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Recruitment And Retention Of
Organizational Participants:
What's Happening Out There Now?

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INTRODUCTION

    This is a study on some initial research relating literature
to actual practice in social action organizations. Our concern is
to learn what are social action organizations of the 1980s doing
to recruit and maintain their membership and how this relates to
the literature on recruitment and retention. We will review the
literature, describe the methodology and report the findings, and
then attempt to connect the findings and the literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

    The literature is replete with lengthy discussions of what
motivates voluntary participation. There has also been a great
deal written on whether or not poor people join organizations,
under what conditions they join, and the forms their participation
takes. The discussions are particularly relevant to community
organizers in social action organizations. These are voluntary
organizations which seek to recruit and maintain large memberships
as an alternative power base in order to win resources and change
existing structural power relations. By definition, recruitment
and retention of organizational participants becomes an important

Focus, an essential means to an end. For these organizations, why people join and remain involved, and what are the most effective means of involvement pose serious and often troublesome questions. The literature suggests some interesting and possibly useful answers.

Olson[1] and O'Brien[2] discuss motivation for voluntary participation on the basis of incentive theory. O'Brien argues that while disadvantaged people have interests in common, they are also self-interested individuals. The "benefits" of voluntary organizations (i.e. instrumental goals attained) accrue not only to participants but to others as well. In order to recruit and retain people, the organization must offer selective individual benefits in addition to collective rewards. O'Brien suggest strategies to deal with the dilemma: offer collective benefits with individual "by-products," use a federated structure which builds on primary organizations which do offer individual benefits, and provide social incentives, viewed as less stable and not competitive with other rewards.

In O'Brien's thinking, the inability to offer individual instrumental rewards will always create a certain deficit in a voluntary organization's ability to recruit and retain membership. Without rewards the organization will always be transitory. Piven and Cloward[3] accept a transitory organizing model asserting that large numbers of people can be mobilized only in the context of a larger socio-political-economic environment and then only for spontaneous action rather than in an ongoing organization. On the other hand, Brager and Specht[4] and Wellstone[5] all underscore the importance of expressive rewards, particularly personal recognition.

Gerlach and Hine[6] in their study of the Pentecostal and Black Power movements, suggest four major factors, perhaps best categorized as relating personal needs to organizational structure. First, they identify fluidity of organizational structure as being functional for promoting growth, preventing suppression, and enabling personal and programmatic change. Second, they identify face-to-face recruitment by committed members along lines of pre-existing, significant social relationships as promoting growth. Third, a process of commitment to both ideology and in-group ties is seen as essential. Finally, the existence and vehemence of an

opposition to the movement intensifies rather than weakens participants' involvement.

Knoke and Wood[7] offer a systems understanding of involvement and retention of organizational participants, conceiving of it as a transaction between internal organizational dynamics and external environmental forces. In their study of "social influence associations" they found that internal organizational characteristics--purposive incentives, legitimate leadership and, most importantly, involvement in decision making--correlated highly with organizational commitment. The reputation for influence was based more on the organizations' ability to amass financial resources and generate high levels of membership commitment than goal attainment in the external environment, a finding which clearly contradicts an emphasis on instrumental rewards.

In developing these theories none of the authors make distinctions among social action organizations; in general they are discussed as a single cohort.[8] Based on discussions with organizers and our own experience this apparent assumption may be erroneous. Certain prototypes do seem to exist, and the testing of existence of these prototypes became part of our study.

Given the literature, we were left with several questions related to current organizing efforts, First, do social action organizations still see recruitment and retention of an active and large membership as a pre-requisite for effective organizing and action? If so, what procedures, rewards, and structures do these organizations use to induce and maintain participation? Second, is membership involvement a focus from which issues and strategies are generated or do the tactical demands of a given campaign necessitate membership recruitment?

Third, is organizational attachment valued and how is it generated? Fourth, are there differences in recruitment and retention between different types of social action organizations? And, finally, in today's social action organizations how much attention is paid to the advice of the literature related to incentives, both expressive and instrumental? In summary, what are the social action organizations of the 1980s doing to recruit and maintain memberships?

