Exploring the Use and Perception of Creativity in Community Organizing

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Organizing is a dynamic process that incorporates creative elements in mobilizing communities to achieve change. Creativity has been linked conceptually to organizing, but little is understood about this relationship in practice. This exploratory study examines organizers' use and perception of creativity using an online qualitative survey. Three overarching themes are identified: creativity as attribute, in which creativity is seen as an individual quality; creativity as means, whereby creativity is a tactical and strategic tool; and creativity as core, i.e. a central and fundamental element of organizing. Takeaways for organizers and implications for practice, education, and research are discussed.

Keywords: community organizing, community practice, creativity

Introduction

Community organizing is a dynamic process that mobilizes members of a community to address commonly held concerns (Hardina, 2002; Pyles, 2009). Effectiveness in community organizing rests on the ability to solve complicated problems in changing circumstances. Organizers and communities must manage disparate interests, envision new realities, and chart paths from what exists to what could exist. The fluid and aspirational nature of organizing suggests that creativity is a key ingredient (Shepard, 2005). Yet little is known about how creativity is perceived and used by community organizers on the ground. This article aims to advance empirical understanding of how organizers make use of creativity in furthering the goals of communities and how they see creativity fitting into the idea of inclusive and participatory social change that is at the heart of organizing.

This paper begins with an overview of how community organizing and creativity are conceptualized in the literature, and in particular how creativity is viewed as an intervention to address social problems. The next section provides an explanation of the methods used for this study, with attention to its exploratory nature and the benefits and challenges associated the online data collection process. In the findings section three major themes derived from the analysis are identified and substantiated: creativity as attribute, or individual trait; creativity as means, or strategic tool; and creativity as core, or fundamental to the process of organizing. The article closes with six takeaways for organizers, as well as implications for future practice, education, and research.

Literature Review

Both community organizing and creativity are terms used and interpreted in a variety of ways. The purpose of this section with regard to community organizing is to reiterate its importance for those invested in the goal of a just and inclusive society, and to briefly highlight the relevance of creativity for those engaged in community organizing. Regarding creativity, in light of the limited attention to creativity in the community organizing literature the authors briefly explore the contours of how this phenomenon is conceptualized across disciplines and how it is used and implemented in practice in selected contexts.

Community Organizing

Social work scholars have traced the historical roots of their profession and the commitment of early settlement house workers to community-based social reform (Addams, 1910/1990; Reisch & Andrews, 2001). Yet over the last century, the emphasis on community organizing in social work practice and education has fluctuated and trended downward (Reisch and Andrews, 2001; Specht and Courtney, 1994). Regardless of its level of prominence as a sub-field of social work, the goals and activities of organizing are highly compatible with the emphasis on self-determination, empowerment, human relationships, social and economic justice, and other values and ethical principles associated with social work (Hardcastle, Powers, & Wenocur, 2011). Social workers are expected to work alongside clients and communities to change power dynamics and reduce oppression (CSWE, 2012). By empowering individuals and improving community well-being, organizing addresses the "micro" and "macro" ends of the social work spectrum.

Extensive scholarship has documented the evolution of community organizing and its impact outside of social work as well (Garvin & Cox, 2001). Across disciplines, the goal of effective community organizing is to move from a problem state to progressive social development and transformative social change, strengthen democracy, and make systems more accountable and responsive (Pyles, 2009). Organizing also achieves both long-term transformation and urgent social goals, often simultaneously (Alinsky, 1971/1989; Garvin & Cox, 2001). Incidentally, no doubt the power of organizing to create change across systems and timeframes is one reason it is considered a critical component of the social work profession (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2008).

