PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

CORE COMPONENTS OF THE THEORY OF BUILDING LOCAL POWER IN THE TRADITION OF COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

Aaron Schutz
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Educational theory has tended to avoid discussions of how the less powerful might come together to contest oppression. Yet strategies for collective action are learned practices, like any others. While there are no "rules" for social action, different traditions provide useful "rules of thumb." This article lays out some core theoretical assumptions of one tradition of social struggle: the "neo-Alinsky" model within the broader tradition of local community organizing. These, of course, are ideals—the actual "sausage making" of social action often diverges quite significantly from them. I conclude by discussing possibilities and limitations for drawing on this theory in educational settings.

Different traditions of solidarity and collective action have emerged across history with divergent perspectives on how to build collective power.[1] The tradition of "community organizing" focuses on building local power, creating coherent organizations that speak for communities to powerful people who make decisions that affect them. Alternative traditions include civil resistance, popular education (e.g., Freire), and anarchism, among others.[2] These are traditions partly in a retrospective, analytical sense, since social action efforts have not necessarily seen themselves as participating in one or another discrete branch.

There is no single "theory" of community organizing, and different groups organize differently. Nonetheless, in the 1930s and 40s, Saul Alinsky drew a range of influences together into an extremely influential conceptualization, writing books like *Reveille for Radicals* (1946) and training many organizers.[3] While Alinsky's vision of organizing was quite fluid, after he

---

[1] Aaron Schutz, *Empowerment: A Primer* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

[2] For overviews related to these different strands, see, e.g., Erica Chenoweth, *Civil Resistance: What Everyone Needs to Know* (Oxford University Press, 2021); Celina Su, *Streetwise for Book Smarts: Grassroots Organizing and Education Reform in the Bronx* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011); Dana M. Williams, "Contemporary Anarchist and Anarchistic Movements," *Sociology Compass* 12, no. 6 (2018), https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/soc4.12582.

[3] Saul Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals* (1946; repr., New York: Vintage, 2010). Much work remains to be done to understand the sources of Alinsky's vision. He was not very forthcoming about where his ideas came from. Useful sources for understanding this include Sanford Horwitt, *Let Them Call Me Rebel: Saul Alinsky, His Life and Legacy* (New York: Vintage, 1992); Mike Miller, "Alinsky for The Left: The Politics of Community Organizing," *Dissent* 57, no. 1 (2010): 43-49; Mike Miller, "Herb March:

© 2022 Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society

died in 1972, his followers came up with a more standardized model that I will term "neo-Alinsky" organizing, which I focus on, here.[4] While neo-Alinsky organizing is only one of a range of ways to orient social action, it contains key insights, providing some foundational tools for thinking differently about education for effective empowerment.

Since organizing lacks many explicitly theoretical writings, I draw on reflective writings of organizers, organizing training materials, and on empirical and historical research about organizing.[5]

It is important to note that people often come together without being trained in some "approach" to resist oppression. Student protest walkouts, for example, are a somewhat common occurrence.[6] People have always been creative in drawing on their experiences, the information available to them, and their cultural resources for developing ways to fight for change. The point is not that students, parents, and community members lack any knowledge or skills for collective action. Instead, when we do not provide people with lessons that others have learned from their long experience of social action, we leave people without ideas about strategies, ways to avoid common pitfalls, and more. Stories about effective organizing can also provide hope.

A Legend Deserved," *CounterPunch,* February 16, 2018, https://www.counterpunch.org/2018/02/16/herb-march-a-legend-deserved/; Peter Szynka, "Three Alinskys?" *Forum on Community Organizing*, http://www.fo-co.info/organizing/literatur/szynka/three-alinskys/.

[4] Key sources for understanding the neo-Alinsky vision include Edward Chambers, *Roots for Radicals* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018); Mary Beth Rogers, *Cold Anger: A Story of Faith and Power Politics* (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 1990); Aaron Schutz and Mike Miller, eds., *People Power: The Alinsky Organizing Tradition* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2015).

