

African American Models of Community Organization: Toward a Culturally Competent Theory

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Research Problem

There is a rich history of organized efforts undertaken by African Americans to improve African American community functioning (Carlton-LaNey & Burwell, 1995; Harding, 1981; Young, 1996). Unfortunately, for the discipline of social work, such efforts are rarely discussed in community organizing pedagogy (Carlton-LaNey and Burwell, 1995; Carlton-LaNey, 1999; Kahn, 1995). The failure to examine strategies used by members of this community to mobilize against oppression, racism and disadvantage is more than an unfortunate lacuna in the community practice knowledge base. The lack of organizing models based in the world view and experiences of African Americans and other people of color fundamentally calls into question the cultural competency of the organizing models currently used by the profession (Delgado, 2000; Glugoski, Reisch and Rivera, 1994; Gutierrez and Lewis, 1994; Rivera and Erlich, 1997; Young, 1996). The purpose of the research summarized here was to expand community practice theory in a direction that increases our understanding of the unique dynamics of organizing within the African American community.

The Research Question

The dissertation research was aimed at determining whether a theoretical model of African American community organizing could be configured from an examination of the organizing approaches used by African American organizers working in contemporary African American communities.

Research Methodology and Data Analysis

A grounded theory methodological approach was used to conduct the study. Snowball and theoretical sampling methods were used to develop a pool of 20 African American community organizers, who were either members of the Institute for the Black World (IBW), a national network of African American organizers representing an array of social philosophies that can be defined as progressive, or who were recommended by IBW members familiar with their work.

Data collection consisted of telephone interviews with African American community organizers who worked in varying urban African American communities across the United States¹. During each interview, the researcher sought to identify the key approaches organizers used when engaging with African American community members. The interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes to one hour and were tape recorded, transcribed and then entered into Atlas.ti in order to conduct data coding and analysis. The search for a theoretical description of African American organizing models was loosely guided by a set of questions that incorporated concepts developed by Rothman (1974; 1996) and Young (1996) in their respective community organizing analysis frameworks².

Results

Twenty organizers, including 10 women and 10 men ranging in age from 27 to 80 years old, provided the data for the findings. The organizers held varying social philosophies with most organizers stating that their philosophical perspectives were shaped by multiple schools of thought. The most commonly mentioned social philosophy was socialism, followed by Africentrism, then Black Nationalism, eclecticism and finally egalitarianism. Only four of the organizers interviewed engaged in organizing as their primary profession. In terms of training, the majority (18) of the organizers had a combination of practical experience and non academic instruction in organizing techniques.

From the analysis of the interview data, five core theoretical concepts describing African American approaches to community organizing emerged; these included a) cultural dynamics, b) locus of community power, c) organizing goals, d) mobilization methods and e) change strategies. Two propositions were developed from the analysis to

¹ The greatest number of organizers (15) were from the northeast.

² The researcher employed an interview guide that incorporated three concepts from Rothman's (1964, 1974, 1996) community organizing analysis framework (orientation to power structure, goals and change strategies) in order to frame the discussion in the context of community organizing, along with concepts (social philosophy, mobilization methods and cultural dynamics of organizing) developed by Young (1996) that described unique African American culture based organizing approaches used by three historical African American social movement organizations-the Universal Negro Improvement Association, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Black Panther Party. Rather than 'forcing' the data to fit these concepts, the definitions of these concepts were redefined using the distinctive perspectives of the organizers interviewed.

link these concepts into a model of African American community organizing. Each proposition is described below.

Proposition 1. The culture based world view and social philosophical perspectives held by the organizers each influence their standpoint on the locus of community power and how power can best be deployed to make change in African American communities.