Despite the inherent social and political necessity for organizers and the communities with whom they work to be inventive and innovative in their efforts to gain power and challenge the status quo, the attention to creativity as a vital element of community organizing is scant. Standards proposed by community organizing practitioners and scholars center primarily on values, ethics, and impact (Hardina, 2004; Reisch & Lowe, 2000), and fail to explicate creativity and its value in addressing collective concerns. Creativity is occasionally presented as essential to the social project of community organizing (Shepherd, 2005; 2011) or as a tool in the education of organizers (Wehbi, Ali, & Enros, 2005). In both cases, however, a concrete definition of creativity and an exploration of how it is used and perceived among organizers are absent. In light of the limited explicit connection between creativity and organizing in the empirical literature, the authors next

examine the conceptualization and implementation of creativity across a variety of contexts and disciplinary perspectives, including organizing and social movements but also extending to organizational management, philosophy, arts-based social change work, and creativity-based community interventions. These perspectives help form the basis of this study and inform the analysis of the relationship between creativity and community organizing.

Conceptualizing Creativity

Just as community organizing transcends immediate and distal outcomes, creativity bridges the concrete with the abstract. More broadly, themes of transcendence, problem solving, and originality permeate discussions of how creativity is conceptualized. In the organizing and social movement literature creativity connects the political and the cultural while also linking individual agency to broader social significance (Reed, 2005). Additionally, creativity energizes a joyful and participatory ethos that revitalizes democracy and makes difficult and thankless political work sustainable (Shepard, 2011). Outside the realm of organizing, management scholars have defined creativity as the capacity to adapt and generate something new, original, and useful (Berkun, 2007). Woodman and colleagues (1993) argued that creativity is a necessary condition for innovating and thriving within complex social systems, and that the post-industrial knowledge society in particular demands flexibility and inventiveness. In organizations and communities alike, then, creativity helps advance collective goals when the status quo does not suffice.

In philosophical and artistic domains creativity relates to a metaphysical dimension and represents a fundamental aspect of the human condition. It allows and facilitates dialogue between an individual and the unconscious, whereby discoveries about the self are made and those discoveries are translated into culturally meaningful objects (Fidyk, 2012). Creativity is a dialogue that "transcends, transforms, and reconciles profound divisions between the external and the internal, the past and the present, the rational and the irrational" (Papiasvili and Mayers, 2011, p. 193). Postmodern scholars have celebrated creativity and critiqued the modern, rationalist view of human potential (Chambon & Irving 2003; Foucault, 1985). Foucault (1985) summed up a creativity-based epistemology in his appeal to philosophers to "endeavor to know how to and to what extent it might be possible to think differently" (p. 9). Philosophers as early as Plato in *The Republic* and Aristotle in *Poetics* identified an intrinsic balance between creativity and reason in generating new ideas (Papiasvili & Mayers, 2011).

At the intersection of social work and creativity, creativity is associated with the phenomenon of catharsis, or "getting stuff out" (Sinding, Warren, & Paton, 2014). Writing about social work specifically, Chambon and Irving (2003) contended that reason is given "too much responsibility for the work of a caring knowledge" (p. 265). Social workers are committed to reflexivity and critical thinking (CSWE, 2012). They enter into and challenge dominant discourses of teaching, learning, and knowing. Creativity helps "break habits of seeing and knowing" (Sinding, Warren, & Paton, 2014), and can enhance critical thinking and enable social workers to address complex social problem more effectively (Burgess, 2004).

Implementing Creativity

While creativity is linked conceptually to the processes of originating, transcending, and solving, on a practical level it has been effectively incorporated into community-level interventions and tied to social transformation, personal liberation and empowerment, collective identity formation, and organizational innovation. Augusto Boal's (1974/2007) *Theater of the Oppressed* is a classic example of using art and creativity for personal and community transformation around issues of inequality and injustice. The use of creativity propelled a landmark event in the HIV/AIDS movement. The AIDS quilt activated individuals and shifted public consciousness of the epidemic through symbolic representation of its immense yet personal devastation (McDonald, Sarche, & Wang, 2005).