[5] See, for example, Michael Gecan, *Going Public* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2012); Lee Staples, *Roots to Power: A Manual for Grassroots Organizing* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2016); Michael Jacoby Brown, *Building Powerful Community Organizations* (Arlington, VA: Long Haul, 2006); Aaron Schutz and Marie Sandy, *Collective Action for Social Change: An Introduction to Community Organizing* (New York: Palgrave, 2010); Kim Bobo, Jackie Kendall, and Steve Max, *Organizing for Social Change, 4th ed.*, (Chicago: The Forum Press, 2010); Chambers, *Roots to Power*; Rogers, *Cold Anger*; Schutz and Miller, *People Power.*

[6] A search for "student protest December 2021" brought up many student protests just this month. See also Richard Fabbro, "There is a National Student Movement Underway: Why Kids Across the Country are Walking Out," *Salon*, Dec. 10, 2021, https://www.salon.com/2021/12/10/there-is-a-national-student-movement-underway-why-kids-across-the-country-are-walking-out/; or remember the student protests after the shooting at Marjory Stoneman High School: Vivian Yee and Alan Blinder, "National School Walkout: Thousands Protest Against Gun Violence Across the U.S.," *New York Times*, March 14, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/14/us/school-walkout.html. There is a long history of student activism in America. See, for example Interference Archive, Walkout: A Brief History of Student Organizing, www.walkout.interferencearchive.org.

WHAT IS COMMUNITY ORGANIZING?

Community organizing creates organizations for people who belong to some coherent "locality" (like a neighborhood or a school or even a group on the internet). Because community organizing groups are networks of relationships, they are limited in how large they can be. When issues require work beyond the boundaries of, at most, a small city, multiple local organizations generally come together in coalition.[7] Community organizing groups generally emerge when many in a particular locality feel that they are being ill-treated by the powerful within and beyond it. After trying to engage with the powerful, if community concerns are not adequately addressed, organizing groups move to put pressure on the powerful. A key aim is to get the powerful to come to the "table" and negotiate with the organizing group in good faith. Actions to pressure the powerful may include collective protests, marches, boycotts, and the like, seeking to show the powerful that it is in their best interest to respond to an organization's concerns.

Internally, community organizing groups are often quite diverse in their perspectives and experiences. They have a defined governance structure for major decisions, but issues and actions are often developed in a very fluid, collaborative, and often contentious manner. When groups emerge into the public realm to challenge the powerful, however, these differences are left behind and organizations stand behind agreed upon demands and a small group of individuals empowered to negotiate for the collective.

Within organizing groups, there are generally two key roles. Leaders come from the local community, have relationships with others in the represented group, and make decisions about what the group will act on and how it will act. Organizers, who may or may not come from the same locality, do the grunt work to keep the organization going day-to-day, advise leaders on effective strategies, and develop new leaders for the organization. Leaders govern; organizers staff and advise.

Organizing groups identify specific things that they want changed ("cut" issues) and then develop strategies for pressuring the powerful to make these changes. Organizers generally distinguish between "organizing" and "mobilizing." In "mobilizing," a group of people get together to protest something, but the group dissolves after they have won (or lost). "Organizing" develops durable organizations that exist over time and that continue to struggle against oppression, moving from issue to issue and making sure that there isn't backsliding on earlier wins.

While less-informed writers on organizing tend to focus on "winning" and on organizing's creative conflict tactics, this misses Alinsky's emphasis on the importance of democracy. A central goal is to create democratic spaces where leaders can overcome their sense of disempowerment and work together to make concrete change. Alinsky worried that if we did not give people real options for

---

[7] Robert Kleidman, "Community Organizing and Regionalism," *City & Community* 3, no. 4 (2004): 403-421.

action, they would be lured by demagogues. In fact, he used conflict with the powerful as a tool to heal fractures in and across different communities. He believed that if groups understood that they needed each other to win, even groups they looked down on or found repugnant, the act of working together to make change would build common cause and respect. In our current politically divided moment, for example, he would have sought opportunities and issues that would have drawn groups together across lines of polarization—perhaps seeking ways for rural and urban groups to work together. This was both an ethical and a pragmatic commitment, since a key strategy of the powerful is to split the disempowered apart and reduce the chance they might build enough collective power to threaten the status quo. Supporting division is a long-term recipe for disempowerment.

