



## The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 9  
Issue 2 June

Article 7

June 1982

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### Recommended Citation

Carew, Robert and Kelly, Tony (1982) "A Tactic for Intervention in Meetings that are Being Controlled," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol9/iss2/7>

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A TACTIC FOR INTERVENTION IN MEETINGS  
THAT ARE BEING CONTROLLED

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ABSTRACT

"This article describes an approach which can be used to generate tactics to free meetings that are being controlled. More assertively it can also be used to increase the probability of achieving prescribed goals in meetings."

The purpose of this paper is to present a framework that can be used by community workers to open up meetings that are being controlled. More assertive use can also be made of the framework to increase the probability of achieving prescribed goals in meetings. As a matter of convenience the focus in this paper will be on the use of the framework in the committee setting; it can, however, be used just as effectively in other types of meetings.

The Relationship between Community Work and the Committee

In Dunham's (1970) view a substantial amount of community work is operationalised through decisions made by committees. For example, he points out committees have the power to finance projects; thus they also have the power to veto other, competing projects. They have the power to appoint key personnel to run the projects; thus they also have the power to reject other applicants. Because they are often seen to be accountable for the success of the projects which they sponsor they have the right to interfere

in the running of these projects.

With such important functions and related power, one would expect to find in the community work literature a considerable amount of space devoted to the critical analysis of the use of committees in this field. One could be excused for expecting to discover articles and research that critically question the fundamental premise that committees do in fact reinforce democracy. However, our literature search confirms the assertions made independently by Simon Slavin (1978) and Ralph Kramer (1975) that there is a substantial void in the administrative and research literature on the functioning of boards and committees and that there is a lack of critical assessment of the interpersonal relationships between its members. In relation to the latter statement, Kramer (p.307) suggests that the naive view persists in the literature that interdependence between members is the norm and furthermore, authors rarely acknowledge the role conflict plays in this setting.

We found that the research that had been undertaken tended to focus on such areas as the attitudes of committee members (R. Ruderman, 1962); cross cultural studies (J. Gyr, 1951); studies focussing on the socio-economic status of board and committee members (E. O'Donnell, 1978), and studies considering the effect of group size on decision making (E. Lowenstein, 1971). We were unable to unearth any literature referring to research concentrating on the question of whether committees are open to abuses, manipulations and pressures that would affect or even undermine the democratic decision making function of committees. Furthermore, apart from the writing of Specht, Kramer, Brager and associates (e.g., G. Brager and S. Holloway, 1978; R. Kramer and H. Specht, 1975) we found few articles that even hinted at the possibility that committees may not uphold the democratic ideal; that, in fact, they could well be a mechanism used to uphold the status quo. A result of this inability to unearth controversial literature on committees led us to question ourselves, that is, whether we were being naive in relation to the whole question of the function of committees in social welfare. We began to wonder if abuse of committees in the community work area is taken very much for granted by those involved in this field and therefore as this is an established fact it does not warrant research or critical assessment. On the other hand, we questioned whether it was possible that the belief in the democratic function of committees is sacrosanct and to question this belief is tantamount to committing a sacrilege; such questioning could be seen as casting doubts on democracy itself. A final point in reference to the consideration of the literature is that we were unable to unearth any literature that clearly illustrated strategies that could be used to increase the probability of achieving prescribed goals in committees.

This lack in the community work literature of a critical examination of the functions of committees is paradoxical. First, there is little doubt that they do perform an important function and their members therefore possess considerable power in operationalising community work. Because of this, it seems vital that such a process be clearly understood. Only through understanding is it possible to build in the necessary safeguards that prevent abuses in the system. If we are unaware of them, or ignore them, the creation of safeguards is not possible.

It is paradoxical second, because of the fact that in recent years there has been an increasing emphasis in the social work literature on the necessity for social workers to develop, test and use knowledge in their practice (O. Stevenson, 1970; H. Bartlett, 1970); in respect to knowledge a committee constitutes a particular type of group and as far as this is concerned social work, social psychology, and sociology have developed numerous theories about groups, yet the community work literature appears to indicate that this knowledge has not been translated into propositions that can be used to maximise the worker's performance in the committee setting.