In other settings, creativity helps form relationships and mobilize communities; develop tactics and anticipate next moves; envision and plan strategically; and engage in both short- and long-term decision making (McDonald, Sarche, & Wang, 2005; Eyerman & Jameson, 2003). Creative expression creates pathways to psychological transformation and collective identity formation (Eyerman & Jamison, 2003). Music has helped connect communities to movements for workers' rights, youth, and black power (Eyerman & Jamison, 2003; Morant, 2011). Youth have been a specific focus of creativity-based interventions, with positive outcomes in self-esteem, pro-social skills, critical thinking skills, and self-confidence (Gutierrez, Parsons, & Cox, 2003; Stinson, 2009). Creativity helps illuminate life from the direct perspective of community members and shifts the perspectives of those in positions of authority (Goessling & Doyle, 2009; McDonald, Sarche, & Wang, 2005). In summary, creativity is a "connecting" intervention, helping to align external actions with internal intentions while at the same time bring people together through clarity of purpose and self-expression. While creativity and community organizing are aligned in their

simultaneous interest in the internal and external world, little is known empirically about how organizers use and perceive creativity in their work. This study establishes a beginning framework to guide future research, practice, and education in the area.

Methods

This exploratory study used an online survey instrument to gather qualitative data on the perceptions and experiences related to creativity among community organizing practitioners. The purpose of this study is to understand the use, role, and efficacy of creativity in community organizing. While grassroots participants in community organizing also have valuable insights that must be incorporated in future studies, this project's primary focus is practitioners, their use of creativity in organizing, and what that means for community organizing more broadly. The Institutional Review Board at the first author's previous institution approved the study as exempt based on the minimal risk associated with participation and the anonymity of responses. The research questions were as follows:

1. How is creativity used and perceived by community organizers?
2. How is creativity incorporated into the training of community organizers?
3.

The research questions for this study are exploratory by design. The researchers' aim was to better understand the views and experiences of organizers regarding the use of creativity. Additionally, in order to investigate perceptions of creativity in the field of community organizing more broadly, participants were asked to comment on their experience being trained as an organizer and whether and how creativity was integrated into that training. By addressing these questions this study builds an empirical basis for future inquiry in this area.

Data Collection

The survey instrument was created using the Qualtrics online survey system. A combination of first-hand experience and a review of the literature guided item development, and the authors consulted with several experts in the field to establish face validity. The instrument contained ten open-ended questions about the participant's experience as an organizer, the training in which they participated as an organizer, and their experiences and perceptions regarding the role of creativity in organizing. Specific items in the instrument included:

- Please describe in your own words the role (or roles) you have personally played in the community organizing process.

- How would you describe the role of creativity, the creative process, or the arts in the community organizing work you do or have done?

- Do you believe creativity, the creative process, or the arts helps community organizers to be more effective? Why or why not?

Since creativity is a term with many interpretations and in light of the lack of emphasis on creativity in the organizing literature, the phrase "creativity, the creative process, and the arts" was used in the recruitment materials and survey items in order to convey a broad scope. In the introduction to the survey the authors explained their interest in learning about any aspects of organizing that participants viewed as relevant to creativity. Demographic information about personal identity, number of years of organizing experience, and length of organizing training received was collected as well. Geographic data was not collected, but none of the participants mentioned working in an international context.

The sampling frame included any individuals who self-identified as having experience doing community organizing. No distinction was made between paid and unpaid organizers or full-time versus part-time organizers during recruitment. Given the range of definitions and understanding of the term organizer, participants were not screened and were permitted to self-select into the study. Based on their responses, all participants had substantial community organizing experience. A combination of snowball and convenience sampling was used. As experienced organizers, both authors have social networks in the organizing community. A link to the survey was sent to prospective participants along with a request to respond at their convenience. All responses were anonymous. While the authors had some control over the sample frame, the sample itself was self-selected and comprised only of those who chose to complete the survey instrument (N = 25). Data collection was discontinued after one month. At the end of this period, the authors assessed the data and determined that variation in the sample was sufficient to allow identification of themes that would contribute to understanding of creativity across an array of organizing settings and inform further future investigation. The number of participants was lower than anticipated, which may be attributed to the time demands facing potential participants as well as the possibility that online requests and data collection platforms are easier to overlook and perceived as less personal or urgent.