A famous example of k-12 organizing came in the 1960s, when an organization of Latinx students at Los Angeles high schools worked against racism in school. This involved a multi-year effort to develop leadership and understand the challenges they were facing. In 1968, the students conducted a survey of Latinx students and sent a report to the school board about the concerns that emerged. The board ignored the survey, demonstrating it had no interest in listening to students and providing a justification for more aggressive action. As a result, the students organized a walkout in a number of different schools and eventually forced the district to address many of their demands. (At one point in a documentary about the walkout, a student says to the assembled students "They're trying to split us up. But we won't let them!") Students in the organization kept working together in organizations in and across the schools after the protests ended to negotiate and ensure that the district actually did what it agreed to do.[8]

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE TRADITION

The story of the "theory" of community organizing generally starts in the academic literature with Alinsky because he put together the most influential conceptual overviews of organizing and trained many who later became organizers (and he was a white guy more likely to be listened to by other white guys). However, Alinsky's vision itself drew on a range of streams of tradition and scholarship that he did not necessarily acknowledge. Furthermore, there are many historical writings about and examples of organizing efforts that preceded his formulation—many of which diverged significantly from his vision.[9]

[8] See this documentary: Hector Galan, *Taking Back the Schools* (PBS, 1996). In 2006 HBO made a movie about the walkouts directed by Edward James Olmos. See also Rosales F. Arturo, *Chicano! The History of the Mexican American Civil Rights Movement* (Houston, TX: Arte Público Press, 1996).

[9] The long fight for civil rights in America provides good examples and includes the work of Ella Baker, Robert Moses, and thousands of unsung Black organizing heroes as well as allies. See, for example, Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Clayborn Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of*

Alinsky's first organization was developed in parallel with a union organizing effort in the stockyards of the Back of the Yards in Chicago. The union effort was led by a non-party-line communist focused on the development of local democracy with experience in community action as well. Although opposed to doctrinaire communism, Alinsky's vision of organizing, with its clear "targets" and clear "issues," derived, in part, from what he learned from the union effort.[10] Alinsky also spent years as a graduate student in the University of Chicago sociology department working with some of the top sociologists in the nation and conducting fieldwork in Chicago gangs, and the theories of this "school" deeply informed his work.[11] Finally, he often referred to the "founding fathers" and other participants in the American revolution and the development of American democracy as key "ideological" forerunners. Of course, these sources, themselves, drew from their own sources, the "founding fathers" looking to the Iroquois Confederation and deeply tainted by their complicity (at a minimum) with slavery, and the white, male Chicago sociologists failing to acknowledge the extent they cribbed off of work by others like WEB DuBois and Jane Addams.[12] A voracious reader, it is not entirely clear what else Alinsky drew from. But he must have been influenced by the movements he saw around him in the 1930s and before, like the titanic battles between labor and capital, the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, the NAACP, communist-based community organizing efforts, efforts to organize the unemployed, and more. Nonetheless, while he did organize in Black communities in the 1960s, and while even critics generally acknowledge that he was no racist in any simple sense, his overall vision seems fundamentally grounded in a white male vision of the world—and the organizers Alinsky trained were all men and almost all white.

Work to trace the multiple sources of visions of community organizing that diverge from the neo-Alinsky one and to place Alinsky's vision in context are in their infancy. Nonetheless, looking across current discussions of organizing grounded in communities of color and women's organizing efforts, it is possible to identify some key initial differences from neo-Alinsky organizing described below. These include: (1) a focus on "deeper," more authentic community relationships—reflective of the "beloved community" described by SNCC activists and others; (2) an emphasis on political education, especially on learning particular ideologies that can help participants make a broader sense of

the 1960s (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); Charles M. Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007); John Edgerton, *Speak Now Against The Day: The Generation Before The Civil Rights Movement in the South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995).

[10] See, e.g., Miller, "Herb March."

[11] See Szynka, "Three Alinskys?," and Horwitt, *Let Them Call Me Rebel*.

