



Reimagining the Scholarship and Practice of Community Organizing: Introduction to Issue One

Alexandra Piñeros Shields, The Heller School, Brandeis University

Jocelyn Vicente-Angeles, Te Ohu Whakawhanaunga

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Abstract

This essay introduces the inaugural issue of *Community Organizing Journal*, "Reimagining the Scholarship and Practice of Community Organizing." Written by two scholar-organizers, the introduction summarizes key themes from Issue 1 papers, including 1) defining community organizing; 2) problematizing Alinsky-style organizing; 3) diversifying organizing strategies; and 4) exploring power dynamics.

Keywords: community organizing, engaged scholarship, grassroots organizing, power , leadership development

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Overview

The *Community Organizing Journal* (COJ) is dedicated to advancing the scholarship and practice of community organizing around the globe. COJ is an emerging platform for reflection that will give impetus to robust learning and interactive discussions among scholars and practitioners. This inaugural issue explores how the scholarship and practice of community organizing can be reimagined. The following questions guided the authors in developing papers for this issue:

1. What community organizing practices can and should endure? What have been the impacts of these practices and in what ways can they be sustained in the future?
2. What needs to be disrupted? Why?
3. How can the academic study and teaching of organizing contribute more effectively to the practice of organizing?

In this introduction, we identify and discuss four key themes that we see emerging from these articles, and then address how they contribute to our ongoing search for answers to these questions. Together, the articles problematize community organizing research and practice in valuable ways. For researchers, they provide new lenses and conceptual frameworks to sharpen future research with and about the field of community organizing. For organizers, they constitute a compelling call to interrogate commonly accepted practices and to imagine new strategies. For the field, these articles invite us to imagine ways researchers, practitioners, and those engaged in social action and democratic participation bridge research and practice towards a global learning community that can collectively wrestle with the questions of what needs to be sustained and what needs to be disrupted in the field of community organizing.

We are thankful for the ingenuity of community leaders, organizers and scholars who shared powerful stories and innovative strategies on how organizers successfully transcended the physical limitations brought by the COVID pandemic, develop new approaches and tactics, and form new alliances promoting solidarity to wider communities. The level of commitment and organizing skill to pivot to meet new challenges such as the use of digital tools to maintain organizational communication and relationships during COVID inspired us.

Read on, you will enjoy and have a glimpse of the various approaches in community organizing from the United States (USA), Oceania (Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand), Germany, and Latin America. Some authors affirmed Alinsky's method of organizing while others challenged Alinsky orthodoxy. Given our theological orientation and early organizing formation, we were both excited to read about the interplay between Alinsky and other methods of organizing using the pedagogical teachings of Freire and Latin American Liberation Theology. We hope that you too, will be inspired by the evidence that organizing practice works despite its limitations. The good news is that together we can draw humbling lessons from the practice and complementing mechanisms within reach. We anticipate the possibility of going beyond the walls, visible and/or invisible that divide scholars and organizing practitioners in order to enhance and advance unity in organizing theory and practice. Finally, the transnational nature of the conversations represented in this issue inspires hope and trust in sustainable powerful collective action and transnational solidarity that we need to defend against global racial capitalism, increasing political extremism, and climate catastrophe.

Our personal experiences as community organizers are rooted in different geographical and socio-cultural contexts. Yet, through discussion of these articles, we found that the political orientation we share was shaped by our common passion of fighting for human rights against

authoritarian rule. We also learned that social thinkers Gustavo Gutierrez, Paulo Freire, and Saul Alinsky played a pivotal role in developing our theories of change.

Our Backgrounds

For two years we have worked together as founding members of COJ's editorial board. We came to this work because of our experiences as community organizers and our interest in fostering an international conversation about community organizing practice. We have each served as lead organizers, building and strengthening organizations in communities that experience state repression, economic exploitation, and racism. We have also had relationships and positions within academia. These roles and our experiences have shaped how we approached reading the papers in Issue 1. After reading and reflecting on the papers, we met online numerous times to share our impressions and integrate our reflections into a collective analysis which we present below. We begin by sharing our backgrounds to make explicit the positions from which we approached our analysis.

