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ABSTRACT

The paper describes a phenomenological approach to the understanding and explanation of how people and organizations make the decision to become involved in community action. Three sufficient conditions to induce cooperation are presented. Community action is presented as the result of a cooperative system of people and organizations that choose to become involved independently, based on their absolute and dynamic values. A model for community involvement is described that includes a problem, the social structure, convergence of interest, and goal formation. Formation of effective initiating, recruitment, and execution sets is presented as an important consideration for all community action.

This article is an essay on community-wide efforts at change as seen by the author in more than 30 years of direct experience in the business of community development education. It is written to present core ideas designed to give a clearer understanding of the communities in which we live. We know, to begin with, that each community has a history of successful and not-so-successful "community development" efforts. As a result of these efforts, over time the relationships among people and between their systems tend to become fragmented and highly polarized. Positions are taken; sides are drawn as problems arise and are resolved. Conflicting relationships tend to develop among social systems and the people in these systems when their attention is turned to community development problems. The solutions of these problems generally call for significant commitment and cooperation on the part of units (social systems) and people directly affected by the problem.

A Phenomenological Start

A starting point from which to study the process is to keep in mind that the community, our community, is what we think it is, what we believe it to be or not to be. If we view our community as good, then that is the way we are going to keep it. If we view it as bad, then we are either going to try to alter it or leave it. How we view our community is related to our belief system. It is phenomenological. It has something to do with perceptions, identity, loyalty, and structure. (Boulding, 1961)

The proposition is made that the community—in terms of its people, social systems, and structure—is a cooperative system, not because cooperation is a "good thing," but because it is absolutely necessary in order to achieve community goals (Kanter, 1983; Kelman and Warwick, 1973; Loomis, 1960; Louman and Pappi, 1976; Parsons, 1937, 1960; Weber, 1943).

Despite an almost universal impression of national selfishness and narcissism, Americans are basically cooperative. In fact, there is a widely held cultural belief that it is good to be cooperative and bad to be noncooperative. As a society we tend to shy away from or avoid noncooperative people. But Americans are also pragmatic and discriminate carefully in their patterns of cooperation or involvement. So the basic question is, "Why—that is, in what circumstances and under what conditions—do we cooperate or not cooperate?"

From my scholarship, research, and observation of human behavior, I have worked out this explanation. The general philosophical principle is: *I will not cooperate with anybody, for any reason, on any task that I can do myself* (Anderson, 1963; 1970; 1976; 1986).

I believe that this individualistic, self-centered do-it-myself position characterizes the American people more accurately than participatory democracy, cooperation, altruism, or concern for the well-being of others. When I say this, I am not making a value judgment. I am simply saying analytically that if there is any one principle that seems to govern the behavior of most people, it is the principle that they do not cooperate with anybody on any task they can do themselves.

We all deal with, and are responsible for, very limited resources, the resources of our own time, talent, money, and values. Therefore, it is logical that we ask, "Why should I cooperate?" before making a cooperative commitment.

Clearly, we cannot always remain independent because we haven't the resources to do everything alone. We organize and cooperate to achieve tasks that we perceive are worth doing and that we cannot achieve by ourselves. If any one of us could do these tasks individually we probably would, because then the benefits derived from them would be ours—social recognition, monetary reward, self-satisfaction, or whatever—benefits based on values of importance to us. If I cooperate with somebody on a task, then it is no longer

my project, it is *our* project. I must share the gains or losses associated with it with somebody else.

Once we identify a project worth doing and assess what is needed to get the job done, the relevant principle of involvement is that the only time we should seek the involvement of someone else is when he or she has a resource that, combined with our resource, will accomplish the task that could not be independently achieved. Then we tend to share or exchange our loosely held or surplus resources, but not our closely held values.

All acts of involvement have a price tag, a cost, an investment, a responsibility. This cost is reflected in terms of the allocation of our own limited resources and our identification with the resulting product. So when we set up cooperative arrangements, these are not to be entered into lightly. None of us can afford to be so cooperative as to say, "Sure, count me in," every time we are asked to become involved in an activity. That may be why there appears to be some public apathy in most communities. It may well be that many of our community projects are really not worth the cost of commitment called for or necessary to complete the project. Maybe the costs, or the potential losses, are too high. Or it simply may be a project of little or no importance to us at that time. In other words, cooperation may be good and rewarding, not so good and not rewarding, or irrelevant and unnecessary. In fact, it may be harmful (Etzioni, 1975; Kimberly et al., 1980; March, 1965; March and Simon, 1959; Merton, 1959).