[12] See Barton Edens, The Iriquois Influence Thesis and the "Great Debate," History Thesis, East Tennessee State University, 2001; Aldon Morris, *The Scholar Denied: W.E.B. DuBois and the Birth of Modern Sociology* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2017); Mary Jo Deegan, *Jane Addams and the Men of the Chicago School, 1892–1918* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

the long-term forces that help explain the workings of oppression; (3) an attention to trauma—both experienced by members of oppressed groups and by participants in social conflict—and healing from this trauma; (4) the creation of safe spaces for minoritized groups away from the "gaze" of members of groups that participate (however unknowingly) in oppression and lack the concrete, rich experience of group members; and (5) more attention to the long-term goals of struggle: a vision of what a "better" society and "better" community would look like.[13]

Despite its core commitment to democracy, the neo-Alinsky vision has tended to be fairly instrumental. Neo-Alinsky organizing groups historically have held to a largely non-ideological, pragmatic focus on common "issues" that can substantively improve the lives of members. While there has been some broader analysis of the social forces underlying oppression, ultimately the vision of these groups has usually been fairly short-term.[14] In addition, Alinsky tended to assume that strong community leaders existed that he simply needed to identify and develop, ignoring the work that was required to create and maintain such relationships (often seen by him and other male leaders of other efforts implicitly as "women's" work).[15] And neo-Alinsky approaches to developing relationships (through the "one-on-one" process described, below) ultimately embody a somewhat instrumental perspective.[16]

As a result, the neo-Alinsky theory of organizing is useful and yet also limited. It provides only one vision, among others, to inform those trying to develop organizations to support local struggle.

POWER AND TARGETS[17]

> When people are organized, they move in…to the central decision-making tables. [They] say, "This is what we want…We are people and damn it, you are going to listen to us…" They are admitted to the decision-making tables…on

[13] See, e.g., Alicia Garza, *The Purpose Of Power: How We Come Together When We Fall Apart* (London, UK: One World, 2020); Charlene Carruthers, *Unapologetic: A Black, Queer, and Feminist Mandate for Radical Movements (*Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2018); Eli Jimenez, Jessica Tokunaga, and Jessica Wolin, *A Scan of the Field of Healing-Centered Organizing* (Aspen Institute, 2019); Shaun Ginwright, "Peace Out to Revolution! Activism Among African American Youth, An Argument for Radical Healing," *Young* 18, no. 1 (2010): 77-96.

[14] See Schutz and Miller, *People Power*, for examples of key documents and the thought and activities of organizers informing the development of the neo-Alinsky vision.

[15] Susan Stall and Randy Stoecker, "Community Organizing or Organizing Community? Gender and the Crafts of Empowerment," *Gender & Society* 12, no. 6 (1998): 729-756.

[16] E.g., there is a fairly strict conceptual separation made between "public" and "private" relationships, with "public" relationships within and beyond organizing groups framed explicitly as essentially instrumental and based on self-interest. Schutz and Sandy, *Collective Action for Social Change*.

[17] This is described in more detail in Schutz and Sandy, *Collective Action for Social Change*.

> the basis of power… Once admitted,…they have a place in the debate and the discussion and the compromise.[18]

Steven Lukes argued that "power" is an "essentially contested" term with many different meanings depending on how it is used.[19] In the realm of empowerment practice, the most important conceptualizer of a coherent model of different kinds of power is probably the Power Cube developed by John Gaventa, along with a wide range of feminist visions.[20] While I examine these in detail elsewhere,[21] for the purposes of this paper the most useful model seems to be a simple one Alinsky provided for community organizing. He argued that power is made up of either "organized people" or "organized money."[22] Powerful people have access to organized money and access to organized people, in part through control of different institutions. In contrast, the powerless mostly have only their bodies.

Alinsky believed that the powerful pay no substantive attention to those who cannot demonstrate that they hold substantive power, who cannot affect anything the powerful care about. As a result, those without power are not treated as legitimate dialogic partners.[23] Thus, demonstrating such power is a precursor to any real engagement. A simple example of this can be seen in a story about the Black pastor of my church, who discovered that there was a trash-filled play-park behind our building. He called the local alderperson to get it cleaned up and got no response. He then asked people in his next service to pull out their cell phones and gave them the alderperson's phone number. Quite a few left messages for the alderperson about the park. The park was cleaned up the next week, and the alderperson called the pastor to talk. An argument didn't make a difference; a demonstration that the pastor had influence over enough people to matter to a local politician did.