Finally, the inadequate discussion in the literature is paradoxical because of that fact that the clients of community workers are increasingly becoming members of committees. A problem in relation to this is that committee activity is, as Morris and Rein (1967) point out, predominantly a middle-class activity whereas clients, particularly in the field of community development, are often drawn from the lower socio-economic bracket. The result of such a situation is that clients frequently do not possess the procedural knowledge of committee behaviour nor the skills associated with this activity, and are therefore disadvantaged in such a situation. The community worker who is aware of such a dilemma might decide to set up training programs to help clients acquire knowledge and skills in this area. If there is insufficient literature on this subject it means that workers have to draw upon their practice wisdom to devise such programs. If the worker is relatively inexperienced or ineffective in this area it means that clients will not receive effective training.

In summary it can be seen that it is important for social workers to publish articles related to intervention techniques and strategies that have proved successful in their practice. This is important, first because it is a way in which practitioners can gain knowledge about such techniques and strategies and use them to further the welfare of the people they are attempting to help. Second, it is important because the only way knowledge can be further developed is through actual assessment. In respect to this second point, a considerable amount of literature focussing on the development of social work knowledge suggests that to a significant extent practitioners tend to base their activities on 'practice wisdom' rather than

on theories developed in other disciplines (H. Bartlett, 1970; R. Carew, 1979).

According to Bartlett, 'practice wisdom' is that knowledge which practitioners themselves have developed experientially during the course of their practice. It is disseminated through such avenues as informal discussion, supervision and conferences. Seldom is it written about and presented to a wider audience for assessment. The consequence of this is that further development or redevelopment of these ideas does not occur. This, according to Bartlett, is serious as this knowledge may not become available to a wide audience "all of whom might use it to improve social welfare" (p.73).

As pointed out previously, the purpose of this paper is to present for consideration and assessment a frame that was developed by Australian community workers that can be effectively used to open up meetings that are being controlled. With regard to the development of knowledge, it should be pointed out that the framework emerged through observations and applications in the field: that is, it became obvious through trial and error that if certain tactics were carried out in committees and meetings certain results occurred. This was intriguing and attempts were made to explain why this should be. The following discussion is one such explanatory attempt.

Undoubtedly from the point of view of knowledge development this explanation is pre-scientific and as such could be described in Popper's terms as 'conjecture' or less politely as 'myth'. However, he points out that :

"science must begin with myths, and with the criticisms of myths; neither with the collection of observations, nor with the invention of experiments, but with the critical discussion of myths, and of magical techniques and practices. The scientific tradition is distinguished from the pre-scientific tradition in having two layers. Like the latter, it passes on its theories; but it also passes on a critical attitude towards them. The theories are passed on, not as dogmas, but rather with the challenge to discuss them and improve upon them."

(K. Popper, 1972, p.50)

In respect to this, we have theorised amongst ourselves as to why certain operations carried out in a meeting produce certain results. Because we are unable to proceed any further because of our lack of knowledge of the physical science and lack of resources, we wish to offer this for wider critical consideration and hopefully more rigorous development. A second

reason why we offer it for consideration is that even in the form below it is a powerful method of intervention that can be used by practitioners to open up meetings and increase their chances of getting their items on committees passed.

### The Important Elements in our Framework

The important elements in this framework are 'the triad' and 'energy'. These will now be conceptualised and then followed by an illustration of how these concepts are linked to provide a framework that can be used to open up meetings.

### The Triad

Knowledge derived from triad theory has been used to direct the activities of therapists in counselling - particularly in family therapy (S. Minuchin, 1977). However, we feel that the potential of this input has not been utilised to its full extent by social work theorists and practitioners particularly in the areas of community work - specifically committees, social planning and social work administration.

Caplow (1968) points out that the importance of the influence of triads in relation to society was recognised centuries before sociology evolved as a distinct discipline. The sociological significance of their potential emerged through the work in the early 1890's of George Simmel on the place of conflict in society. In his analysis of conflict Simmel came to the conclusion that a significant potential area of conflict revolved around the patterns of social relationships which involved three elements - the triad.

Caplow points out that after Simmel's death there was not a great deal of concentration on the development of triad theory until the 1950's when social psychologists began to experiment with triadic situations both in the laboratory and real life situations. In this re-emergence of interest there has been a movement away from Simmel's emphasis upon the interactions involving three elements towards an analysis of the dynamics, consequences and variety of coalitions that can be formed in a group consisting of three members. In Caplow's view the term 'member' need not necessarily refer to individuals as it can also pertain to three collectives acting as a unit. This has significance for community work as the 'three collectives' can be seen to refer to such things as localities, agencies, organizations and other institutions related to community work.