We do not really involve ourselves in any meaningful decision making, development, or cooperative act without committing ourselves and our resources to that action. To simply say, "It is a good idea," or "I wish you luck," or "Let me know how it turns out," is not meaningful interaction. It is not sufficient cooperation and does not generally lead to development. Only when we are willing to invest ourselves and our resources are we likely to become a part of community decision making and community development. When we do this, we place our life's values on the line and they cannot be retracted. That is what it takes to get into the decision-making structures of communities and to become a community decision maker for community development. Our personal and organizational resources—name, reputation, what we stand for—are involved.

The Cooperative Process

Community involvement is a very obvious part of community development. Community involvement, by definition, calls for community cooperation, but what is "cooperation?" (Barnard, 1938). Cooperation is a very widely used and generally misunderstood concept in most communities of America. It is appropriate, at this point, to state my ideas about community cooperation in a more precise form:

1. Cooperation is not *good* or *bad*; it may be either or both.
2. Community action is organizational in character, whether it is the informal organization of two people or large-scale formal organizations of 500 people. Community action is an organizational activity and, as such, some common "principles of organization" govern the action.
3. Community actions are interorganizational and therefore cooperative activities. This is true not because of choice or because of the goodness or appropriateness of cooperation, but because of a *necessity* for multi-person/multiunit involvement and commitment for successful community problem resolution.
4. Cooperation is the ordinary business of life in a human society.
5. Cooperation comes into being when: (1) there are persons or organizations able to communicate with each other (2) who are willing to contribute their own limited resources to a cooperative action (3) to accomplish a specific goal.
6. Cooperation occurs only when individual or organizational limitations become significant factors in goal achievement and when the application of the resource energy of two or more persons or organizations has the potential to overcome this limitation.

People must be induced to cooperation or there can be no cooperation. *The net satisfactions that induce people to contribute their efforts to an organization result from their perception of positive advantages as against the disadvantages that are entailed.*

Sufficient conditions for involvement in cooperative community action programs involve at least three elements or postulates:

Postulate 1:

An individual or organization will become involved in, and contribute resources to, cooperative activities that will directly enhance the interest of that specific individual or organization.

Postulate 2:

An individual or organization will become involved in, and contribute resources to, cooperative activities that will directly enhance the interest of a broader community of interests of which that specific individual or organization is a member or part.

When these two conditions are met, it is possible to postulate that:

Postulate 3:

An individual or organization will insist on becoming involved in and contributing resources to cooperative activities that are perceived as serving the actual or potential good of the whole community of interest as well as of each individual or organization holding membership in that community.

The Involvement Process

Given this image of the cooperative process, I now want to describe briefly a model for community involvement. To do so, I have drawn heavily on the work of a number of sociologists at Michigan State University. I believe their work provides a base for understanding community involvement as it really is (Sower et al., 1957; Miller, 1953).

There are three major parts to the model:

1. *Problem recognition, convergence of interest,* and *goal formation*
   (1) Identification of a problem
   (2) Identification of the individual units and groups directly affected, positively as well as negatively
   (3) Development of alternative solutions

2. Establishment of an *initiating set*
   (1) Justifying the membership of the initiating set
   (2) Justifying the goals proposed by the initiating set
   (3) Securing legitimation, support, and sponsorship of these goals

3. Recruitment and establishment of an *execution set*
   (1) Justifying the membership of the execution set
   (2) Securing organizational as well as individual commitment to a program of action
   (3) Planning the detailed course of action to follow
   (4) Implementing or carrying out the action program