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METHOD

These questions were addressed as part of a larger study of approaches to social action organizing. Through reputational means the authors identified established organizations in two East Coast cities which had been in operation for two or more years and employed at least one full-time organizer. These staff were then asked to identify their approach to organizing by selecting from case vignettes reflecting grass-roots, mobilizing, and lobbying approaches to organizing. A total of forty-five organizations-fifteen in each approach-will be involved in the larger study. For the current effort, four grassroots and three mobilizing organizations are analyzed. There are two respondents for each organization: the "lead" organizer and a non-salaried participant, knowledgeable and representative of the organization who is nominated by the organizer.

Two research instruments were used: a structured questionnaire focusing on organizational attribute variables and semi-structured interviews with each respondent focusing on the organizing work itself. Because of the small number of respondents, only very basic descriptive statistics have been used. Qualitative content was analyzed for themes and associations among variables mentioned by respondents.

The organizations included in the current effort have been in existence for between ten and twelve years. The "lead" organizers had all been on staff for at least three years. The organizations represented both interest groups and geographic constituencies.

FINDINGS

Recruitment and Retention of Participants

A subset of questions focused on how and why participants are initially recruited, subsequently engaged, leadership is fostered, and involvement sustained.

All the organizations believed that recruitment of participants was extremely important for the reasons one would expect. They believed in the need to replace community leaders who would be lost to the organization through natural attrition and valued the potential for bringing in "new blood" with new ideas.

Further, the organizers saw recruitment of new participants as a way for the organizations to keep a pulse on the new and current issues of their constituencies. Methods of recruitment varied, but grassroots organizations tended to use federated structures to bring in new people.

The organizations differed in terms of the kinds of people they wanted to recruit. Grassroots groups tended to focus on people who had extensive social networks in combination with other personal qualities. Mobilizing organizations tended to look for "committed individuals" who would remain in the organization on a long term basis and whose motives were more altruistic than self-interested. The majority of participants were those directly affected by the organizations' issues; such people tended to make up the total membership of grassroots organizations. All the organizations had ways of including "supporters" or "experts" in their organizational structures by forming advisory boards, administrative committees, or using formal or informal expert "consultants" on primarily administrative matters.

Most of the organizations made a distinction between levels of participation. They tended to accept the notion that people self-define the degree to which they will participate and simply work with them at that level. Only one organizer said that it was her job, by definition, to increase the individual level of participation or to challenge new people to join the inner circle of more established leaders. The mobilizing organizations tended to be more fatalistic about increasing participation. In one organization there was an inverse relationship: the more active an individual became, the less attention the organizer gave that person.

The organizations differed in their response to why people got involved with them. Most of the grassroots groups said that self-interest was a major factor, along with personal growth, excitement, and a composite of personal reasons. For two of the mobilizing groups, involvement was seen as connected to the organizations' track record for success. One organization merged a religious philosophy with concerns about the neighborhood, and felt that participants' understanding of Christian scripture was a major motivating force.

While all the organizations had ideas about involvement, no group had actually assessed why their membership had become active. In spite of this, the organizations used a variety of methods and messages to recruit people ranging from offering services, espousing the morality of a cause or the importance of a current issue, reinforcing organizational purposes, or alluding to the collective gains of their constituents.

The organizations once again differed in their initial steps to involve new recruits. The grassroots organizations had more organizational structures with decision-making power to absorb new recruits immediately. Boards, steering committees, action committees, and issue committees were used as a way both to engage new people with organizational roles and decisions and with more experienced and established leaders. Mobilizing groups tended to engage new recruits with small, task-oriented responsibilities such as doing research, operating the copying machine, and answering phones.

At an abstract level, the organizations espoused the belief that indigenous people could do all the work of the organization. This belief was limited by a practical concern with volunteer time and capabilities relative to the organizational staff. But even this limited belief was clearly not operational. The grassroots groups generally operated on the principle that staff carries out day-to-day operations while lay leadership makes policy decision with staff "coaching." In mobilizing groups, the roles areoften blurred; staff often made profound organizational decisions. For example, when a mobilizing organizer was asked about who in the organization selected issues, he responded, "Issues would get pick by staff who present them, who have a major input. I have a lot of input.... They (members) want to do something, they're not sure what, and they're open to ways to go." The visibility of staff is defended in various ways; issues move too fast to develop appropriate lay leadership; or the organizer sees herself as a member of the constituency and, therefore, given decision making powers rightfully. The fact that the organizer has the option to choose to be a member of the constituency is not mentioned as a concern about staff-member roles.