Neo-Alinsky organizing leaders don't want to be "liked." They want to be "respected." Organizing groups generally start by asking nicely for a change. When they are rebuffed, they shift to actions that pressure the powerful to make the changes they want. The goal is to get to the "table" where decisions are made (as Alinsky noted in the epigraph, above) and engage in negotiations over change as a legitimate "power player." And there is always a willingness to go "back into the streets" if an adequate agreement is not reachable. Thus, a core motto of community organizing groups: "no permanent enemies, no permanent friends."

---

[18] Audio file in possession of author.
[19] Steven Lukes, *Power: A Radical View* (New York: Macmillan, 2004).
[20] John Gaventa, "Finding the Spaces for Change: A Power Analysis," *IDS Bulletin* 37, no. 6 (2006): 23-33; Starhawk, *The Empowerment Manual: A Guide for Collaborative Groups* (New York: New Society Publishers, 2011); Amy Allen, "Feminist Perspectives on Power," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminist-power/.
[21] Schutz, *Empowerment*.
[22]Schutz and Miller, *People Power*.
[23] See, e.g., Gecan, *Going Public*.

For this process to work, there must be an identifiable person or persons who can be "targeted" and who can make the change the organization wants. Institutions, under this vision, do not make "decisions." The organization develops an understanding of the motivations (self-interests) that drive this person or persons, so that any actions target these motivations.

Note that, from the organizing perspective, conflict—not reasonable dialogue but clashes between organizing groups and the powerful—is a positive thing. Alinsky argued that the organizer dedicated to changing the life of a particular community must first "rub raw the resentments of the people of the community… He must search out controversy and issues, rather than avoid them."[24]

Through such clashes, organizing groups demonstrate that they have power and must, therefore, be engaged with issues. These clashes also can draw more members to the organization from the community, give the organization a public presence, provide a training ground for leaders, and more. So, organizing groups actually seek out issues that will require them to fight. This affects the long-term power of an organization as well. When a community has an organization that develops a reputation for power from such conflicts, the powerful are less likely to take actions that affect the community without first checking with the organizing group.

This is fundamentally a relational view of influence over people in power. Leaders and organizers need to know what makes a particular power holder "tick," understand their self-interests, and organizations' campaigns to get this person to negotiate are in part efforts to create a different kind of relationship. As a result, organizing groups often don't want to go too far in their pressure tactics. If a powerful person begins to hate an organizing group to the point where the person won't work with the group even if this would hurt their own self-interests, for example, this makes getting the changes sought much more difficult. Ultimately, organizing has generally been reformist and not revolutionary—trying to get the system to work, not to destroy it or its leaders.

PEOPLE POWER AS A NETWORK OF RELATIONSHIPS AND THE ONE-ON-ONE PROCESS

Just as organizing groups succeed or fail based on the relationships they create with the powerful, groups are also held together internally by relationships. Alinsky argued that the kind of leaders he wanted were looked up to, known, and trusted by local people. Two local pastors described his approach:

> [Alinsky's] people came quietly into the community. They asked questions, had discussions, and discovered places and people that we who have lived in Woodlawn for years did not imagine existed. Some of us ministers found ourselves being

[24] Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals: A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 116.

> escorted to meet pool hall proprietors, janitors, distracted looking women on relief, stern retired mailmen. These individuals, we were informed, were community leaders. It was hard to believe. Most of them had little education; they spoke peculiar English, and their areas of greatest knowledge had nothing to do with traditional organizations. How could such people be leaders, we asked Alinsky's men? Because each of them [Alinsky's] representatives explained, had a larger or smaller following, a greater or smaller number of people who listened to what they said, who usually did what these "leaders" suggested.[25]

While certainly there are still local leaders in any community, American communities have fragmented since the 1940s and 1950s. The emergence of the non-profit industrial complex has crowded out old mutual aid and ethnic and racial organizations, and churches are fading as institutions. Membership organizations have declined precipitously in the United States.[26] Furthermore, Alinsky's original approach tended to accept current leaders as opposed to seeking out potential new leaders.