Data Analysis

Coding and analysis occurred in three stages. In stage one, each author coded the data for themes individually and inductively (Boyatzis, 1998), then negotiated agreement regarding the names and definitions of these initial themes. Thematic analysis is used often in exploratory research to identify patterns in qualitative data and to establish the basis for future theory development (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In stage two, the first author identified and defined overarching second-order themes (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) into which the initial themes could be uniquely assigned. In stage three, the authors individually coded the data using the second-order themes as a template to corroborate the associations between initial themes and second-order themes (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). This process ensured that data were analytically connected to both an initial theme and a second-order theme. For example, the data segment "fly by the seat of your pants" was first connected to the initial theme "think fast, improvise, and change course" and later independently coded under the second-order theme "creativity as attribute." Hereafter, "second-order themes" and "initial themes" are referred to simply as "themes" and "sub-themes," respectively.

Sample Characteristics

Among the 25 respondents who completed the survey, the mean age was 38. Nearly two thirds of respondents (16 of 25) identified as female. Six respondents identified as male, and three respondents identified as non-binary. Twenty out of 25 participants identified themselves as White or Caucasian, and the remaining five identified as African American or person of color or used their ethnicity as a primary identification.

Participants had 9.5 years of experience in community organizing on average. These experiences varied. Organizing modalities represented included faith-based, union, anarchist, neighborhood, electoral, and arts-based. Regarding substantive content of organizing, participants' experiences encompassed more specific concerns related to housing, labor, gentrification, environment, higher education, prisons, police brutality, and health, as well as overarching issues such as capitalism, inequality, race, and poverty. Participants also represented a range of organizing traditions in terms of the level of prescription—some implemented pre-established models while others improvised based on the context. Several participants described organizing in the context of informal collectives, while others were employed by independently incorporated nonprofit organizations,

and still others worked for or with nonprofits affiliated with national networks of similar organizations. Despite the variation in participants' organizing experience, the limited sample size precluded meaningful sub-group analysis. Still, the array and depth of experience represented in the sample indicate that the findings may resonate across many organizing contexts.

Limitations

The limitations of this research relate to sample size and the online platform used for data collection. In order to reflect a fuller range of organizing experiences, including but not limited to demographic diversity of the respondents, studies with larger sample sizes are needed. Still, given the exploratory nature of this study and the extensive experience level of participants, the number of participants was adequate to establish a basis for further investigation. The use of an online instrument enhanced feasibility and convenience for participants, but this platform also carried a downside. Access to and comfort with online surveys is not universal. In addition, communication via online surveys is asynchronous, meaning that clarifications and probes are not possible. For example, when one respondent stated that "it sounds like you are asking about artistic creativity," there was no opportunity to clarify that the scope of the study was broader.

Results

The bulk of the results presented in this article relate to the main research question guiding this inquiry – how organizers use and perceive creativity. Three themes are presented and substantiated in the first sub-section in response to this question. The second sub-section addresses the secondary research question regarding how organizers are trained to think and act in creative ways.

How Creativity is Used and Understood

Regarding the primary research question of how creativity is used and perceived among organizers, participants' responses coalesced into three themes: creativity as ability, in which creativity is viewed as an individual attribute that is either innate or developed; creativity as means, in which creativity is used to achieve the goals of organizing; and creativity as core, in which creativity is fundamental to the process and purpose of organizing itself.