All the organizations interviewed had at least one or two lay leaders, if only for the reason that they were then able to say

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they represented their particular constituency. The criteria for leadership differed by the type of organization. Grassroots organizations tended to look for people with a mixture of personal and organizational qualities; people with a natural social network or base in a community institution such as a church were valued. The grassroots organizations also had more structured ways of developing leadership. By offering formal training and informal preparatory and reflection sessions, they had ideas and ways to develop a member into a credible leader. Mobilizing groups tended to look for people who came into the organization with some sort of credibility, perhaps a reputation for activism, and offered them support around their existing strengths. In fact, leadership legitimacy was less significant to the mobilizing groups than was the saliency of an issue. One organizer said, "We'll move on an issue even if we don't have a credible leader. The issues are more important than the development of a leader."

Similarly, the notion of an optimum number of leaders differed by approach. Mobilizing groups tended to want a small number of lay leaders and staff sometimes performed leadership tasks. Recruiting in these organizations was more for background roles than real decision-making leadership positions. Grassroots groups said clearly that the organization could never have too many leaders. As one organizer put it bluntly, "By having fewer leaders we are cutting off exactly what we are trying to do."

The organizations once again differed on ideas of sustaining participation. Mobilizing organizations tended to believe that people stay involved because of their history with the organization in times of struggle; they admit that they have greater difficulty keeping people involved who have not shared that struggle. The dilemma for these organizations is that while they recruit members on the basis of organizational track record, the communication of organizational history is apparently not a strong sustaining force. The grassroots organizations, on the other hand, stress current and constant successes and how that makes organizational participants feel, as well as close personal relationships formed both among members and with the organizer. As one organizer said,

> You should get to know some of the people so
> you can ask about their kids, their dog. And
> no matter how you felt before, you have to go

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in there acting with conviction, that there's
something right about being there, about what
you are doing, not only for yourself, but for
everybody who's there.So they say, 'If this
guy's so sure about it, there's got to be some-
thing there.'

All the organizations emphasized the importance of organiza-
tional victories, both major end-results and small victories
during the organizing process. There was a strong recognition of
the need for success on concrete issues as a way of instrumentally
rewarding people for participation. Grassroots organizers tended
to see victories as an inducement more for people to join the or-
ganization while mobilizing organizers saw them primarily as a way
of sustaining people already engaged. Grassroots groups, then,
saw the emergence of new issues as a way of bringing in new peo-
ple; in mobilizing groups the notion of new issues was seen as
unimportant except when an issue was solved or hopelessly lost.

None of the organizations had given much thought to expres-
sive rewards for participants. They had tried to build in collec-
tive expressive rewards like parties and celebrations and some
individual rewards (public and media exposure in grassroots or-
ganizations and testimonials and plaques in mobilizing groups.)
One organization had an innovative idea about offering a "benefit
package" of discount services from locksmiths, lawyers, and
others. The organization decided, however, not to implement that
incentive. Essentially, all the groups concentrated on offering
instrumental collective rewards through organizational victories
and small collective and individual expressive rewards. Indi-
vidual instrumental rewards were glaringly absent.

Generation of Organizational Work

A subset of questions was framed around whether membership
generated organizational work (i.e. selection of issues, strate-
gies and tactics, and the implementation of action) or whether
organizational work generated the need for recruitment.

All the organizations expressed the idea that issues should
come from their own constituencies but they differed to the degree
to which the belief was realized. Mostly, issues were selected
out of constituent perceived needs and environmental conditions.

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For instance, the Reagan assault on social security benefits was accepted as an issue by a senior citizen organization, even though it had not been yet raised by membership. It was generally conceded that it was more difficult for an organization to proceed on any issue when it had not been raised by constituents.

All the grassroots organizations said that they involved members in selecting issues and had highly structured ways of doing so (e.g. action or issue commttees, boards, surveys.) The mobilizing groups tended to be much more informal about involving participants in selecting issues. As one organizer put it, "The staff bounces an idea off the members, and they're pretty open."

The types of issues preferred also differed by organizational approach. Mobilizing groups had more diverse reasons for selecting issues. Issues of interest to constituents, issues which would produce a large number of people, and issues which reflected the larger socio-political-economic climate were all acceptable. Grassroots groups tended to use the classic Alinsky definition of "good issues;" they had to come directly from constituents, have the potential to increase organizational power, and be concrete and winnable.