Partly as a result, the neo-Alinsky organizers who took over after Alinsky's death, like Ed Chambers and Ernie Cortes, developed what they called the one-on-one process to help leaders build *new* networks of relationships. In essence, the one-on-one is a fairly simple process. Leaders go out into their community and meet individually with prospective members and have discussions with them to understand what motivates them. What do they care about? These discussions accomplish a few things. First, they allow leaders to create a relationship with a wide range of new people. After finishing a one-on-one, you have built a bit of trust and know someone well enough that you can call them up and ask them to do things. Second, by holding many one-on-ones, leaders and organizers learn what people in their community are concerned about.[27] Even though a relatively small group of leaders may make decisions, they are informed by their relationships with and knowledge about many others within the community.

---

[25] Schutz and Miller, *People Power*, 60.

[26] Theda Scokpoll, *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003).

[27] Good sources for the one-on-one process includes Brown, *Building Powerful Community Organizations*; Schutz and Sandy, *Collective Action for Social Change*; Chambers, *Roots for Radicals*; "Building a Base for Community Organizing, With a Focus on One-on-one Meetings," *New York City Organizing Support Center* (2000), http://www.econnet.eu/media/Listening%20and%20recritment/One%20on%20One%20Packet%20-%20NYC%20Organizing%20Support%20Center.pdf; Relational 1 to 1 Handout, https://ntcumc.org/Relational_1_to_1_Handout.pdf. Michael Jacoby Brown gives an example on video of how to conduct a one-on-one here: https://youtu.be/4CARmuVJuqo.

Organizers often talk about seeking to understand people's "self-interests" through this process. Self-interest is not the same as selfishness, however. Useful participants in community organizing groups do not participate because they are out to get something for themselves, alone. As Michael Jacoby Brown says, "Self-interest includes our whole selves, our stories and memories and the relationships we have with close friends and family. It involves all that makes us tick and why."[28] Another word for "self-interest" is passion. Organizers like to say that community organizing gives people an opportunity to "turn their private pain into public action."

One-on-ones are personal but public—somewhat intimate, but with an explicitly stated motive to draw people into action. Importantly, one-on-ones have no core agenda except to understand another person's experiences, passions and concerns. Long-time neo-Alinsky organizer Michael Gecan says of one-on-ones:

> [Our culture doesn't] take the time to "relate," to connect publicly and formally but meaningfully with others … We don't take the time to meet one to one with others, to hear … interests and dreams and fears, to understand *why* people do what they do … When you develop the habit of individual meetings, you stop thinking of people as "the poor" or "the rich" or "the establishment" or even "the enemy." You don't size up another person to see if you can make a sale … [We discover] the many facets of people who have come to think of themselves as invisible or voiceless not just because the powers that be fail to see them and hear them, but because those who claim to care about their concerns also fail to relate to them and with them. And they see more facets of you.[29]

Nonetheless, as I noted earlier, there is still something somewhat instrumental about the one-on-one process. While drawn in some ways from women's traditions of organizing, it has a middle-class, white male spin to it. Neo-Alinsky organizers are quite clear that one is not trying to make "friends" through this process.[30] This differs from the language used by organizers in other traditions, like strands of the Black radical tradition, or forms of feminist organizing, where there is often an effort to create deeper relational ties and community that goes beyond participation in a social action group.[31]

---

[28] Brown, *Building Powerful Community Organizations*, 201.
[29] Gecan, *Going Public*, 21.
[30] On public vs. private, see Chambers, *Roots for Radicals*.
[31] Garza, *Purpose of Power*; Stall and Stoecker, "Community Organizing or Organizing Community;" for some recent research that seems to support this point at moments, see Hanrie Han, Elizabeth McKenna, and Michelle Oyakawa, *Prisms of the People: Power & Organizing in Twenty-First-Century America* (University of Chicago Press, 2021).

This vision of power as emerging out of a network of relationships, linked to the commitment to vibrant democracy, informs a vision of leadership that rejects "strong" or "charismatic" leaders who rule over others. A strong organization is seen as one with a broad leadership team. "Presidents" of organizations and other officers are generally elected for only a year or so. Organizers and leaders are constantly seeking to find new leaders.[32]

CORE CONCEPTS

There are many more components to community organizing "theory," but I believe what has been said so far provides a context to think about how these ideas might (and might not) contribute to education.