Creativity as Ability

The first theme places creativity among the necessary attributes of a successful organizer or organizing participant. What distinguishes this from the other themes is that creativity is understood as a trait that individuals possess or a skill that they develop, as opposed to an element

of organizing more broadly. The first sub-theme in this theme is the ability to improvise, think fast, and change course. This ability is strategically advantageous because, as one respondent stated, "nothing ever works out as planned." Adjustments are required with little or no advance notice. Another participant noted that organizing is a fluid and dynamic process, and organizers must be prepared to "fly by the seat of their pants." Creativity allows organizers and participants to remain effective even when circumstances change and unexpected developments occur. This depiction of organizing can be viewed in tension with more planned and deliberate organizing models. Respondents who represented more prescriptive organizing traditions expressed skepticism about creativity unless it serves the pre-established strategic vision.

Another sub-theme of creativity as ability is the capacity to see different perspectives and communicate effectively. Organizers must remain "flexible, thoughtful, and open" in their interactions with communities, and creativity is a key part of this ability to empathize and engage with difference. Included in this theme is the need to connect with others in a sincere and authentic manner. One respondent stated that "you cannot be sincere without creativity" and if an organizer uses a facade to build relationships then "people...can sniff that out." While the online methodology prevented further clarification, the authors interpreted this comment to mean that the respondent relates creativity to vulnerability and the breaking down of superficial behaviors that create social distance. Creativity helps individuals operate from a place of personal authenticity, which in turn supports the process of establishing relationships.

A third sub-theme of creativity as ability is the capacity to navigate complicated and unique situations. Participants described the need to balance numerous disparate perspectives while identifying and moving toward a common goal, and to "connect dots that haven't been connected." Each set of circumstances is unique, and therefore organizers are most effective when they can work with communities to "develop tactics to fit a specific situation." Another participant who came from a theater background provided a holistic image of what being creative means as an organizer: "Creativity is everything...and I use those exact [theater] skills in all my organizing work: community building, participation, bravery, laughter, problem solving and self-care." For this participant the process of building trust and taking risks in organizing requires the same skills and attitudes used in the theater.

Creativity as Means

The second theme points to the twofold view that creativity is a useful tool in advancing the desired process and material outcomes associated with community organizing. A large majority of participants (n = 23) described ways in which creativity furthers the goals of community organizing, and a number of sub-themes emerged within this theme. First, creativity builds and maintains engagement, both within the target community and with outside stakeholders. It "creates interest," "keep[s] energy high," and "develops a culture and attitude that draws people in." One of the ways that creativity supports engagement is by allowing access to the affective realm. Creative modes of communication strike "an emotional chord" with participants and the broader community. Participants reported that creativity not only stimulates engagement within communities but also enhances the ability of a community to effectively and provocatively communicate with external stakeholders. Creativity is "essential for attacking hard-to-influence targets, especially using humor" as well as helping to make reports covers, protest signs, and other materials more compelling for outside audiences.

A second sub-theme is that creative methods help bridge difference. Use of creativity invites participation by those who have been historically overlooked or marginalized by political arena. One participant explained that an activity grounded in a creative spirit is perhaps "less threatening" for potential participants than a speech or "traditional workshop" would be, in part because it provides a "tactile and multisensory" experience. Along the same lines, a participant commented that an element of creativity in organizing helps keep the organizer from becoming the default expert. Creativity also helps build a sense of community. As one participant noted, this is particularly relevant when working cross-culturally or cross-racially--finding and appealing to the "common cause...with another person who may not...appear to have anything in common with you is vital."

A third sub-theme is that creativity facilitates analysis and action related to community concerns. Concerns affecting communities are often emotionally fraught, complex, and contentious. Participants described how creativity allows organizers and communities to transform potentially divisive situations into sources of positive energy and consensus. This can be achieved by taking time for fun and celebration, or by approaching heavy topics in subtle and creative ways. One participant explained that she has used creative activities to "dissect and understand power dynamics to be used in the campaign." Another participant recounted a workshop exercise in which community members were asked to work in groups to visually map

power relations in their community. Other participants wrote in general terms that creativity increases the effectiveness of strategic planning.