Jo

In 1984, age 21 a year after graduating from University, I was exposed and trained as a Community Organizer in a Catholic Parish in the Diocese of Legazpi, Albay, Philippines. The training and organizing program were influenced by Saul Alinsky and Paulo Freire's teachings. Part of the six months in-house rigorous training mechanism then was meaningful integration to the community (living in urban/rural poor communities as a requirement), weekly reporting of trainees during tactic sessions, regular monthly evaluation, reflection, and study sessions. Peasant, urban poor organizations and Trade Unions were at their strongest despite the militarization in farming communities and atrocities committed to union and community leaders, community organizers, and student activists in both urban and rural areas. Fierce political rallies and street protest exposing corruption and human rights violation were all over the Nation. The protest movement was led by student activists, faith groups and diverse multi-sectoral organizations from different political spectrum. Highly disciplined and dedicated community organizing work connecting the local issues to the National and International people's struggles contributed to the fall of Marcos' Dictatorial Regime in February 1986, culminating in EDSA People Power Revolution.

I have learned from my mentors the skills that community organizers use to motivate the people to act and solve their own problems from drinking water to eviction cases, following the action-reflection-action praxis. I saw how the urban poor themselves confront/dialogue/engage local officials to demand basic services and/or set up human barricades to protect their homes and negotiate with authorities. Then having the same energy level, they marched together with other social movements to fight the Dictator in the Presidential Palace. This was my memorable journey with our partner urban poor communities as a community organizer (CO) in the Philippines from March 1984 – October 2012.

Fast forward, in 2017 my family migrated to Aotearoa New Zealand, and here, I was so happy to be given the chance to be a part time community organizer of the Living Wage Movement in Auckland and be part of the founding organizing team of the Te Ohu Whakawhanaunga, the newly founded broad-based Alliance in Auckland, both affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) that was founded by Alinsky. Through the COJ journey I uncovered the voice and the courage and fearlessness of the younger version of myself to fight for justice and basic human rights, and this is firing me to keep on, keeping on through collective action. Sharing the valuable experience I have in community organizing in different platforms has been very meaningful to me.

Alexandra

In 1988, during the civil war in El Salvador, I graduated from college and joined the Jesuit Volunteer Corps. I was placed at CARECEN, a Salvadoran community-based organization and began working as a paralegal on political asylum applications for Salvadoran refugees fleeing the war. I helped Maria secure a letter from an INS-approved physician to certify that she was a victim of torture. Maria's asylum claim was denied even though the standard in asylum law is a "well-founded fear" of persecution. Almost all our clients were denied despite having experienced horrific violence. I lost trust in legal remedies. Meanwhile, CARECEN's organizing unit organized me. Having been an activist during college against U.S. involvement in Central America, I joined the struggle again. But this time, was different. I was being led by Salvadoran refugees themselves. A couple of times a week, during lunch, they organized us to protest at the Salvadoran embassy down the road. They organized protests at the Capital, meetings with Senators and Representatives, and testimonies during Congressional hearings. Over time we gained the support of members of Congress to stop U.S. funding of the war. I witnessed Salvadoran refugees, many of whom were our legal clients, step into their power and become public leaders – despite their tenuous immigration status. I recognized a path towards liberation through their passion, vulnerability, courage, and trust in collective power. I choose organizing as my theory of change and vocation.

I have continued organizing and most recently led Essex County Community Organization (ECCO), a faith-based community organizing NGO in the northeast of Massachusetts, USA, part of the Faith in Action network. While I was at ECCO, I worked to integrate Alinsky and movement strategies as well as community-driven participatory action research to create opportunities for affected people to dismantle the systems of mass incarceration in the criminal legal and immigration detention systems, leading to personal and collective transformative power. Through organizing over the past 35 years, I have come to identify myself as a Midwife for Power. I am most moved when I witness people who have been oppressed step into their own power and lead to make social change. Consequently, I place a very high value on leadership development and I am continually seeking new strategies to promote the power development in leaders.