Briefly let us follow the path through this model for community involvement (Figure 1) and see if it has any relevance to the understanding of community action programs. I believe it does account for and explain essential aspects of most community action projects. Note that all of the "action" in this model takes place before the implementation of the community action. (Figure 1, Model for Community Involvement, is derived and adapted from Model for Community Action in Sower et al., 1957:317.)
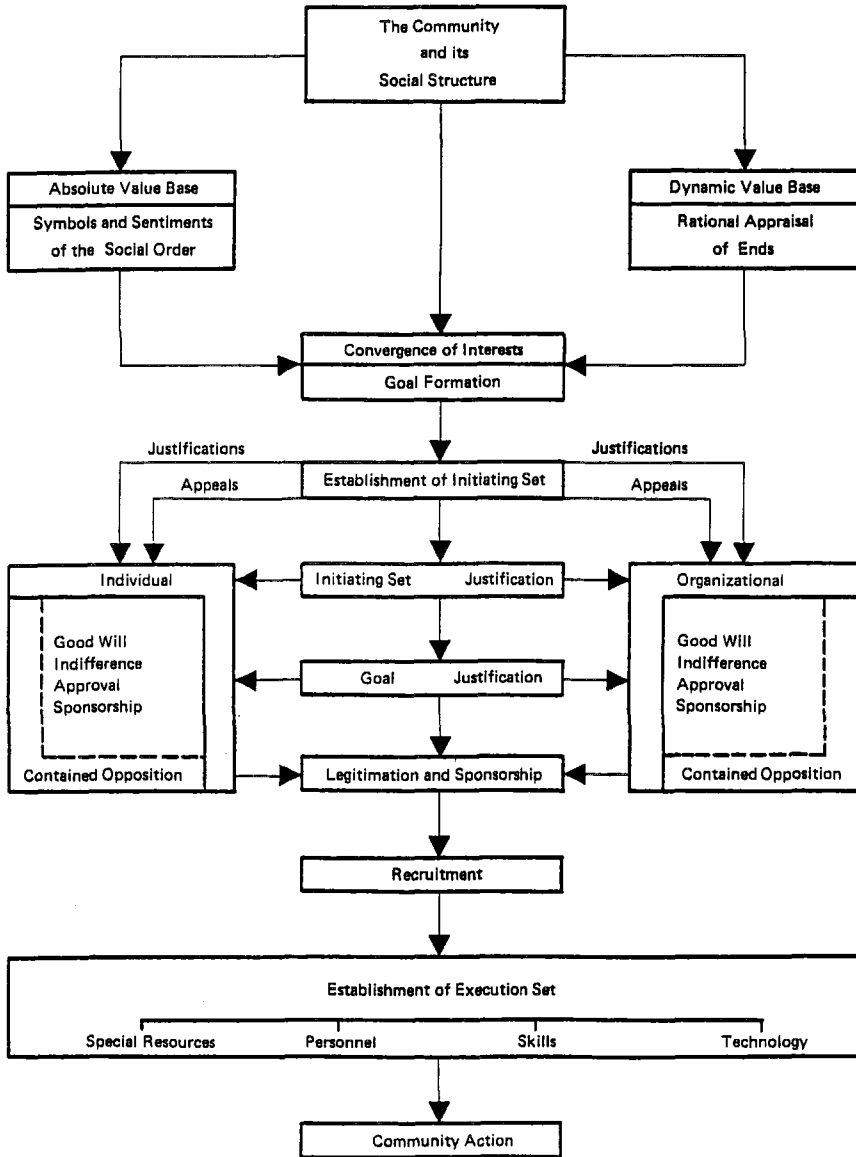
The Community
and its
Social Structure

Absolute Value Base

Symbols and Sentiments
of the Social Order

Dynamic Value Base

Rational Appraisal
of Ends

Convergence of Interests

Goal Formation

Justifications   Justifications
          Appeals   Establishment of Initiating Set   Appeals

Individual   Initiating Set   Justification   Organizational

Good Will   Good Will
Indifference   Indifference
Approval   Goal   Justification   Approval
Sponsorship   Sponsorship

Contained Opposition   Legitimation and Sponsorship   Contained Opposition

Recruitment

Establishment of Execution Set

Special Resources   Personnel   Skills   Technology

Community Action

Figure I - Model for Community Involvement

Let us assume a community problem has been recognized and alternative courses of action have been contemplated. Starting at the top of the model, our first task is to identify the specific social units (the social structures) that in one way or another are directly affected by the community action to be taken. Make a list of all individuals, groups or organizations that have a socially defined right to become involved in the action. At this point it is not important how or if they will get involved or what position (for or against) they are likely to take. The only test to be met is: do they have the socially defined right to be involved in the action?

If so, they make up the *legitimate order* affected by that particular problem. The legitimate order is defined as including all individuals or groups who see themselves and are seen by others as having the socially defined right to be involved in the action. One test of such membership is whether the unit in question will go into opposition if it is ignored, not consulted, or not involved.