In the area of target selection, grassroots organizations once again used committee structures to foster participation; members would be offered alternative targets garnered from staff research. The tendency for mobilizing groups was a larger staff role during target selection. For example, a mobilizing organizer said, "I'm pretty good at selecting targets. I have a tendency to help out there. I can see things, I can see how it looks in the Daily News and how TV is playing it, and that's a lot of my role."

In all the organizations, staff performed a larger role in the selection of strategies and tactics in contrast to issue selection. Clearly here there was a shift of staff control, the rationale being that staff was more expert in the area. In only one organization did members have control over strategy and tactic selection, and this was for pragmatic reasons. "If leaders don't buy the strategy, it isn't do-able," one organizer said. Implementation of strategy, however, meant re-involvement of membership. In grassroots organizations, either lay leaders had the visible roles in action, or it was done mutually by salaried staff and leaders. In mobilizing groups, staff would often have visible

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roles, after consultation with lay leadership. Membership in-
volvement was different at different stages and, then, by or-
ganizational approach. As Figure 1 indicates, grassroots groups
tended to engage members extensively around issue selection, en-
gage leadership only in the selection of strategies and tactics,
and broaden out participation once again during the action phase.
Mobilizing groups tended not to involve the extensive membership
either around issue or strategy selection, broadening out par-
ticipation only in the action stage. One might hypothesize about
the difficulty in involving members that late in the process.

FIGURE 1: LEVELS OF INVOLVEMENT OF
VOLUNTARY LEADERS AND MEMBERS BY PHASES
AND ORGANIZING APPROACH

In sum, all organizations expressed the belief that member-
ship should generate the work the organization pursues; membership
should select issues, targets, and strategies and tactics. The
selection of strategies and tactics involved the least amount of
member participation for all the groups. Grassroots organiza-
tions, however, tended to have many decision-making organizational
structures (e.g. boards, steering committees, and action commit-
tees) which operationalized that belief. These organizations ten-
ded to involve membership intensively and extensively around the
selection of issues, involve a fewer number (mostly identified

leaders) around the selection of strategies and tactics, and then
look for extensive involvement again when implementing the strate-
gy. The mobilizing organizations tended to have less involvement
around both issue and strategy and tactic selection, broadening
out participation only when it came to implementing a strategy.

Organizational Attachment

A subset of questions was framed around issues of organiza-
tional attachment, defined as attachment to the organization's
causes, to other members, and to the organization itself. The
idea of a world view, an over-arching sense of principles, was
rejected by all the organizations, although individual value
statements were evident. Even these were expressed with some am-
bivalence by the organizers. For grassroots organizations, values
were likely to be expressed as an adherence to a shift in power
relations from the "haves" and powerbrokers to the people. For
mobilizing groups the values were most often in relation to a con-
crete issue, e.g. "decent housing" or the "right to a job." One
group had attempted to marry Christian beliefs to organizing prin-
ciples and was using the combination in practice. For instance,
they were planning a Palm Sunday Stations of the Cross march
through the South Bronx, stopping at fifteen neighborhood sore
spots signifying the current reality of scripture. One stop, for
example, was to be a neighborhood brothel symbolizing Jesus' con-
cern for the abuse of women and the rebirth of Mary Magdalene.

The organizations generally had an equally weak sense of op-
position; opponents existed but were not clearly defined or espe-
cially vehement. Mobilizing organizations tended to generalize
opponents (e.g. landlords or employers,) while opponents shifted
in grassroots groups according to the issues. Despite the shift
of opponents, grassroots groups tended to believe that directing
the anger of the membership at a target was important. A dilemma
could be noted here as anger can often only be developed when con-
flict operates continuously and over a long period, an impos-
sibility if targets shift with every new issue.

All the organizations expressed the opinion that members
feeling a "we-ness" was important, but not much was actually done
by any organization to foster in-group cohesion. Mobilizing
groups tended to stress "allegiance to the cause" to bind members
together, while grassroots groups tended to structure in-group

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ties by using committees which would foster a sense of working and socializing together.

Interestingly, consensus on organizational decisions was not seen as very important. As long as internal conflict was contained, organizations could still be functional. The grassroots groups tended to believe that consensus was most important in the area of strategy and tactics. If there wasn't agreement, it was believed, it was unlikely that the strategy could be carried out. These groups tended to define issues so that they would not have the potential of dividing people. They looked for "common denominators" in issues and helped people barter issues of individual self-interest. "If we work on this issue first, we can work on that issue later," was a common approach. Mobilizing organizers, on the other hand, tried to override internal divisions by convincing people of the rightness of a particular issue, what some called the "hard sell" approach.

