjects about an issue the organizer wants the people to participate and touches on the points that the organizer thinks will get the people to act. “Most states have recognized that providing training and oriented tools to community members and other stakeholders is necessary both to enhance public participation and to provide a common understanding of how environmental [and social] justice issues can be identified and addressed” (Targ, p. 180). Communication is the most basic method through which organizers conduct their work. By learning about ways in which they (the community at risk) are affected, people will be more likely to take an interest in the issues being addressed. On the other hand, I have identified some problems which organizers considered troublesome to effectively communicate with people.

The most challenging obstacle that organizers face is apathy, people not caring about their community and not doing anything to better their condition even when they have the resources. Even though organizers attempt to educate the community and inject their energy into the people, there is often no response from them. This continues to be a challenge for which no organizer has determined the solution. Their current methods are persistence and finding new leaders that are more proactive. Community apathy is very discouraging for organizers and many stated that if it were not for other positive outcomes they would have given up already. Essentially the organizers do agree that the reason this challenge persists is the reason they continue organizing.

Organizers lead difficult lives, and sometimes can be on duty seven days a week. Often organizers must face the challenge of differentiating between their private life and public life. They are so connected to their community in the public aspect of their life that it can be difficult for them to get away from it. A number of organizers that I interviewed said that in some occasions it was hard to not bring their work home because the people they are working with, everyday suffers the injustices of social and environmental inequity. They cannot really get themselves out of these situations. Yet it is a part of their role, which they gladly accept unless people are indifferent.

Limitations

There are several factors limiting the inference of this study. But most important is the limited number of interviews. This limits the application of my findings to a larger population and their utility to non-profit organizations to incorporate into their organizing agendas. As a result, I had to refrain my findings to only suggestions for future research. More interviews with subjects other than community organizers in the social and environmental justice movement are required to drawn upon conclusions that can appeal to a broader group.

Suggested directions

To overcome the limited inference of this study, more interviews should be carried out with a larger pool, including executive directors, researchers, and volunteers. It is necessary that people in these fields share their stories to engage others through these means and transform lay knowledge. This type of research can play an important role towards achieving equity for communities of color.

The final direction that the study should take is to make the findings available to organizations working in social and environmental justice, so they may develop more successful means of integrating communities of color. For instance, recent work in the policy sciences has determined that technocratic knowledge is failing to solve the social problems and professionals ought to rely in lay knowledge (Corburn, 2007). This is important because as Hoff and Hickling-Hudson (2011, p. 193) state “furthering the understanding of the dialectic between the global and the local and how adult education for social change can contribute to recovering individual and communal agency within local, national, and global structural contexts.” The U.S. National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences has also recognized Participatory Action Research (PAR) as a vehicle to combine professional and community insights to define and solve problems, collect data, and evaluate interventions (Corburn, 2007). By including the community and their knowledge, paired with professional resources will make research more democratic, researchers can help organizers develop means of assuring that everyone participates, regardless of their social status. Overall, such studies may contribute to the education of lay people that encourage and motivate more people who do not usually participate to promote the importance

of social and environmental justice in communities that are largely affected. This will be a big step towards better understanding and, ultimately positively affecting, the underlying social dynamics of the social and environmental justice movement in communities of color.

Broader implications

Those working for CAUSE, APEN, CRPE and BOCA do not consider themselves activist and do not want to be referred as activists, but rather organizers. They define themselves as working in a group, not alone in comparison to activists. Monahan (2009) argues that the social and environmental justice movement brings people together. Allowing them to collectively overcome their issues, obtain institutional recognition, respect for the movement, and the people through institutional recognition (obtain respect) that also recognizes the practice as a right to maintain and enforce the right designated practice. On the other hand, the organizers I interviewed see their work as a tool to not only overcome the issues facing their communities, but also to connect as human beings, as “the issue is the vehicle to get people to work together, but organizing is also about the human aspect of the community, and to not forget about who we are.”

Researchers have largely failed to consider how the experiences of organizers and those affected shaped the role of the social and environmental justice in developing community leaders and organizers. Most of the research on these topics looks into the movement from points of view that do not reflect the experiences people are exposed to, everyday. Little research has examined the power that communities can generate to influence or change corporate behavior, even though the community is recognized as making an effort to reduce the gap they are facing (Berry, 2003). The continuous effects concerns researchers about the use of the effectiveness of specific public participation in promoting authentic community involvement, but have only studied settings such as watershed management (Konisky & Beierle 2001), toxic waste cleanup (Laurian 2004), hazard mitigation (Godschalk, Brody, & Burby 2003), urban planning (Brody, Godschalk, & Burby 2003) and brownfields redevelopment (Solitare 2005). They have not focused into settings and experiences that affect the social and environmental wellbeing of communities of color. I have approached the life experiences of organizers working in the social and environmental justice movement, and portrayed their stories just as they were told. I have

provided the powerful insights that organizers have generated in the community and can continue to generate. I have demonstrated from their point of view what happens at the community level and what needs to be done to increase community participation. Authentic community participation depends on committed organizers, who work in social and environmental justice to educate, empower, motivate and reduce disparities in communities of color.

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