1 Introduction

Critical thinking [is] the most important skill for the pursuit of freedom, equality and justice, and the greatest enemy of authoritarianism.

Suzanne Pharr (1996, p. 17)

When the United States Army Corps of Engineers’ levees failed after Hurricane Katrina in August 2005, the people who were unable to evacuate New Orleans sought safety and higher ground as flooding ensued. During this desperate time, citizens offered each other support, taking care of their families and neighbors, while waiting for help from the government to arrive. The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), whose authority had recently been diminished by shifting it from a free-standing governmental agency to one of many agencies under the umbrella of the Department of Homeland Security, was conspicuously absent for days. Most of the people who needed resources at the time, such as water, food, and shelter, were low-income African-American families who waited at the Superdome or at the Convention Center. After several days of waiting, they were eventually bussed or flown out of the city to other parts of the country; many are still trying to get back, and many may never return home.

After this massive flood, people all over the globe began discussing the immediate and long-term material and social justice issues that Gulf Coast and evacuee communities were facing. As the waters receded, New Orleans citizens searched for loved ones—and answers. Evacuees attempted to find each other in shelters as well as to call, text message, and e-mail each other; they surfed the Internet for helpful information, wondering what the next steps were, and whom to hold accountable. Faith-based and other relief organizations descended on New Orleans and evacuee communities to provide help where it seemed to be most needed. As citizens gradually reconnected with each other, they began to advocate collectively for levee board accountability, utility services, insurance payments, FEMA assistance, health-care services, and the right to return to public housing. They did this through informal means, as well as by starting new organizations and reviving dormant neighborhood associations. These resilient people were doing this work for myriad purposes and reasons, in some cases, just to preserve their own homes and protect their previous quality of life. In other cases, it was to hold governmental entities such as the levee boards and the Army Corps of Engineers accountable for the vast devastation of almost an entire city. Still others became involved in order to redress the deep-seated local and global racial and economic injustices exposed in the inadequate hurricane response and rebuilding. For many people, the connection between what was happening in New Orleans and what was happening in the developing world was becoming clear—corporations were receiving governmental subsidies to “boost” economies, while public infrastructure and social welfare were being grossly neglected.

Many of these groups were and still are engaged in classical community organizing and activism—organizing people, getting information, identifying grievances, confronting those in power who have the ability to make decisions, and rebuilding communities. The situation in New Orleans was a galvanizing event that has served to marshal diverse citizens in unprecedented ways. Scholars have pointed out that in order to address injustice and engage in community organizing, citizens must feel that their way of life is being threatened (Kieffer, 1984), and such has been the case in New Orleans.
Since the autumn of 2005, scholars and activists have researched and written about a variety of types and levels of community organizing activity in New Orleans.¹ Some of the courageous organizers had never been involved in their communities prior to Katrina, let alone engaged in progressive or grassroots direct-action organizing. Others are lifelong community leaders with a history of activism and organizing successes. Still others identify as part of an international solidarity movement for human rights. And so, to be sure, a wide spectrum of organizing experience has been a hallmark of the post-Katrina landscape. As an illustration, consider that experienced organizers from local and nationally known community organizations² have been working in New Orleans—All Congregations Together (ACT), Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN), Incite! Women of Color against Violence, and the People’s Hurricane Relief Fund. These groups, which consist of local citizens, activists, and professional organizers, are working to mobilize communities to effect change and achieve needed reforms for people in real time.

There are countless examples of inspired and effective community organizing campaigns in post-Katrina New Orleans. African-American neighborhood members in the Lower Ninth Ward founded an organization called the Ninth Ward Empowerment Neighborhood Association (NENA) with the allied support of Mercy Corps, an international nongovernmental organization (NGO). Mercy Corps had previously worked primarily in countries other than the United States, but helped NENA gut a flooded church and begin a neighborhood association, with a focus on the community-development and social-welfare issues that will face them for years to come.³ NENA sponsored a powerful vigil near the site of the levee breakage in the Lower Ninth Ward after the storm, which brought important media attention to the issue. Another example is the Vietnamese elders affiliated with a local faith-based community-development corporation, Mary Queen of Vietnam Community Development Corporation, who became a powerful force when they descended upon their targets at city hall after toxic trash from gutted-out homes was being illegally dumped in their neighborhood. The closure of the dump was a key victory for a coalition of faith-based groups in the city. Katrina has created a unique opportunity to build solidarity across racial and class divides due to the fact that everyone in the community was affected at some level. Though citizens were not affected by the disaster equally, the conditions have provided an opening for citizens to understand their linked fates and how social problems affect everyone.