Caplow defines a triad as "a social system containing three related members in a persistent situation" (p.1). It is conventional to label

the members A, B and C and to refer to the most powerful member as A. Within a triad there are three possible relations AB, BC and AC. The most significant property of the triad is the tendency for members to divide into differing coalitions of two members against the third. The study of this tendency has been the major preoccupation of present-day triad theorists. Through the application of logical symbolism it has been found according to Caplow (p.6) that there are eight basic types of power distributions in triad formation. These are :

Type 1	Type 2	Type 3
$A = B = C$	$A > B$	$A < B$
	$B = C$	
	$C < (B + C)$	
Type 4	Type 5	Type 6
$A > (B + C)$	$A > B > C$	$A > B > C$
$B = C$	$A < (B + C)$	$A > (B + C)$
Type 7	Type 8	
$A > B > C$	$A = (B + C)$	
$A = (B + C)$	$B = C$	

A point that should be taken into account is that the power distribution gives only a partial description of a triad; for a full understanding it is necessary to consider the triad in its specific situation.

The focus in the above formulations is specifically concerned with the effects a variety of coalitions have on a group consisting of three members. We, on the other hand, realised that it would be necessary for A, B and C to temporarily equalise power and direct the resulting energy towards outsiders in order to achieve their agreed-upon goals in the committee. If this was not done, energy would be dissipated in internal power struggles which would negatively affect the prescribed outcomes. In this respect, then, we went beyond present triadic theory as we focussed upon the use of the triad in an equal coalition in conflict with forces outside of its three members. It will be seen later in this paper that such a coalition can be effectively used to achieve prescribed goals.

## Energy

Undoubtedly there is an awareness that individuals produce and possess energy which directs their activities and which is usually described as psychic energy. However, conceptualisations in relation to psychic energy are nebulous. A prime reason for this seems to spring from the fact that the relationship between the physiological, psychological and environmental determinants of energy as yet have not been satisfactorily linked.

A similar situation exists when individuals form a group. Again we are aware of 'energy' as a phenomenon but it seems to defy accurate definition and analysis. When running a group one can roughly judge the level of group energy by using such constructs as high-low, positive-negative, and so on. We also possess techniques that can be implemented to increase or decrease the level of energy. But if we are requested to describe the nature of group energy and its origin there is a tendency to use vague generalisations.

As our framework is dependent on the acceptance of the premise that human beings are capable of creating, using and transmitting energy, we feel that it is necessary to present some evidence drawn from the work of theorists in an attempt to support this premise.

Freud (1953) was probably one of the first theorists to suggest that individuals possess psychic energy. In respect to this, psychic energy is directly linked to his concept of libidinal drives and impulses. His conception proposed that because libidinal energy or drives constantly seek gratification they are an important determinant of behaviour. In his view psychological drives are the sum of psychic energy available to the individual.

Kurt Lewin (D. Cartwright, 1963) was another theorist who included the concept of energy in his theoretical construct. In his view, the personality consists of different structures or regions such as, for example, the perceptual-motor region. These regions, claims Lewin, are capable of changes within or between themselves. This change occurs through the utilization of energy. For example, in states of disequilibrium, energy is used to achieve a steady state while in a state of conflict energy is used to operationalise problem solving mechanisms.

In Lewin's construction energy is seen to be causally related to individual needs aroused by such things as physiological states, factors in the environment, goal achievement and interpersonal conflict. Lewin used the term 'valances' to refer to the properties that led to energy expenditure. Positive valances are those that represent attractions to the individual while negative valances are those that repel the individual and as such generate avoidance behaviour.



Although Lewin emphasised the part played by energy in individual and social behaviour, he tended to ignore the physiological aspects of this phenomenon. His theoretical underpinnings were drawn largely from his knowledge of physics.