Next we need to consider the basis for securing cooperation of members of the legitimate order for the community action proposed. Support for such action must logically evolve from *value bases* appropriate to each unit in the legitimate order of the social structure within which it is being proposed. By this I mean that each organization in the legitimate order will independently test—approve or reject—the proposed action using its own organizational values as involvement criteria.

The value bases for cooperative involvement of these units are derived from two sources. The first I call the *absolute value base,* such as "symbols and sentiment;" the second may be referred to as the *dynamic value base*, such as "appraisal and allocative standards."

Symbols and sentiments are considered to be absolute in character. They are the time-tested, traditional, generally unchallengeable foundations of an individual's or an organization's behavior. They are belief systems. Every individual and every organization has a belief system, an absolute value base that is not challengeable. To debate it is nonsense. If, for example, I am bigoted and a racist, you are not going to change my mind or my heart with logical reasoning and arguments that assert that I shouldn't be. You may be able to do it with some other kinds of strategy, but probably not with rational debate or systematic evidence. This value base may govern whether and how I do or do not become involved in cooperative activity.

Dynamic values, or appraisal and allocative standards, on the other hand, are rationally derived, tentative in nature, and subject to periodic evaluation and change. They are best illustrated by our use of new knowledge. As technology develops, we drop old technologies and old ways of doing things and adopt new ways, employing the new technology. Such value changes are ever-present and occur in all facets of life. We see evidence of this in the market place, in the food we eat and the fashions we wear. We see it in modes of travel, in offices

and industry. We even see changes in education, religion, and community affairs.

After the assessment of value bases likely to govern the behavior of the social structure to be involved, the next step in the model is the *convergence of interest*. This takes on a special meaning here in that it implies a convergence upon the acceptance of a specific group goal. Different individual organizations can accept the same goal for quite different reasons. The important point is that convergence does take place *regardless of the individual or independent motive backing this social convergence*. When social convergence takes place, then, and only then, does meaningful goal formation occur.

In many community development efforts, however, the tendency is to deal with the people who have the same values we have, those who have to contribute essentially the same resources that we possess. We hesitate to talk to those who have a different set of values; we find it uncomfortable and difficult to associate with them. We have difficulty understanding their positions. In essence, we tend to talk to ourselves, never really recognizing that there are other views in the world. If we really want to solve community problems, we must involve people with different viewpoints; and on their terms, not ours.

In so doing, we will modify our goal a little bit to accommodate their vested interests. To the extent that points of common interest can be enhanced or solved by a community action proposal, we can expect to secure a positive commitment of cooperation from the relevant units. If, on the other hand, we push for action and such a move is perceived as detrimental or upsetting to these vested interests, we would predict that organized opposition to the plan would be forthcoming. It also is entirely possible to propose a project that affects relevant units but, in their view of the situation, the potential impact seems inconsequential so they are indifferent to the project and take no action.

The decision to cooperate or not cooperate made by each unit involved is determined by some combination of absolute values and dynamic values. There is not much room to argue or debate the first. It is generally not advisable to tamper with symbols and sentiments or belief systems. If our proposal fits, it will generate support. If not, we cannot do much to change the situation. Isolation of such units in the legitimate order may be called for. The use of reason or debate, when the proposal is counter to the organization's symbols and sentiments, could well result in the generation of dedicated opposition rather than cooperation. On the other hand, appraisal and allocative standards or dynamic values can be changed with the proper presentation of sound rational and factual information.

When we attempt to induce an organization to cooperate in community action programs, the main points to remember are:

    1. Select symbols and sentiments *common* to each organization for use in the appeal for cooperation.

2. Select symbols and sentiments *independently* held that are not in conflict with other organizations' interests.
3. Do not directly alter or attempt to change organizational symbols and sentiments that run counter to the proposed plan of action. Try to avoid them; it is generally better to "go it alone" than stir up dedicated opposition.
4. Select common appraisal and allocation standards when possible.
5. Aggressively counter conflicting appraisal and allocation standards with hard factual evidence and you will establish a new base for cooperative efforts.

I want to underscore again the point that the decision to become involved, to cooperate, is made by each unit of the legitimate order on its own value terms, not ours. After we have accounted for vested interests, then we can move to the next step, the establishment of an *initiating set*. This is a group of individuals or organizations who are held in high enough regard to have the social right to initiate a plan of action. They also must be able to legitimize the plan and secure the obligation of others in the sponsorship of action. The right of an individual or an organization to initiate, to introduce something in a community, has to be earned. It is not granted automatically. Here is where many community development efforts run into program difficulties. What kinds of activities does that group have the right to initiate with the community? What activities are strictly not their right to become involved in? For example, presidents of universities have the right to raise money for teaching and research, but they are not the right people to initiate changes in the curriculum. That is a faculty responsibility. Preplanning the correct strategy to use is essential at this stage of the process.