But most community organizing does not happen in the context of an event as highly publicized as Hurricane Katrina. Most injustices happen without media coverage; they are not in full view for the world to see on CNN. In fact, most injustice is masked by a narrative that describes it otherwise. Consider the welfare discourse in the early years following the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), which reduced the amount of time a person could receive public benefits and emphasized a “work first” philosophy (Kilty & Segal, 2003). Many politicians and media stated that welfare reform had been a success. The welfare rolls had been reduced by half; but many people knew another side to the story, particularly the people who are in need of public benefits and are living the reality of poverty in the United States. Some scholars and activists understood that many of the individuals receiving public benefits had no choice but to work $7.00 per hour jobs and had little prospects for increasing their chances of making more money (Cancian, 2001). If the goal of the welfare reform policy had been to reduce the rolls, then indeed maybe it was a success, but the thinking person had to ask whether it was even the right goal in the first place: What about living-wage employment opportunities? What about adequate food, health care, child care, education, and housing? (Jones-DeWeever, 2005; Taliaferro, 2005).

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were the real beneficiaries of welfare reform? It is through the posing of such questions that the work of progressive community organizers begins.

**PRIVATIZATION, GLOBALIZATION, AND RESISTANCE**

The mid-1970s in the United States denotes the beginnings of the retrenchment of social welfare services, laying the foundation for comprehensive welfare reform (Mink, 2002; Quadagno, 1996). This new federalism has been marked by an emphasis on devolution and privatization (Karger & Stoesz, 2006). Responsibility for social welfare provision has been placed in the hands of states and local entities, and ultimately in the hands of private contractors. Faith-based service providers, social service organizations, and informal citizen networks attempt to coordinate the human welfare needs of citizens with minimal assistance from the government. The idea of “cradle to grave” support for citizens, if it was ever achieved, sometimes seems like a fanciful dream.

These policies evolved from a philosophy of the political economy that emphasizes trickle-down economics, free-market capitalism, and social Darwinism (Karger & Stoesz, 2006). This philosophy is based on a “liberal” approach to the flows of capital, unrestricted by governmental interventions. During the 1980s and 1990s, these neoliberal free markets were ever expanding into global venues. This globalization has been referred to as the most significant restructuring of political and economic arrangements since the Industrial Revolution (Mander, 1996). The term globalization is a complex and loaded term, and for some it may refer to the increasing states of interconnectedness across the globe—cultural, environmental, and technological. For others, it is a distinctively economic term referring to cross-national economic transactions between corporations and governments (Streeten, 2001). These definitions are not unrelated, and both are relevant to the task at hand.

Multinational and other corporations from the global North, i.e., “developed countries,” have for some time been expanding into new territory, or markets, in the “developing” global South. Unfortunately, when many of these corporations begin hiring local labor, it can often happen without attention to living wages or quality of life of vulnerable citizens and families (Streeten, 2001). Free-trade policies and structural adjustment programs have continued to defy attempts to protect workers’ wages and conditions worldwide. Studies have shown that such policies have had deleterious consequences for the environment and the quality of life of workers and poor people throughout the world (Lechner & Boli, 2004). These are the times in which organizers across the globe find themselves, and this is the larger context of this book.

The good news is that just like in New Orleans, there has been resistance to these seemingly insurmountable global and local forces. For many, the Seattle protests of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1999 signified the great strength and resistance of the global justice movement. Union workers, environmentalists, and social change activists from all over the world came together to resist these policies using a diverse range of tactics (Katsiaficas, 2004; Klein, 2002). In countries throughout the world, people who are living in a context of privatized or no services and corporate greed and irresponsibility, struggle daily for funding for affordable housing, the rights of immigrants, access to clean water, community mental health, reproductive justice, and other basic human needs. Activists throughout the world have been looking to grassroots struggles in Latin America and Asia for inspiration and guidance about how to resist policies and practices that are negatively affecting human rights. For example, after a major economic collapse in Argentina in 2001, multinational corporations pulled out of the country—literally overnight—boarding up workplaces and leaving workers without jobs. Workers took action and organized themselves, occupying the factories and winning the right to form cooperatives and keep the factories going. This National Movement of Recovered Factories has shown the world how the power of regular people working together can resist globalization and create an alternative model of business where all workers earn

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1 This “neoliberal” approach to economics is not to be confused with the political spectrum of liberal and conservative commonly used in the United States.
the same amount of money, eliminating a boss who is paid a grossly disproportionate wage compared to the workers. The last chapter of this book highlights some of the early lessons learned from the global justice movements.

DEFINING COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

Trying to define community organizing is actually much trickier than one would at first think. Most organizations and organizers do not necessarily fall under a strict definition of community organizing. Grassroots and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), or nonprofits, are variously engaged in social services, advocacy, community organizing, and activism. Trying to force a definition of community organizing and attempting to include some activities and exclude others is difficult and, ultimately, a false construction. Nonetheless, it is clearly worth setting some parameters about community organizing as characterized in this text. Before defining what organizing is, it is useful to define what is meant by community.