In relation to energy within groups, Cattell (1948) suggested that individuals join groups primarily for the purpose of satisfying psychological needs. These needs, he says, in their raw form are expressed as energy. He referred to this energy as 'Synergy'. According to Cattell the activities of groups are directed towards the maintenance and/or achievement of group goals. The group uses synergy to maintain and achieve goals. The portion of synergy that is used to establish cohesion and harmony he referred to as 'maintenance synergy'. The energy used to achieve goals is referred to as 'effective synergy'. Again, there is little discussion or speculation with regard to the physiological determinants of energy; again we observe the presentation of the notion that energy is important to group life but find no consideration, in any depth, of what constitutes energy. However, an article by Gruen (1979) indicates that theorists are beginning to attempt to integrate the knowledge about energy found in physiology, psychology and sociology. He points out that the energy that is transmitted in such human interactions as 'love' is not necessarily synonymous with the physical energy required to send and transmit love. To link the physiological-chemical and psychic components of energy together he presents a new concept which he refers to as 'nurtenergy'.

Of importance to our framework is the evidence Gruen cites to establish the fact that people are capable of producing psychic energy, which is related to physiological determinants.

Gruen suggests that probably at its simplest level psychic energy is similar to the firings of nerve fibres. He points out that it is not yet fully understood how different biochemical energy sources produce the stimuli that trigger the pump behind a nerve impulse which consists of the exchange of ion particles along its path. But, he says that we do know that nerve fibres fire all the time, at random, even without any evidence of 'activation' or external stimulation. We can, he claims, therefore

"recognise this unique conversion of biochemical energy into electrical-chemical energy, in the nerve fibre, as the rudiment of 'psychic energy'. We see here another example of 'transformation' and negentropy production, because the composites of this neural energy are dialectically transformed to 'higher' or more complex (psychological) energy. This new form of energy potentially allows the organism to engage in much more complex functions".

(p. 26)

Although the evidence Gruen presents is far from conclusive it does indicate that there is a growing awareness by scientists of the importance of the relationship between energy and behaviour. In our view, the research indicates that human biological systems produce energy through physiological-chemical activities and that this is converted into psychic energy.

Because all individuals are capable of producing energy they are referred to as energy points in our approach. Furthermore, in relation to energy we have observed in meetings individuals are capable of energising others through verbal and non-verbal communications.

Examples of this phenomenon are numerous; the speaker who lifts a large audience to a state of high excitation is one such example.

A further phenomenon we have observed is that positive communication between two points tends to also positively charge other points within the communications energy range. A simple, and to some extent realistic explanation for such an occurrence is that this is due to such factors as the positive content of the message for these other points, or the general popularity, prestige, esteem and knowledge the sender of the message has. However, in our observations, there often also seems to be other variables which are difficult to pin point that create this effect. The only way we have been able to make sense of why points other than those that are the direct receivers of a message become positively charged is to liken this phenomenon to the effect a magnet has on certain materials. For example, when a number of paper clips are placed at equal distances from each other on a table and a magnet is placed in the middle of the arranged clips, some clips will immediately move towards the magnet; others will hover but not physically move towards it. Both sets of clips are positively charged, but only those nearest the magnet are drawn to it, whereas those further away are attracted to it but not to the extent that they move. Because of the above we refer to the environment in which meetings take place as a 'field'.

#### The Purpose of Our Approach

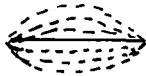
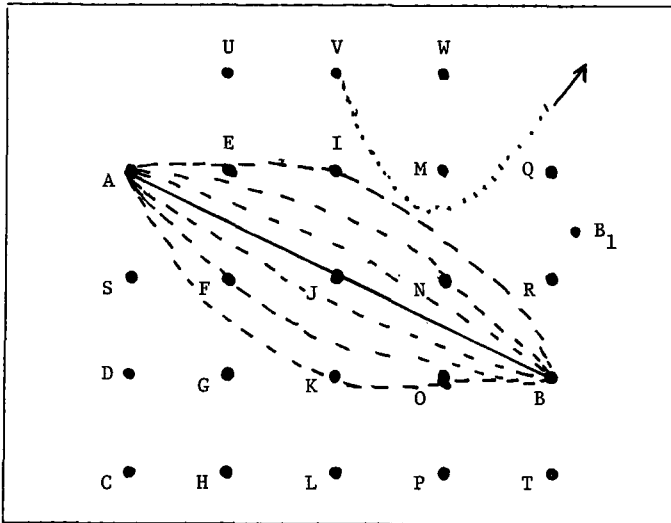
The primary object of this approach is to capture space within the field because it is through this that meetings are opened up. The way in which this is done is through the creation of energy fences. An energy fence is created by a positive communication between two points. It has been found in practice that it is very important to ensure that the communication is pitched at a similar level to the general energy output of the meeting at that time. Too low an output will not establish an effective fence. Too high an output tends to repel those points within the range of the fences. The reasons why this is so will become apparent when we discuss 'saturation of field'.