Issue 1 Themes

As community organizers, we were excited and challenged by the articles in this first issue. We each read the papers and through collaborative conversation over seven months, we synthesized our reactions and perspectives on the papers in light of the issue's framing questions. We found value in the ways that the authors 1) defined community organizing; 2) problematized Alinsky-style organizing; 3) described the diversification of organizing strategies; and 4) explored power dynamics. Below we offer our insights on these four areas.

Defining Community Organizing

The labyrinth and permutations of the definition of Community Organizing presented by the authors offers a collective opportunity to re-imagine the scope and breadth of the community organizing practices and its possibilities. Building people power is at the core of the definition of Community Organizing offered by the authors. The concept of "people power" is a much explored one in the scholarship and practice of organizing. Scholars pursue dimensions of what people power is, how it advances community-driven interests and priorities, and the impact that generating people power has on strengthening democracy. Practitioners similarly pursue new

understandings of the practices and approaches that will build, grow, and sustain the people power necessary for achieving goals and shifting power relations.

Barrow's article shared with us the iteration of the IAF residential training and the universals that it teaches. Accordingly, the training is characterised by taking a nonideological stance, pragmatic view of social change, retaining professional organizers and training local leaders who own and represent the organization. Barrow's case study presents a strong case for the usefulness of classic Alinsky training in organising across significant community differences. Heins and Clifford critique traditional Alinsky through the lens of gender and race and call for internal democratic practice within organizing groups and campaigns. Along these lines, Betscher and Falge expand the conception of community organizing to include marginalized community knowledge as leadership development and political education. In Jo's experience, defining community organizing is necessarily rooted in the context of a given community and their campaigns as well as understanding other players and their strategies in that given local. Accounting for the values of the institution and the personal values of organizers is essential in defining community organizing and the sustainability of the practice.

Gulliver and Vachette also expand the traditional Alinsky organizing definition. The groups they studied used hybrid models that promoted both community-centered relational rituals and professional skills towards both mobilizing and organizing. The papers in this issue further reflect an invitation to consider whether community organizing should stay local or geographically based in a city (Tattersall and Iveson) or national, to effect structural transformation (Falge and Betscher). Or should it be both? Going back to Gulliver and Vachette, among their respondents, they found a pattern of preference for hybrid organizing models that focused on a single issue with global impact. Here there was a clear move away from the classic Alinsky local placed-based focus to one that seeks to engage in or contribute to the development of social movements, some with global targets. Together the papers suggest that the practice of organizing should not be monolithic or purist but rather flexible and open to other strategies.

Problematizing Alinsky-style Organizing

Notable across the papers is a critique of Alinsky-style organizing that Tattersall and Iveson encapsulate in their title, "Organising is not a Silver Bullet: Locating Community Organizing as Part of an Ecology of People Power Strategies that Make Change in the City." Both authors come from their foundational work with Sydney Alliance using the IAF Methodology that is based in the Alinsky tradition and documented organizing practice across a wide spectrum in several countries during a seven-year period. Based on their research, they argue that while building strong relationships and promoting leadership development are central practices, building people power also requires expanding to other strategies beyond community organizing. We believe this argument, the need for an ecology of social change strategies, is an important one to capture because it reflects real, on the ground, social change work and because it answers one of this issue's central questions - What needs to be disrupted? We would agree that a narrow definition of organizing rooted in Alinsky needs to be disrupted.

Heins and Clifford also present a clear call for disrupting Alinsky organizing orthodoxy. Their paper is a compelling critique of the patriarchal organization and culture of Alinsky-style community organizing the U.S. In particular, they focus on how leadership notions are constructed, understood, and deployed and how financial resources are used as well as their influence on organizing. In each of these areas, they critique the dynamics of male-oriented paradigms inherited from the Alinsky model followed by a presentation of liberatory and women-centered approach in each of these areas. Their treatment is nuanced both at the

theoretical level as well as the practical level. A particularly innovative aspect of their paper is their critique of time in the Alinsky model. They argue that the culture of urgency and crisis that undergirds traditional community organizing impedes our ability to be transformational at the individual and organizational levels. Both of us have experienced the masculine nature of IAF training and culture and support the call for our field to reimagine community organizing through a feminist liberatory lens.