WHAT IS COMMUNITY?

Defining the notion of community itself has become more complex in a diverse, globalized, and technological world. The notion of community harkens a wide range of ideas, including trust, mutuality, commitment, and solidarity, as well as the ideas of contestation, conflict, and exclusion (Smith, 2001).

To be sure, people who live in close proximity to each other tend to have some common interests and are representative of this complex idea known as “community.” Bourdieu (1984) has pointed out that the types of social spaces that people inhabit, particularly economical and cultural, are related to lifestyles, power levels, and identities. People tend to reside near those who are similar to them, especially with regard to social class and racial or ethnic affiliation. Indeed, theories of social exclusion trace, for example, the ways that social exclusion, in particular racial exclusion, can be manifested in a domain such as housing (Somerville & Steele, 2002). Such complexities in social geography can be understood by further inquiring into policies and practices related to social planning, economic development, and real estate development. It is the case that citizens live in neighborhoods with people who are somewhat like them, and it is also the case that even in the most diverse of neighborhoods, a toxic waste dump can bring dissimilar groups of people together pretty quickly. Thus, geographical propinquity is still a valuable factor for understanding community.

And yet, many people today tend to find that they have more in common with people with whom they are not in physical proximity. Indeed, such extended social networks may define community for many people (Putnam, 2000). Recent sociological theories of identity have opened up a conceptual space for thinking about community in terms of political interests or various forms of cultural identities (Hoggett, 1997).

A community may be united by shared racial, ethnic, gender, cultural, or other identities, though not necessarily sharing of geographic location or all common values. The lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender (LGBT) community is one such example. Though there is great diversity within the LGBT community, many activists have strategically aligned themselves as a community with common political interests (for example, an interest in the legalization of gay marriage). Thus, the dual notions of place and interest/identity appear to both be of central importance when developing a broad concept of community (Smith, 2001).

The global justice movement represents a community of people across the globe whose members consider themselves oppressed by global free trade and structural adjustment policies. From environmentalists in the Australian outback to European labor organizers to indigenous peoples in Mexico who have lost their land to corporatization, this is indeed a broad conceptualization of community. Due to the expansion of social networks, a result of an increase in technology in a globalized world, it is necessary that the concept of community be considered broadly. Global summits
of grassroots organizers such as the World Social Forum, first held in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 2001, are an indicator that the denotation of community has broadened.

It can be helpful when thinking of community in the context of organizing that, although a group may have strategic, political reasons for aligning themselves, their experiences and values are not always unified (Hartsock, 1996; Stephen, 2005). To be sure, however, community membership has been contested by both insiders and outsiders just as the diversity within a group has been problematized. How can members of a community maintain their individuality and still stand in solidarity with the group? To what degree can allies of a community be considered part of that community? These are important questions that, though they do not have explicit answers, must be considered when thinking about community and organizing. In Chapter 11, I discuss some of the complexities of what some have termed identity politics and how organizers can work through the important nuances of community identity in order to achieve the goal of solidarity. In sum, community can be defined as a group of people with a common affiliation, identity, or grievance that may be geographically or nongeographically based.

What Is Organizing?

The illustrious Chicago-based community organizer Saul Alinsky once said that one should never do things for people that they can do for themselves (Alinsky, 1971). This is an interesting notion, particularly when considered by practitioners whose vocation may be to provide material necessities or social services to people who are in crisis or who are otherwise living in poverty. Indeed, serving people or being a “voice for the voiceless” is surely a noble pursuit. What Alinsky tried to communicate, though, is really a key feature of what makes community organizing unique from other types of interventions—helping people help themselves. Frederick Douglass believed, and Saul Alinsky agreed, that “to re-claim power must necessarily make demands” (Alinsky, 1971). These two features—people organizing themselves and confronting power with grievances—are central attributes of organizing (Bobo, Kendall, & Max, 2001). The ultimate task of community organizing is to mobilize disenfranchised people to advocate on their own behalf in relationship to some power structure in order to achieve needed changes. Some would add that building mutually supportive communities is a vital element of community organizing and change work (Murphy & Cunningham, 2003). And still others would add that an additional and critical component of organizing, indeed the real raison d’être is to overcome oppression and achieve liberation (Pharr, 1996). Actually, all of these components are integral to what I call progressive community organizing.

To be sure, organizing communities for social change is clearly not a value-neutral endeavor. Indeed, no community work could ever be value-neutral. Although this book does begin with such a strong value orientation, my approach is to offer a critical and balanced view of the theories, perspectives, and practices associated with such progressive social change work.