Diagram I below illustrates the way in which a fence is established.

A sets up a fence with B by saying something similar to the following: "I agree with B's view and think we should consider it carefully." It can be seen from the diagram that energy is exerted in radial lines outwards and away from the points AB. The two important characteristics of an energy fence from a strategic point of view are that the fence is capable of distributing energy some distance from its boundaries along its borders and second, that it tends to block communications amongst the opposition.

DIAGRAM 1.

- (i) An Energy Fence created between Points A and B.
- (ii) V's communication to P repelled by Energy Fence.



The distribution of energy

Line of communication between points

Under controlled conditions - that is, that the energy generated by a communication is at a similar level to the general energy within the field - the energy created by the fence positively charges points within

its range on either side of it. This will have two effects: first, some points will be drawn towards it. For example, in Diagram I the fence created by A's communication with B would - under controlled conditions - draw points K, O, F, J, E, I and N towards it, and therefore the likelihood of these points agreeing with the communication is very high because they have been energised by this fence. The second effect is that although certain points won't necessarily be drawn towards the fence they will be attracted to it. In Diagram I points M, R, S and G would be attracted but not necessarily drawn to the fence. In other words, they would be sympathetic, although not committed, to A, B's communication.

#### SATURATION OF A FIELD

An interesting phenomenon has been observed when points generate far too high a level of energy in relation to the general level of energy in the meeting. The result of this is that the energy is transmitted as a positive; it then strikes the boundaries of the field and returns as a negative. In this way the field is saturated with negative energy. Most people who have attended meetings have at some time experienced this phenomenon. The meeting proceeds at a comfortable level where the energy output is neither too high or too low. Then, quite unexpectedly, for no apparent reason an outburst from someone occurs. Members are either surprised, shocked, annoyed, or embarrassed. In this new emotional state they tend not to listen to what is being said but instead react to the excess energy being generated. They attempt to defend themselves from it usually through blocking or rejecting the content of the message. Those who might under different circumstances support the views being transmitted are reluctant to be identified with the deviant member. In this way the point becomes isolated from other points within the field and its communication is nullified or rejected out of hand. The tactical significance of this phenomenon is that points can be deliberately placed in a field to perform this function. For example, the triad are attending a meeting where they are greatly outnumbered. They place a further two or three people in the meeting whose function it is to be more converted to the opposition's view than most of the opposition. At the appropriate time these points generate support for the opposition's view in such a manner and at such a level that only the most rabid would identify themselves as agreeing with what is being said. The triad, using a far more moderate level of energy output, then, either suggest counter proposals or compromise proposals which the fairminded are only too pleased to support. The use of this strategy pre-supposes that there are control mechanisms within the meeting such as meeting procedure and so on. If there is not there is the danger that the strategy will backfire and mob rule will take over.

#### LINKING 'THE TRIAD' AND 'ENERGY' TO ACHIEVE GOALS

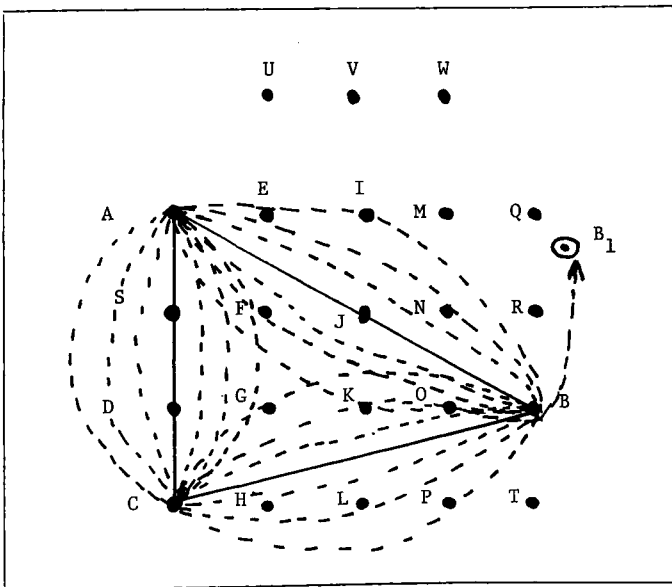
The underlying concepts of this approach have been described. It is now the intention to discuss how the potential of this knowledge is operationalised in practice. It is not the intention to describe every technique that can be