Creativity as Core

The third theme encompasses variations of the point of view that creativity represents a central and defining characteristic of organizing. A sizeable minority of participants (11 of 25) expressed the view that creativity is in some way fundamental to the organizing process. Within this theme three sub-themes emerged: creativity is a necessary part of challenging and transforming fundamental aspects of the existing social order; creativity permeates all aspects of community organizing; and certain approaches to organizing are based on art and artistic endeavors.

The most prevalent sub-theme in this theme was the idea that creativity is necessary in order to dismantle constraints on the human condition. As one participant stated, "the nature of the human being is one of a free-thinking ever expanding being," and "creativity encourage[s] different ways of thinking about and expressing the human experience." At the interpersonal level, another participant viewed creativity as critical in achieving the goal of "authentic and effective relationships with others," and added that these relationships are not cultivated only in service of campaign victories, but represent the "heart of community organizing." Another participant linked creativity to establishing a more "humane" social order. Two participants shared the view that organizing should place emphasis on creating positive experiences for those involved rather than heavily prioritizing material "victories." Creativity, they argued, helps ensure that achieving policy change is not seen as justification for an otherwise alienating process. One participant summarized this view: "I think the forces that separate creativity...from 'progress' are a central part of the apparatus to be resisted." Participants did not speak directly to the nuances that characterize an ideal blend of process and outcomes, but several participants implicitly rejected the conflation of outcome focus and alienation. Goal orientation in organizing, they argued, helps to build connection, leadership skills, and personal investment in community.

Regarding the second sub-theme, several participants suggested that creativity is needed in such a range of activities in community organizing contexts that it is generally indispensable. For example, one participant asserted that organizing is ineffective without a "high level of creativity," and another explained that it is "important at all stages of an organizing effort." In describing a specific project, a participant stated that this initiative required creativity "in every step we...make as a team." Other participants expressed their views that "creativity is woven into all that is done

to engage, assess and implement changes in the community," and "creativity comes into play in every workshop or organizing event I've been a part of." As with the finding regarding the improvisational nature of organizing, this view of creativity permeating all aspects of organizing was not shared by participants affiliated with more fixed and replicated models of organizing. Still, the notion that creativity is critical in all aspects of organizing resonated with enough participants to suggest that for many it is central, not tangential, to the entire process. This may reflect the view that organizing represents such a departure from the normal state of affairs that it requires innovation at all levels.

A third sub-theme of creativity as core is that participants tied the role of creativity to their experiences and perceptions of arts-based organizing. One participant described working on a participatory art initiative in which the express purpose was to bring communities together to identify concerns and solve problems through a process of creating public art. Another participant identified an effective initiative in which youth with mental health concerns came together and used digital media to craft and tell their stories publicly. In these cases, art is a primary means of engaging and mobilizing the community, and therefore creativity is central to the organizing process. One participant questioned the value of arts-related creativity, saying "I don't much care about [that] in organizing." This comment reinforced the tension identified by some organizers between creativity viewed as essential to the process and outcomes of organizing and creativity for its own sake.

Organizer Training and Creativity

A sizeable majority of the sample (19 of 25) participated in formal community organizing training at some point in their careers, and for most of these formally trained organizers (15 of 19) the training lasted more than five days. When asked which aspects of the training were relevant to creativity, one participant described a training activity in which facilitators explicitly connected creativity to the cultivation of a deeper consciousness regarding how community members see and engage with the world. Another participant mentioned an arts-based organizing training in which creativity was central. By contrast, the remaining 17 participants who had received formal training recounted activities in which the value of creativity was either implied or absent, but not emphasized. Eight participants experienced training in which creative aspects of organizing were presented implicitly or explicitly as instrumental means to strategic or tactical ends. They recalled role-plays as a tool to analyze power, for example, or storytelling taught as a recruitment strategy.