However, not all progressive organizers will always emphasize these various elements of organizing equally, i.e., self-organization, confronting power, building community, and transforming oppression. For example, some community organizers, including neighborhood organizers, labor organizers, and others, may not focus their work on transforming multiple oppressions such as sexism, racism, and homophobia. Their work may be more utilitarian in nature and focus instead on achieving winnable victories or righting a specific injustice. There is always something to be learned from the diversity of community organizers and frameworks.

Organizing Versus Other Interventions

In order to comprehend just exactly what community organizing is, it may be useful to compare and contrast community organizing to other areas of social welfare intervention—social services, activism, advocacy, and community building. Historically, the field of community organizing has gone to great lengths to distinguish itself from what it appears not to be, namely social service. Saul
Alinsky had a disregard for what he called “do-gooders” who were helping the poor; instead, he believed in helping the poor help themselves (Boyte, 1984). In some sense, however, any work that one does in the name of social justice for all people is a kind of service, a “call to service” (Coles, 1993). But, clearly, community organizing has a unique empowerment and change orientation, and thus it is necessary to make some important distinctions.

Examples of services in the traditional sense are: case management services for people with chronic mental health issues, food banks for the working poor, disaster relief, and assistance with filling out disability applications. While some of these activities can involve case advocacy (for example, a social worker making demands for welfare benefits for which a particular client may be eligible) and may have a strong emphasis on empowerment, they are traditionally viewed as services. And yet, it is possible that such services could be provided with a strong social change, or activist orientation. For example, the Black Panther Party, a progressive, politically oriented civil rights organization active in the 1960s and 1970s, provided services through what was referred to as “survival programs pending revolution,” which included medical clinics, free breakfast for children, free clothing, pest control, sickle cell anemia testing, education, and prison support. Another example is services for people with chronic mental health issues that are provided by peers, in ways that attempt to deconstruct the power of social service hierarchies, which tend to uphold strong distinctions between those who provide services and those who receive them. Such consumer-led efforts, as opposed to efforts that may only seek input from consumers, are not forms of community organizing, strictly speaking, but are allied endeavors that are important to progressive organizing agendas. These efforts are important because of the strong emphasis on the empowerment of traditionally marginalized people and a social change agenda that seeks to undo societal power structures that oppress people with mental health issues.

Offering training on racism to social service agencies or providing technical assistance on immigration issues to legal aid clinics are also services in the narrowest sense. However, such training/services may happen in the context of a larger organizing or social movement campaign, and such ally endeavors by supportive organizations seek, for example, to strengthen the rights of immigrant Latino workers. Kivel (2007) attempts to distinguish between social service and social change: “Social service work addresses the needs of individuals reeling from the personal and devastating impact of institutional systems of exploitation and violence. Social change work challenges the root causes of exploitation and violence” (p. 129).

Social service work can be done with an activist orientation. Interestingly, in my experience, women and low-income people of color do not often so clearly separate community organizing from service provision because they often do not have the luxury to ignore service and just focus on organizing. Women, in particular, tend to be service providers, the caretakers for communities in crisis, the ones who are forced to pick up the pieces of a society that too often ignores its basic social welfare infrastructure. There is a famous Native American parable of a tribe that comes upon some drowning babies in a river. The group begins taking the babies out of the river to save them, one after the other, trying to bring them back to life. It is very exhausting and seemingly incessant work. Eventually, though, somebody gets the idea to go upstream and find out why the babies are drowning, to get to the bottom of the situation and try to stop it from happening in the first place. And this might be a good way to think about the difference between social service and community organizing work—both are necessary, but ultimately organizing work is the only thing that really can get to the bottom of social issues.

Consider now the practice of advocacy, particularly policy advocacy, which is the practice of influencing legislation, appropriations, or planning processes. This usually implies advocating for or on behalf of a group of people, of being a “voice” for the so-called voiceless. Compare the difference between a small group of people with disabilities testifying on a bill at the state legislature about local building codes and accessibility issues versus an able-bodied paid staff person testifying on the same bill. By organizing a group of marginalized people, particularly if they are led by a person with a disability, their sense of personal empowerment as well as group identity may be
strengthened. This empowerment could then be leveraged and sustained for future endeavors. Also, consider the effects on the legislators at the hearing. They may be more moved by and thus more inclined to respond to the stories of people for whom the effects of the policy are real rather than a person whose paid job it is to testify. Advocacy work, while it is often better funded than organizing work, is often engaged in without accountability to a base constituency or with only little input from the base. It should also be noted that advocacy may involve a certain amount of organizing a constituency, just like leaders of grassroots community organizing ventures engage in advocacy; to be sure, the definitions are slippery. Community organizing and advocacy are both important interventions, but organizing the people for whom the issues are most real may be a more effective and sustainable strategy for long-term social change.