First, a brief summary of the core concepts discussed above. Community organizing:

- Creates durable democratic organizations with a reputation for effective action.
- Seeks substantive changes that respond to the concerns of the community.
- Governs through leaders who have relationships with many others in the community.
- Demonstrates power through collective conflict that targets the self-interests of powerful people.
- Develops relationships of respect with the powerful and membership at the tables where decisions are made.
- Draws groups together across fractures in the community around common cause against the powerful.
- Is generally reformist instead of revolutionary in its goals.

ETHICS?

> If you have faith in the people, you should have faith that they will evolve a people's program. If it is not a program to your liking, remember that it is to their liking. Let all apostles of planning never forget that what is most important in life is substance rather than structure. The substance of a democracy is its people and if that substance is good—if the people are healthy, interested, informed, participating, filled with faith in themselves and others—then the structure will inevitably reflect its substance.[33]

It has been said by those who are attacking Alinsky and Alinsky-based organizing that community organizing is unethical.[34] This is not entirely

[32] In this way, his vision was similar to that of Ella Baker.

[33] Alinsky, *Reveille*, 80.

[34] Interestingly, those on the Right tend to treat Alinsky as a bugaboo (the fact that Hillary Clinton wrote her undergraduate thesis on him—he offered her a job—and that Obama was an organizer in a neo-Alinsky organization does not help), while most of

inaccurate. As Alinsky noted in the epigraph, above, organizing requires a level of "faith" in the "people" in a community. Ultimately, an organizer's only real option if they don't agree with the direction of the group is to resign. And Alinsky did have this deep faith—something that would surprise those who would demonize him—and this faith was often rewarded.

At the same time, Alinsky leaned on his principles of organizing to help ensure that things would work out. For example, he often sought out communities with groups that did not like or respect each other and used the organizing process to get them to work together. At one point, for example, he attempted to deal with the incredible housing discrimination of the 1950s by creating an organization that brought Blacks and whites together. This effort didn't work out, and his first organization ended up working to keep African Americans out. But he had many successes as well.[35]

However, there are some ethical principles implied in the overall vision. For example, an organizing program must be grounded in the motivations and concerns of the people in the community. It should not be foisted upon them by some isolated group. And there is a core commitment to democracy. In fact, democracy and the creation of community power through which people could effectively act on their concerns was as important to Alinsky as "winning" on issues. In fact, he believed that organizing was essential to the maintenance of American democracy more broadly, asserting that the "confidence [of the people in their own]…power…which comes out of a People's Organization is actually the strongest barrier and safeguard against Fascism which a democracy can possess."[36]

At the same time, this focus on conflict and "winning," unoriented by some ethical commitments, is dangerous. How does one decide what is an ethical

---

those on the Left have never heard of him. At the same time as the Right attacks Alinsky, however, they also sometimes draw on a somewhat distorted version of him (focusing on tactics and conflict, but as far as I can tell ignoring his vision of democracy) in their efforts, including the early "alt-right" rebellion of the Tea Party in the Republican party and a training program in Alinsky approaches put on by the Koch brothers. Ashley Parker and Maggie Haberman, "With Koch Brothers' Academy, Conservatives Settle In for a Long War," *The New York Times*, September 6, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/07/us/politics/kochs-republican-conservative.html; Dylan Matthews, "Who is Alinsky, and Why Does the Right Hate Him So Much?" *Vox,* July 19, 2016, https://www.vox.com/2014/10/6/6829675/saul-alinsky-explain-obama-hillary-clinton-rodham-organizing.

[35] The organizer Shel Trapp tells an interesting story about this in Schutz and Miller, *People Power*.

[36] Alinsky, *Reveille*, 216. The Deweyans among you would recognize Alinsky's broader vision of democracy as a process and not a set of rules: "The critics in this case continue to think of democracy only in terms of its form and structure. It is easier to think of democracy in those terms; it is neat and orderly. The other kind of democracy, real democracy, is as disorderly as life itself—it does not hold to a form; it grows, expands, and changes to meet the needs of the people," p. 216.

"action" against a "target" and what is not? How does a group decide what kinds of issues are ethical to fight for and which are not? Ultimately, aside from its faith in the people, Alinsky-based organizing has few resources to respond to these questions.

As a result, many organizing groups come together around some set of common values to orient their actions. In one organizing training, for example, an experienced organizer wrote comments made by participants about an effective organizing group out in a big circle on the board. Then he drew a heart at the center and wrote "values" inside it. If you don't know your values, he emphasized, you are going to get yourselves into a great deal of trouble and potentially cause harm.