Others described training that emphasized creative ways to engage the media, or creative use of the affective self, e.g. guilt or admiration, in order to elicit involvement in an organizing project. One participant recalled hearing that organizers need to "be creative" in order to achieve the goal of an action or campaign, but not being instructed in how to nurture and cultivate creativity in themselves, let alone others. Ten respondents indicated that creativity was not discussed or addressed in training at all.

Discussion

The findings of this study clarify ways that creativity can advance community organizing goals, and they offer a starting point for a more extensive empirically based conversation. The findings also suggest that organizers agree that creativity makes them more effective but that how and to what extent creativity should play a role in organizing is highly contested. It is possible that much can be learned from future research comparing creativity in different modes of organizing, and the authors recommend further inquiry in this direction. This study points to six key takeaways for organizers and the communities with whom they aim to create change.

First, the findings indicate that organizers acknowledge creativity's value. Creativity resonates with organizers on multiple levels, including the tactical, the strategic, as well as the existential and foundational. Organizers agree that creativity is a necessary or at least highly beneficial aspect of effective organizing, but variation exists in how and how much it should be emphasized. Second, creativity helps navigate complexity. Organizers recognize the advantages of creativity in engaging participants, sustaining interest, designing campaigns, and other complicated yet critical undertakings associated with organizing. Creativity is an asset in tying together seemingly disparate elements of a single situation and dealing with complicated circumstances that defy linear or causal logics. Additionally, it allows communities typically excluded from decision-making processes to find leverage points and exert influence.

Third, compatibility between creativity and organizing depends on the mode of organizing in use. Certain modes or traditions of organizing emphasize the goal of structural change, and thus may consider creativity for its own sake to be a diversion from the primary and immediate goal of resolving material injustice. If organizing is understood primarily or solely as a mechanism to shift power and address the immediate concerns of communities, then the most efficient and expedient approach may be perceived as preferable. Though efficiency and creativity are not necessarily at odds, they can be seen as incompatible goals. Fourth, there is a lack of explicit emphasis on

creativity in training. It is often implied as a critical attribute to have in organizing but rarely cultivated, or even acknowledged, explicitly. In light of the general agreement that creativity has a critical role in organizing, the limited attention to creativity in the training of organizing warrants further exploration.

Fifth, creativity helps animate a critique of rationality in organizing by allowing space for spontaneity and decoupling the process-outcome binary. The introduction of creativity as a core element of organizing potentially adds a new dimension to the change that communities can seek and achieve. Communities can seek redress not only of material injustice, but also of relational patterns and power dynamics that are not tied to specific policies. For some organizers, however, outcome-driven organizing can also challenge status quo power relations by building esprit de corps and social capital within marginalized communities. Sixth, creativity helps facilitate inclusivity and bridge difference. Participation and engagement are the lifeblood of organizing. Engagement strategies that reinforce hierarchical patterns of power distribution may consciously or unconsciously deter participation. By contrast, activities that convey openness and provide opportunities for creative expression can attract groups and individuals with well-founded skepticism of centralized authority. Some would argue that arts-based organizing and specific activities with a creative bent would similarly deter those who do not consider themselves creative by nature. Further inquiry is needed to explore how creativity can effectively engage participants while not repelling the creatively less inclined.

Implications

How organizers use and perceive creativity has implications for community organizers and also for helping professionals, activists, community leaders, educators, and researchers interested in fostering community-driven, participatory change. For those serving in professional human services roles, for example, this study suggests creativity is a promising tool in efforts to dismantle silos in general and the service-organizing binary in particular. The long history of conceptualizing organizing as separate and distinct from service delivery (Brooks, 2005), combined with shrinking support for grassroots and social rights advocacy (Hasenfeld & Garrow, 2012), means that highly innovative and transcendent approaches are needed to re-imagine the compatibility between direct

service and organizing. Such new approaches might include using creative engagement and consciousness raising strategies with individual human service clients. Counselors, case managers, and organizers might work in concert with clients to connect individual concerns to collective rights and claims, and develop organizing strategies accordingly (Brooks, 2005).