Community building, the practice of identifying assets and problems and seeking resources and solutions in a neighborhood, is also often contrasted to community organizing. Again, the distinctions are not completely clear, nor is it necessary that they need to be totally distinct. A community development corporation, for example, may emphasize building leadership and supporting small business ownership for people of color in a depressed community instead of confronting power structures with a demand. Their major focus may be to empower local business owners and support neighborhood economic development, and only rarely, if ever, would they engage in an action that would directly attempt to take back power or transform inequities.

Though policy advocacy and community building have received thorough treatments elsewhere, I do consider components of them in this book, particularly to the extent that they are part of larger organizing campaigns (Jansson, 2007; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). Though some consider community organizing to entail only those activities whose primary purpose is to organize constituents and take back power, my belief is that organizing, like the notion of community, should be considered more broadly. Organizers should have a comprehensive understanding of the kinds of allied work that are a part of a progressive organizing agenda. Community organizing always involves regular people who confront or resist power, where power is manifested as governmental institutions, legislators, corporations, media outlets, landlords, etc. There are lessons to be learned from community development work, advocacy groups, and social change—oriented service organizations. The above discussion reveals the slippery nature of historic definitions and the socially constructed nature of social welfare practices.

**A CRITICAL APPROACH TO ORGANIZING**

The paradigms through which one conceptualizes individuals, families, communities, and institutions—and the interactions among them—are directly related to the ways in which one is inclined to intervene in social problems. If one understands domestic violence to be caused by low self-esteem or learned helplessness in women, then concomitant interventions would focus on building the self-esteem of women. On the other hand, if one understands domestic violence to be a result of a patriarchal society that privileges men and devalues women, then interventions would likely focus on changing the social structure—changing norms, educating young boys, and holding perpetrators accountable. Additionally, if one comprehends the problem of poverty to be a function of people being lazy, then policies will require people on welfare to work at any job or even to do volunteer work. Or, if poverty is understood as a function of low wages, then a living-wage strategy might be pursued. Thus, how one frames social problems is clearly tied to how one attempts to intervene. Such paradigms are tied to one’s own standpoint, or positionality, in society, as well as influences from the media, educational systems, and the economic system.

The philosophical and literary movements of postmodernism and post-structuralism, particularly that of social constructionism, offer important and unique ways of thinking about breaking down oppressive narratives, revealing the slippery nature of rhetoric and language. These intellectual movements offer tools for reframing issues in ways that attend to the realities of oppressed people that can be empowering. Gergen (1999) and other social constructionists have posited that
individuals do not create language and meaning in isolation; rather, meanings are a function of relationships and agreements among people in society. Reality is, in essence, socially constructed and thus can be deconstructed and subsequently reconstructed in ways that are liberating.

Various accounts of economic globalization often state that expanding markets will solve the world’s problems; these markets offer a way to finally develop the developing world (Oxfam, 2004). This idea of “development” is based on the belief that Third World or global South countries, i.e., developing nations, are primitive and need to be modernized (Kaufman, 2003). The argument contends that corporate investment in these countries will make the standard of living for the poorest peoples increase. And yet these narratives of the global economy are often constructed by the people who are the major beneficiaries of the new arrangements—corporate leaders, their allies in government, and centralized global trade bureaucracies such as the WTO and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Mander, 1996). While the phrase free trade is often used to advocate for policies such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), a better term might be “deregulated international commerce” (Daly, 1996, p. 230). The concept of freedom that rests in the idea of free trade masks the negative effects of a deregulated economy. When one looks a little more closely at the actual living conditions of people living in “free trade zones,” one has to question if the workers and their families are indeed free. While a globalized economy that increases communication and respectful sharing of cultures is something most people could agree on, a globalized economy that displaces people from their homes, removes health-care benefits, and pays people low wages does not seem like such a good idea to many people.

This practice of deconstructing narratives and inquiring further into the empirical circumstances of people’s lives, ultimately a kind of critical thinking, is indeed, as Pharr (1996) says, “the most important skill” for social change. This approach, which entails inquiring into the winners and losers of social arrangements, is guided by critical theory. Critical theory, which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3, is grounded in Marxist and neo-Marxist analyses that seek to clarify and interpret the power differentials that exist in society (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000). While Marx was primarily concerned with class power, critical theorists have come to be concerned with racial, gender, and other forms of power that prohibit people from full inclusion and flourishing in society. Such an approach is grounded in the idea of intersectionality, whereby oppressions, such as racism, sexism, and classism, are understood to be interlocking (Collins, 1999; Kaufman, 2003). Thus, an underlying assumption of this text is that progressive organizers working toward social change must necessarily unravel all aspects of oppression based on an understanding of intersectionality (discussed in further detail in Chapters 3 and 12).