The grassroots organizations felt that at least the core group of lay leaders had to be committed to the organization over and above any set of issues currently undertaken. Members were seen as expressing their commitment by increasing contact with the organization and taking on more responsibility (e.g. chairing committees, speaking in public, recruiting others.) In mobilizing organizations, commitment to issues took prominence over committment to the organization. People were seen as expressing it in smaller tasksoriented ways such as wearing tee shirts with the organizational logo, running the copying machine or baking cakes for a fundraising event. In grassroots organizations, then, increased commitment means increased responsibility, while in mobilizing organizations involvement does not necessarily result in organizational responsibility.

CONCLUSIONS

In general, social action organizations view recruitment and retention of organizational participants as important. Yet, despite that belief, not a great deal of attention is paid to the care and grooming of the membership. It seems that while the value of membership is operant, there is little assessment of the reasons why members become and stay involved. Mobilizing groups tend to rationalize non-involvement by either assuming the primacy of the issue over leadership development or that staff can assume

lay leadership positions and so membership is secondary. Grass-
roots groups, on the other hand, heavily utilize the tried and
true (but certainly not the only effective) means of structuring
participation by the use of decision-making committees.

The literature we reviewed suggested several ideas about in-
volvement. Our initial findings suggest that social action or-
ganizations do give some limited attention to the various types of
inducements for participapation. O'Brien placed emphasis on indi-
vidual and collective rewards. The organizations studied largely
operate by offering collective instrumental benefits through or-
ganizational victories. Yet, only one organization had discussed
(and ultimately decided against) the implementation of an indi-
vidual instrumental reward in the form of a members-only "benefit"
packages. Knoke and Wood and Brager and Specht all stress the
importance of expressive rewards. Small collective expressive
benefits were noted in most of the organizations through parties
and victory celebrations. Attempts at relatively minor individual
expressive benefits also existed; grassroots organizations gave
individuals media exposure and mobilizing groups rewarded members
with plaques or testimonials. Gerlach and Hine's notion of or-
ganizational attachment was less evident. The grassroots or-
ganizations make attempts at attachment through the use of feder-
ated systems and structures which foster organizational and in-
group affiliation. But a sense of world view was expressed with
ambivalence, and opposition was seldom seen as continuous and
vehement. One group tried to engender organizational attachment
by merging Christian scripture with organization principles.

In sum, our research found some evidence of all the theories,
although not a great deal of practical attention to any strategy
for involvement other than offering collective instrumental re-
wards through organizational victories. Social action organiza-
tions are badly in need of a reformulation of what constitutes the
most effective means of recruitment and retention of participants.
Essential questions revolve around organizational ownership, i.e.,
who owns the organization and what are the various and most effec-
tive ways of initiating participant ownership?

The literature and our initial findings suggest, therefore,
an integrative model for recruitment and retention. Figure 2 rep-
resents this complexity by integrating the idea of offering both
collective and individual instrumental benefits, the notion of

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offering both collective and individual expressive benefits, and, finally, the development of organizational attachment through commitment of individuals both to the organization and in-group ties. It is suggested that organizers develop mechanisms to involve and sustain members in each of these areas. Especially needed are ideas which offer individual instrumental benefits and foster organizational attachment. Membership benefit packages, the articulation of a world view as it arises from an organization's efforts, and a clearer identification and relationship with ongoing and vehement opposition ripe areas for development and thus greater involvement. Our model demands testing, of course. Still to be studied are the model's effectiveness in practice and the relative strength of each component part in recruiting and retaining organizational participants.

FIGURE 2: INTEGRATIVE MODEL OF REASONS FOR
PARTICIPANT INVOLVEMENT

The argument that "the times" simply do not lend themselves to grassroots participation is obviated by the apparent successful social action organizing efforts on the right wing end of the political spectrum. If progressive social action organizations

are to be equally as successful in garnering the masses of support necessary for social change, questions of recruitment and retention of participants must be addressed.

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9. We have categorized three approaches to organizing: 1) a grassroots or populist approach, best expressed in the work of Saul Alinsky; 2) a mobilizing approach, best articulated by Piven and Cloward; and 3) a lobbying approach, as explained by James Q. Wilson, Edward Banfield and practiced by Ralph Nader.