COMMUNITY ORGANIZING THEORY AND EDUCATION

It should be no surprise that organizing theory has faced challenges in integrating itself into educational settings. Teachers and administrators do not see classrooms or schools as places for conflict. If students feel oppressed, they often see the school, rightly or wrongly, as a key source of that oppression. Teaching students this vision would seem likely to lead to conflict with the school over issues that staff and administration would rather not have to address and that may get them fired. While there is an expanding literature on youth and parent organizing in education, these efforts almost always happen outside of the school, itself. [37]

Nonetheless, I believe that it would be extremely helpful for educational professionals to have a broader understanding of some of the key tenets of organizing theory. There would be a range of potential benefits. First, perhaps those in schools could be more receptive to student, parent, and community action when it happens; more conscious that, in fact, as people with power they and those above them really are not open to student perspectives that differ from theirs and that it may actually be the case that they need to be "pushed" if they are going to actually engage substantively with the concerns of those their decisions affect. Second, it might help staff and administrators understand better the myriad constraints they are under and the extent to which they may be resistant not because students or parents are necessarily wrong, but because to actually do something to address legitimate concerns would be risky and endanger staff's own positions—and that this may be part of the reason they need to be pushed (and that people above them need to be "pushed" as well for them to be able to act). Third, while it may not generally be possible to teach students robust skills for community organizing, school staff informed about these principles might be in a position to engage with students, especially after a

[37] See, e.g., Jerusha Conner and Sonia M. Rosen, eds. *Contemporary Youth Activism: Advancing Social Justice in The United States* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2016); Ginwright, *Beyond Resistance!*; Mark Warren and Karen L. Mapp, *A Match on Dry Grass: Community Organizing as a Catalyst for School Reform* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Barbara Ferman, *Fight for America's Schools: Grassroots Organizing in Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2017).

"blowout" has already started. Fourth, some of these techniques and principles could be very useful in schools. For example, a principal or teacher might conduct a few one-on-ones with parents every week, developing a depth of community knowledge, relationships, as well as the capacity to engage parents in different efforts. (A commenter noted the dangers of placing this kind of "power" in the hands of an agent of the institution, which is absolutely true, of course. A better approach would be to create a democratic organization.)

We live in a world where some hold power and most have little substantive influence or control over the institutions and individuals that affect their lives and communities. Schools do not teach about power in this way—how it works or how to generate it. My college-level organizing class is especially interesting to many students not only because many are learning knowledge they didn't even know existed. Some have participated in collective action efforts, and some have some sense of what seemed to work and not work, and some have had some training about ways to act effectively, but most have little idea that there might be a "method" in the madness. Again, what I teach is not the "truth" about power (in fact, I am increasingly critical of the limitations of what I have been teaching), but organizing theory is a kind of intellectual "pry tool" that lifts the shades that hide the fact that there are, in fact, effective (if always risky) principles for acting to resist power.

Ultimately, failing to teach about how power works is disempowering. It makes us complicit with the oppressive forces that affect our students' lives. It's okay to teach them how terrible the world is, or how to work together on common projects, or how to read or do math, but not that there are approaches for building power to actually change some of the terrible things around them. It's too risky for us, and we don't trust them to act in the ways "we" want. Some of us would rather believe what, in our heart of hearts, we know is a fantasy: that people in power will respond substantively if our students just try to collaborate nicely with them.

My point is not that everyone in schools should turn around and start teaching something like community organizing. If you haven't participated in organizing, and if you don't really have a depth of knowledge about the complexities that underly these somewhat simple principles, you aren't equipped to "teach" someone how to act (I am careful about how I teach myself, given my own limited experience and skills). But it is possible to introduce students to the fact that these ideas exist and to a few of the key strategies, as long as we are humble and honest about the limitations of any "answers" in the always unique contexts of any struggle. We can walk together through case studies of organizing efforts and talk about what seemed to work and what didn't and why. We can learn from each other, and trust that those we are working with, in the end, are thoughtful enough and informed enough by their own individual experiences and cultural traditions and collective efforts to make the best decisions for them.

And, of course, this brings us around again to Alinsky's faith in "the people."