It is clear that one’s analysis gives rise to one’s methods. If one has no critical thinking skills to observe phenomena and deconstruct them, then one can completely miss the boat, just blindly intervening without understanding the roots of issues or the deep-seated strengths of a community. Because the way one frames or analyzes issues is related to interventions, then it follows that critical thinking skills and the ability to analyze are the foundations of organizing. Engaging in such power analysis is a bedrock of community organizing practice (Sinclair & Russ, 2006). Thus, this critical approach is a principal orientation of this text. In Chapter 7, I talk about the framing perspective, a phenomenon identified by sociologists that emphasizes how the reframing of issues is a critical step that community organizers must engage in before determining what action to take.

THE JOURNEY OF PROGRESSIVE ORGANIZING

There are numerous ways to engage in communities as a practitioner. These ways are often based on a variety of goals and methods. Some ways of engagement have stronger elements of social change and individual empowerment than others. Other methods emphasize changing a particular policy or achieving a victory and may involve lesser degrees of engaging a particular constituency in the process. These different goals and methods may all have their place, but it is important to understand them and know when it is appropriate and feasible to incorporate various strategies.
Understanding the organization a person works for, the ideologies underlying policies, and the funding mechanisms of an organization are all a part of understanding one’s location as an organizer. I submit that understanding one’s own self, especially one’s personal history and values, is also a critical component of organizing work.

Some organizations may believe that they are engaged in social change activities that, unfortunately, may actually be perpetuating current arrangements. Social welfare practices have been “implicated in oppressive processes by fostering relations of dominance that are consistent with supporting the status quo” (Dominelli, 2002, p. 28). Organizations may believe they are promoting citizen empowerment when they are actually doing things for their constituency rather than doing the work with their constituency. An organization that advocates for the rights of immigrants but that is composed only of white citizen professionals with privilege is not necessarily engaged in progressive organizing work. The ability of such a group to be truly accountable to the constituency is virtually impossible without being driven by immigrant voices. Such a situation can be remedied, but it takes a strong commitment to such things as: giving up power, changing organizational policies and tactics, and being open to critique by those who are marginalized.

**Empowerment and Social Change**

My experience has been that terms such as *social justice*, *social change*, and *empowerment* are utilized with regularity among organizers, activists, and social workers. Not only are the definitions of these words often unclear, but the activities that correspond to the words are often incommensurate. For this reason, it may be useful to define a few of these terms. (See Key Terms at the end of this chapter.) Many of these terms are interrelated.

Oppression is a socially constructed situation whereby a dominant group “others” a group deemed to be of lower status (Dominelli, 2002). People acquiesce to domination when societal ideas lead them to believe in the naturalness of the present order of oppression (Kaufman, 2003), the idea that the Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci called *hegemony*. This hegemony is a social construction dependent upon daily reinforcement in the media, workplace, and educational institutions as well as social welfare institutions. Thus, liberation from such oppression entails a kind of undoing of such social constructions. Breaking through belief systems is the first step toward empowerment.

I define empowerment as increasing the levels of understanding, engagement, and/or personal power of individual citizens. This may happen through consciousness-raising activities, participation in social action, and engagement in leadership roles, to name a few. Empowerment has been an important concept in community organizing practice, social work practice, and community development, rooted in and related to feminist and strengths perspectives (Gutierrez, Parsons, & Cox, 1998; Saleebey, 1997). Empowerment is ultimately a political idea that seeks to develop individual power in order to reshape the environment, a belief that people are capable of making their own choices and have much to offer in shaping society. The role of the organizer, then, is to “nourish, encourage, assist, enable, support, stimulate, and unleash the strengths within people; to illuminate the strengths available to people in their own environments; and to promote equity and justice at all levels of society” (Cowger, 1997, p. 62).

Thinking of empowerment as a metaphor of a ladder is a useful heuristic that emerges from urban planning literature (Arnstein, 1969; Murphy & Cunningham, 2003). Greater degrees of participation and thus empowerment are achieved as one climbs up a ladder. Arnstein’s ladder of participation (see Figure 1.1) incorporates the idea of a ladder to convey how some activities on the lowest rungs of the ladder, such as “social service provision” and “therapy,” represent low degrees of citizen participation. Activities such as “informing” and “consultation” represent medium degrees and the middle rungs of the ladder. Many national advocacy organizations, such as the Children’s Defense Fund or the National Organization for Women, fall into this category. Professional and paid staff members consult with their constituencies to learn about what issues are important to them, as well as to inform them of new campaigns and other relevant policy actions. “Partnership” and
“citizen control” are the highest degrees of citizen participation, represented by the highest rungs of the ladder. Thus, empowerment is best achieved on the highest rungs of the ladder and is exemplified in citizen-led organizations such as the Coalition of Immokalee Workers; the Kensington Welfare Rights Union; and the disability rights group, ADAPT.