Community activists and leaders can also use these findings to consider the merits of using creativity when organizing in their communities. This study suggests that creativity is a tool that can help bridge process and outcomes, but it must be noted that some organizers harbor concerns that the overuse of creativity leads organizing efforts to drift away from a focus on material outcomes. While findings from this study cannot be generalized, they suggest that the level of prescription is a relevant factor in determining use of creativity. While large regional or national organizing networks may provide fixed guidance to organizers and communities regarding how and when creative strategies or tactics are appropriate, local leaders and communities might tend to make determinations on a case-by-case basis whether and to what degree creativity should be employed. In some communities, the creative process itself -- including but not limited to art-related interventions -- may be tied to the goal of liberation, whereas in other contexts it is a means of achieving policy change. Despite this variability, what is clear is that creativity is viewed as helpful across many processes and activities related to organizing, and that the relevant stakeholders in a given context are perhaps best equipped to decide specifically how it should be used.

Educators and researchers can build on this article to expand understanding of creativity in community organizing. Instructors of social work and other fields that embrace community organizing as a vital social justice intervention should highlight the role of creativity in bridging process and outcome as well as connecting individual transformation to structural outcomes. Relevant questions in the classroom might include: How does creativity help or hinder the goals of community organizing? To what extent should creativity be emphasized as a goal in its own right versus as a means in achieving material outcomes? To what extent can creativity be taught? How much should organizers see the teaching and implementation of creativity as part of their jobs? The connection between creativity and community organizing is particularly relevant when teaching about the use of self in social work and other helping and social justice-oriented professions. The findings of this study suggest that creativity unlocks self-awareness and allows

for authentic interpersonal engagement, and would therefore be relevant in any educational endeavor focused on building meaningful relationships.

In the research domain, it would be helpful to understand the relationships between the model or type of organizing in use and the level of acceptance, perceived value, and actual use of creativity. For example, it would be instructive to learn whether more fixed, prescriptive models of organizing use creativity in different ways than locally designed, emergent efforts. Does the use of creativity relate to whether organizing is single- or multi-issue? Does it make a difference whether those organizing or being organized are primarily youth, middle-aged adults, or seniors? Do race, class, or gender play a role in how and how much creativity is embraced? In addition to delving deeper into the populations and types of organizing, future research should make use of in-depth interviews and focus groups that allow participants to explore the topic at length. In light of the finding of this study that creativity is underemphasized in organizer training contexts, longer conversations would allow time for researchers to pose follow-up questions and for participants to reflect on and convey more fully how creativity is stressed or minimized in their work.

Conclusion

Others have found that creativity has a critical role to play in the practice repertoires and educational environments of community organizers and social workers (Burgess, 2004; Lymbery, 2003; Shepard, 2005; Sinding, Warren, & Paton, 2014). This study helps provide an empirical basis for better understanding the considerations, benefits, and concerns related to incorporating creativity into community organizing specifically. In a rapidly changing social world shaped by the dynamics of geopolitical conflict, globalized economic structures, and digital technology, communities stand to gain from the ability to envision new realities and to adjust and respond effectively to change as it occurs. Community organizers must embrace the complexity of the human condition in solving problems alongside individuals, groups, organizations, and communities. Often this entails finding the best solution in less than ideal circumstances. No formula exists for many of the decisions organizers make. They act in accordance with their personal and professional ethics, and they are guided by theoretical knowledge combined with practice experience in the field. This study supports the view that creativity enhances the capacity of organizers to navigate complexity and respond effectively to dynamic situations. The findings

also indicate that creativity helps to challenge fractured and exclusive modes of thought and social action.

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