The initiating set also has to justify its goal in terms of value bases. As mentioned above, findings on community action show clearly that different individuals and organizations justify group goals for quite different or even opposing reasons. The important test is not *how* each group justifies the goal, but whether or not it *does*, and whether it then decides to join in the sponsorship of the action.

An important function of the initiating set in the involvement process is to conduct negotiations to determine how to alter and redefine the goal so as to involve the critical proportion of the legitimate order that can justify, legitimize, and, hence, sponsor and support the proposed action.

Moving to the lefthand block of the model, we see that individuals will either offer good will, support, be indifferent to, or oppose the proposed action. Likewise, we see on the righthand block of the model that organizations have the same alternatives. How access to different individuals or organizations in the legitimate order is to be gained—i.e., whether by overlapping or multimembership in different organizations, personal channels, justification based on logical

reasoning, or by some other kind of general appeal—must be determined and carried out by the initiating set at this stage of the involvement process.

To begin with, they need to account for major organized interests that potentially have something at stake in such a goal effort. These may be classified into at least three groups: approving, indifferent, and opposed. The point here is to actually identify and specifically account for the kind of involvement that can be expected from the individual and organized interests directly affected by the action proposal.

Early strategy to follow would be the neutralization or containment of potential opposition and the moving of indifferent individuals and organizations into a position of supportive involvement in goal formation and program sponsorship. This can be accomplished by carefully justifying the proposed plan using the independent value bases governing the behavior of each individual or organization. It may be that one of the best sources of assistance in goal formation, sponsorship, and execution leadership can be obtained from what are initially indifferent individuals and organizations. If the opposition is not contained or neutralized at this point in the process, common sense would say the plan should be brought to a halt and a reappraisal made.

Community action programs traditionally are perceived as being carried out by community leaders, community-minded individuals. I would argue, however, that most action programs call for commitments of resources far beyond those held by individuals. If we are trying to achieve anything that has an impact, not only do we have personal commitments of individuals, but we also have to secure corporate or organizational commitment, large and small, public and private, and vertical as well as horizontal. Many projects call for commitment of the scarce resources of the city, churches, utilities, associations, industrial and business firms, schools, colleges, and universities. Unless we obtain such commitment, we are not likely to activate a meaningful program. Rather, we will probably engage in a lot of talk, have a lot of dialogue, but have no action program.

It is individuals who in the end must represent their organization and commit its resources for or against the proposed action. It should not be too difficult to identify the individuals who, as responsible organizational representatives, can justify and sponsor an action program within their own organization. They must not only be *personally* committed, but must be able to justify the program to their representative organization and secure an *organizational commitment* of support.

After the decision is made to carry out or execute the action, it is important to obtain the necessary facilities for carrying it out. This is accomplished through what can be called the *recruitment process.* This is the point at which firm commitments for cooperative action are made, and *execution set* is formed and carries out the details of the action plan.

Winding It Up

As we attempt to mobilize resources for our program, I would like to suggest that we secure only the resources sufficient to get the job done. I question the advisability of always attempting to maximize involvement. I do so on several grounds:

1. We are always dealing with limited resources of people's time, talent, and economic possessions. We must be discriminating in our allocation of these resources.
2. There are many good alternative community development projects that call for citizen and corporate or organizational involvement. To expect extensive, continuous commitment of people for all "good causes" is to expect the impossible.
3. For some projects, widespread involvement may, in fact, prevent rather than facilitate community goal achievement. When the task becomes everybody's responsibility, in all too many cases it becomes nobody's responsibility.
4. There is a social cost associated with involvement. You can go to the social bank and withdraw people's commitment and involvement only for a limited period without making some new deposits.

Finally, I wish to restate the basic questions which must be answered if you are to secure cooperative involvement of people and their organizations in community development programs:

- What specific tasks are you attempting to achieve?

- What kind of involvement is really necessary to get the job done?

- What contribution will each involved person or organization be expected to make and can they afford to make such a contribution?

- What is in it for them?

- What is in it for you?

- What is in it for your community?

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