Bobo et al. (2001) also present a framework for thinking about empowerment as a matter of degrees. Such frameworks are very relevant because they do not succumb to unnecessarily dichotomous thinking that might tend to identify organizing activities as either empowering or disempowering or either just or unjust. Thus, it seems fairly obvious that measuring the degree of empowerment of a social action campaign is fairly complex and only lends itself to such subtle analysis.

Both empowerment and social change are mutually reinforcing concepts. While empowerment is obviously an end unto itself, it also provides fuel for social change. The more individuals feel empowered, the more sustainable organizing campaigns will be over time. Assuming there will always be a need to do social change work, it makes sense to foster the strength and solidarity of groups. It is not uncommon for activists to overstate the amount of empowerment and social change that their activities engender. By thinking about these central elements of organizing as a matter of degree and always in flux, an organizer is better able to be transparent and critical of his or her own practices.

Social change is characterized as concrete alterations of an unequal social structure. This definition rests on the idea that oppression and social injustice such as sexism, racism, ageism, or homophobia are deeply entrenched in society and manifest themselves in manifold ways. Harper (1998) defined social change as “the significant alteration of social structure and cultural patterns through time” (p. 4). Some have argued that the only real social changes that occurred in the 20th century were during the time of the New Deal in the 1930s and during the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s (Piven & Cloward, 1979). Others may see social change successes as transforming a mental health organization to being consumer driven or securing a living-wage ordinance in a city or municipality.

Papa, Singhal and Papa (2006) offer a definition of the phrase organizing for social change: “the process through which a group of individuals orchestrate their skills, resources, and human
potential to gain control of their future” (p. 31). I like this definition because it emphasizes organizing for social change as a process and indicates that the goal of such activities is fairly broad, i.e., “to gain control of their future.” This phrase has both an empowerment element and a social change element; it leaves open the possibility that the goal may be to pass a piece of legislation and get new programming or funding, or it could be creating a new way of living, a new community, such as a community-based, cooperative business venture that is empowering to previously marginalized populations.

Social change is about creating the kind of world that people want right now, in this moment. It is about challenging a set of practices (Kaufman, 2003). While it is something that occurs over time, it is also something that one can constantly be working on, a way of life. Social change is a process and an outcome. While some may argue that one can only view social change in terms of the long-term outcomes that are engendered, I argue that process is equally important and that the strategies organizers use are an integral component of social change. My assumption is that the seeds that organizers plant and the care that they take with their endeavors will produce the social change outcomes. If one is trying to grow green beans, then it is necessary to plant green bean seeds; it wouldn’t make sense to plant squash seeds to grow green beans. If one is trying to grow tomatoes, then the tomatoes should be put in a location that provides them with lots of sunlight; it wouldn’t make sense to put them in the shade. All of these acts constitute the act of gardening and growth. And, thus is the case with social change; one must plant the seeds and create the conditions one wants to see in the world. As Gandhi famously said, “You must be the change you wish to see in the world.”

To commit to social change work is to commit to a journey. When one embarks on any journey, it is always helpful to try to be prepared—pack a map, tools, and other provisions that one may need over the course. Anything can happen on a journey, however, and thus being open to any eventuality and the new insights that can arise are enormous opportunities. It is when one thinks one knows all the answers to doing social change work that some of these new opportunities can pass one by. Just when one thinks one has arrived at her or his destination, one realizes that the journey is still ongoing. But, how does one simultaneously stay committed to one’s ideals and analyses and be open to critical new findings, learning to improvise along the way?

Parton (2007) has argued for what he calls constructive social work. Such an approach is based on a postmodernist view of reality that insists on “a critical stance toward taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world, including ourselves” (p. 158). Because the world is the result of social processes, interactions, and negotiated understandings, the basic premise of social constructionism (Gergen, 1999), community organizing practice, can be based on such an understanding. Parton (2007) describes his approach:

A central emphasis of constructive social work is thus upon process, plurality of both knowledge and voice, and the relational quality of knowledge and language…. Social work is as much, if not more, an art as it is a science, and proceeds on the basis that practice should be understood as much as a practical–moral activity as a rational–technical one. It is affirmative and reflexive and focuses on dialogue, listening to and talking with the other. An ability to work with ambiguity and uncertainty, both in terms of process and outcomes, is key. The principle of indeterminancy [sic] suggests the fluid, recursive, and nondetermined way that social situations unfold (pp. 159–160).

The possibility of engaging in organizing work in a way similar to constructive social work may be a useful way of thinking about a critical approach to progressive community organizing.