used, but rather to present the basics which can then be developed further in practice. For maximum effectiveness it is necessary to ensure that at least three people with shared goals attend any meeting. These people must be familiar with this theoretical approach and committed to achieving their goals. The primary object at the meeting is to capture space through the use of static and mobile energy fences. The way in which a fence is established has already been discussed and illustrated. However, consideration of Diagram I indicates that although this fence positively charges points within its radius, it does not necessarily capture space.

To capture space it is necessary at the onset to set up three connecting energy fences which form a triangle. The area within the triangle is the space captured. Having established this space it is then possible for one of the points of the triad to become mobile and capture further space.

DIAGRAM II

- (a) Capturing space through the use of the triad
- (b) B moves to new position  $B_1$



In Diagram II above the triad are points A, B, C. At the appropriate time in the meeting A establishes a fence with B by saying something similar to the following: "I think B has some very interesting ideas about this and I think the committee will agree with me when they hear them." B then briefly presents his ideas, and C then says, "After hearing what B has to say on the subject I agree with A's contention that it's a good idea and I feel that we should really give it serious consideration." In this way A has set up a fence with B. C has set up fences with both A and B. The space within the triangle A B C has been captured because of the fact that these fences generate energy away from them and thus draw and attract points towards them. Fence A to B would draw points F, O, K, I, N, E and J towards it. Fence B to C would draw points H, L, P, G, K and O towards it. Fence A to C would draw points S, D towards it. If a vote was taken just after the space had been captured, A or B or C's motion would be carried because 16 out of a possible 23 points would be positively charged.

If, however, it was felt that the time was not ripe for a vote, mobile fences could be used to capture further space. Point O which has been positively charged could be used to maintain the original space that was captured in more or less original shape. B could then move to a new position between Q and R, for example, and A, C and B<sub>1</sub> could create a new triangle and capture more space.

Once the original triangle (of fences) has been established and there is certainty of maintaining this space the patterns and the amount of space that can be captured are numerous. This can be continued until one is certain that the meeting is positively energised. A motion is then put before the meeting and voted upon. It is highly unlikely that it will be defeated.

#### CONCLUSION

This paper was given to colleagues for assessment prior to sending it in for consideration for publication. The major criticism or concern was that the conception was mechanistic and it was felt that individuals should not be perceived as energy points without wills or minds of their own; one colleague went so far as to suggest that the activities proposed were diabolical. There are deliberate reasons for dehumanising this scheme. As previously pointed out, committees and other similar meetings play an important role in decision making particularly with regard to the allocation and distribution of money and other scarce resources. For this reason, social workers and, more specifically, those in the community field, who often represent the powerless in the competition for resources, need a repertoire of techniques to enable them to be successful in such competition, particularly when the cards are stacked against them. Sentiment can often be a negative in such competition. One may like and sometimes respect others on the

committee, and acknowledge their point of view; and as a result one is vulnerable to manoeuvres which can result in failure in obtaining badly needed resources. By viewing the members of the committee in such abstract terms as 'energy points' one is able to put distance between other members of the committee and oneself and thus achieve the necessary objectivity to operate freely. The use of such a framework does not necessarily imply a lack of respect for individuals; in fact, in our view, it indicates an awareness that others on the committee possess objectives, skill and determination to achieve their ends.

As we subscribe to the view that genuine client participation in community work is of vital importance we feel that there is justification for teaching such tactics to the disadvantaged so that at least they have some hope of competing on even terms with those who possess greater influence and verbal know-how. In respect to this approach we have applied it successfully in the field and have taught people to use it.

A further criticism by our colleagues was that the strategies proposed for use in this paper are extremely manipulative. Our answer to this is that our primary objective in using them has most often been to open meetings where there is evidence of control by the executive or other power elites. We do not deny that they could be used for personal gain. But the same could be argued for the majority of strategies used in community work. Control and manipulation have always been part of the social work dilemma.

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