Proposition 2. By examining the sub-categories describing the organizers' perspectives on the locus of community power—that is where power is located in reference to a community (externally, internally or combined)-and the change strategies organizers employ, it is possible to distinguish patterns in the: a) goals, b) mobilization methods and c) the use of culture in African American community organizing. The data analysis conducted based on these propositions yielded a theoretical model of African American community organizing and three distinctive sub-models of community organizing; including political action, resource and capacity development and cultural empowerment (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 provides a detailed overview of the three African American culture based models of community organizing derived from this study. The political action organizing model is similar to the social action model developed by Rothman (1974) with one core difference, the use of African American culture as a tool for motivation. Efforts under this model are centered on organized drives to draw power and resources into the community. Community members are seen as lacking the full resources to solve community problems however, a key power held within the community is the power to use social pressure to force external systems to change policy or to take other specified action to address a community need. Thus, the mobilizing approaches used in this model make use of attention getting tactics (i.e. stunts, press conferences). The primary change strategies are: issue-based consciousness raising targeted at developing the capacity for mass mobilizing, participation in advocacy groups, and political participation in the form of voting. Tactics center on confrontation, protest, voting, political advocacy, grassroots research and policy study, direct confrontation and civil disobedience. Cultural factors incorporated under this model include the use of history, spirituality, music and art forms to "motivate struggle".

The resource and capacity development organizing model is aimed at institution building as a means of increasing community members' capacity to address self defined issues. The goal is centered on ensuring consistent, focused and long-term efforts to end varying forms of oppression. Adherents of this model assume that community power lies within the collective resources and capacities of community members to address their own needs and in drawing in some economic or educational resources from supportive external institutions (i.e. grant funding and technical assistance). Mobilizing approaches are focused on face-to-face contacts and small and concentrated efforts to establish mutual aid based social relationships among community members and institutions. Change strategies include collaboration and coordinated community problem solving, community education, technical assistance, increasing access to technology, philanthropy, leadership development and international collaboration with African descended and other oppressed peoples. Resource and capacity development organizers focus on cultural factors by seeking to understand the unique dynamics of the African

American social historical experience and the ways that aspects of this experience can be used to counteract modern day social and economic oppression.

The cultural empowerment organizing model describes empowerment organizing efforts aimed at solving problems by changing the denigrated and powerless stereotypes and self-perceptions held by some African American community members. Such perceptions are seen as stunting the ability for individual and collective self help, thus change efforts focus on promoting Black Consciousness/African Centered perspectives through various African influenced cultural forms. Under this model, power lies in individual and communal efforts to resist denigrated and powerless stereotypes of African descended people. Mobilization methods center around forms of cultural appreciation including: marking key historical events of the African Diaspora, education on aspects of African and African American history and culture, artistic appreciation of folk and popular African inspired art forms and on youth development. Tactics include hosting events, performances and instruction in history and/or culture. Cultural Empowerment organizers use culture as a tool for fostering resistance and liberation.

Implications for Social Work Practice

Although the findings of this study cannot be widely generalized beyond the sample, the research does provide a clear illustration of the ways that cultural differences shape community practice modalities beyond a surface level. The research also justifies the examination of indigenous approaches to community practice undertaken by communities of color, in order to realize cultural competency in this practice area. Key findings centered on the centrality of culture as a tool for 1) relating to community members, 2) understanding the nature of and developing solutions for community problems and 3) motivating participation. This research illustrated the critical need to understand the impact of oppression on the psyche and the social reality of African Americans and the ways that community members relate to each other and mainstream society.

Beyond providing a conceptual framework for understanding African American community organizing, the research also provides guidance in terms of strategies that can be used in African American community practice. One of the most critical dynamics discussed by organizers was the need to be involved in community work beyond a professional interest and the necessity of meeting clients where they are in a literal sense, which includes being open to developing linkages with community members that extend beyond business hours. The organizers also discussed examples of efforts to improve community access to political and economic resources, and capacity building efforts that lead to increased community capacity for self help. These and other strategies illustrated in the research can be used to conduct culturally competent social work practice in African American communities.

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Figure 1. African American Models of Community Organization.