Some scholars have articulated a similar approach, arguing that social welfare practices operate in a borderlands space that transcends dichotomies such as art and science (Jackson, 2000; Walter, 2003). Walter (2003) argues that it is like improvisational acting “characterized by creative and spontaneous reflexivity, as well as moment-to-moment decision making in continuous relation to the social context” (p. 320). Writers on the topic have advocated that successful practitioners, like good
improvisational actors, attend to the moment, accept ideas and suggestions, and advance the action by adding something to it. Burghardt (1982) has argued for what he calls “tactical self-awareness” in community organizing, which emphasizes that, when one is choosing and engaging in particular organizing tactics, it is helpful to be aware of personal as well as organizing limitations in particular contexts. Rather than succumbing to the idea of a grand theory of organizing, the tactically self-aware person accepts the realities of organizing, including one’s own limitations, fears, and concerns.

Sometimes one’s ideologies can actually hinder a person on his or her journey. My identity as a “feminist” has actually blinded me from seeing other perspectives or pieces of information that may be relevant. I tell this story by way of illustration of this point. I was working as an advocate for battered women, doing policy work at the statewide level and participating in a working group that was focusing on welfare reform and child support enforcement regulations. One person referred to fathers who owed child support as “deadbeat dads.” This was not an uncommon way to refer to men who battered their partners and did not pay their child support. In fact, we often referred to them in even worse terms. It hit me though at that moment that not only was name calling not particularly helpful, but that most of these “deadbeat dads” were struggling economically themselves. They, too, are victims of an economy that favors the rich over the working class and a government that had recently retrenched many social welfare provisions. Many of these men were dealing with the realities of low-paying jobs and unemployment. It became clear that manifesting as a social change activist meant making connections about the multiple ways that power affects regular people. It means speaking out about victim blaming and that one oppression (violence against women) does not necessarily trump another (economic injustice). At this moment, I began to really understand what solidarity means. Though I was not ready to speak up in that moment, the next time that this scenario arose, and it inevitably did, I was able to articulate my concern with the use of such language. Progressive community organizers understand that oppressions are interconnected and interlocking. Organizers must work at maintaining a balance between their ideals and the constantly changing evidence, engaging in a kind of improvisational, dialectical dance of social change work.

Having an understanding of empowerment, social change, and a practice that is flexible and constantly under construction are the key ingredients for a recipe for success as an organizer. Though social systems are indeed formidable, doing one’s personal work on the important issues of oppression and clarifying one’s own reasons for doing organizing are critical and ongoing steps to social change work. In Chapter 10, I discuss some of the key personal work that organizers can consider doing to be effective and committed for the long haul.

The word radical literally means “to the root.” To engage in progressive community organizing for social change in a globalized world is indeed radical work; it necessarily involves getting to the root of social issues. Alinsky reminded us, though, that the most effective organizers were always “realistic,” i.e., they understood the context and how to achieve their victories. And thus, no matter how one defines oneself—citizen, advocate, social worker, organizer, activist—one should first be a student of history, a student of the political economy, a student of social welfare policy and programs, and a student who understands the various ways that oppression gets played out in people’s lives.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How does globalization affect your life? Describe both positive and negative effects.
2. Describe what barriers you see to doing community organizing, including those barriers that are personal, cultural, and organizational.
3. In what ways is critical thinking encouraged and in what ways has critical thinking been discouraged in our society?
4. What community are you a part of? What communities do you feel an alliance with?
5. Discuss the specific organizations that you work in or have worked in. Do these organizations fit into the categories of social service, advocacy, community organizing, or activist? Why or why not?

SIGGUESTIONS FOR FURTHER INQUIRY

BOOKS
Moraga, C., & Anzaldua, G. (Eds.). This bridge called my back: Writings by radical women of color. Watertown, MA: Persephone Press.
Mander, J., & Goldsmith, E. (Eds.). The case against the global economy and a turn toward the local. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books.

WEB
Education Center for Community Organizing. http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/socwork/ecco/

KEY TERMS
Activism: A general term to cover any number of social-change activities that are political in nature. Activism may include actions done by regular people such as letter writing, political protest, or other forms of consciousness raising. It may also include the work done by paid individuals who work in social-change organizations.
Advocacy: To work on behalf of a marginalized group by working to change policies, secure new programs and funding, or redress some other injustice.
Community development: Efforts to strengthen social networks and a community’s capacity for social and economic justice.
Community organizing: Efforts to mobilize people through leadership development to confront power and address issues identified by the constituency.
Progressive community organizing: Community organizing that works toward the liberation of oppressed and marginalized individuals and the transformation of social systems that perpetuate the oppression.
Protest: A moral voice that explicitly criticizes oppressive actions, organizations, and policies. Protest may be exemplified through a variety of means, including the arts and direct action.
Social service: The provision of assistance by relatively formal helping systems, either by a governmental or a nongovernmental organization.