Petitjean's article unpacks and elucidates the role of community organizers. Unlike most of the other articles which focus on external strategy, Petitjean focuses on the internal dynamics of organizing groups and argues that paid organizers and their professionalism create beneficial organizational power but may also hinder the development of power in community leaders. This professionalism has its roots in Alinsky's *Reveille for Radicals* and *Rules for Radicals* as well as the Midwest Academy's manuals to more recent texts that have established the profession's rules. Acknowledging the wealth of literature besides Alinsky's own work to draw from if we want to take the path of advocating for the professionalization of community organizing / community organizer work as a sustainable strategy, Jo wonders, at this juncture, should we focus on increasing professionalization? How do we account for and ensure that organic intellectuals/leaders are not marginalized in this endeavour? Protecting democratic spaces and the wins of those who invested sweat and blood to protect civil liberties and human rights is the call of this time. Leaders, community organizers and / or activist or critical social scientists are essential elements to build the world that it should / can be. The article ends with very valuable questions as the field works to reimagine community organizing. Petitjean asks,

*"How to build organizational mechanisms that can hold organizers democratically accountable to the organizations they work for, accelerate the devolution of their power to the community leaders and beyond, and make those organizations more accountable to the constituencies they represent?
And how to disentangle the processes of formalizing knowledge and know-how and democratizing the access to organizing skills, which appear as crucial areas to expand in the future, from the logics of professional closure and cognitive superiority, which hamper coalition work and produce a form of political paternalism that stands at odds with organizing's values of dignity and democracy?"*

Diversifying Organizing Strategies

The articles in this first issue present ways community organizers around the globe continue to use Alinsky-style organizing while building, expanding, and also challenging Alinsky orthodoxy. By capturing the multitude of ways organizers are enlarging the toolbox of organizing strategies and tactics, the authors provide a valuable contribution for the public to understand the ways the field of organizing is growing on the ground. Tattersall and Iveson clearly explain the core strategies embedded in Alinsky-style organizing and note their strengths and limitations. Through personal organizing experience as well as large study with respondents in 34 cities, they arrive at the conclusion that while Alinsky-based strategies are important, a broader "ecology of people power strategies" is necessary for effective social change. Their analysis resonated with us. Alexandra's work in Massachusetts, USA to secure secured drivers' licenses for undocumented immigrants would not have been successful if the coalition had not diversified the strategies it employed in their 24-year campaign. Their proposition is powerfully exemplified in the work of Momentum (founded in 2014) and their movement ecology (Ayni Institute) work which also incorporates Andean cosmology which Alexandra connects with given

her Colombian heritage. Gulliver and Vachette provide another powerful example the diversification of organizing strategies in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. In their comprehensive study of 97 organizations, they conclude that most organizations utilize a “hybrid model” that blends community organizing with social movement mobilizing. Interestingly, most organizations that use a “hybrid model” focus on single issue campaigns with global impact. Some of their respondents named “disruptive, nonviolent civil disobedience” as key to building “people power.” We are hopeful for the future of community organizing because they found that a large percentage of the organizations are in a constant state of evolving their structures and organizing models in response to ever changing contexts, which, they argue is a key determinate of what strategies are used.

Josephson and Fatima found a similar dynamic. As a result of the COVID pandemic, organizations were forced to pivot to digital tools. They argue that identifying and applying new methods is a common practice when the approaches being used are not advancing a campaign. Thus, COVID, created the conditions for “disorganizing” and “reorganizing” to new methods. Scaling with technology required organizations to be attentive to questions of access and inclusion on the one hand but also offered expanded geographic reach which resulted in more benefits than costs. Other benefits of this transition were the need for and promotion of intergenerational collaboration and greater access to public officials. This paper presents another example of the need for flexibility and diversification even if technology is simply a tool rather than a method of organizing as the authors argue.

For us, these articles adeptly interrogate adherence to organizing orthodoxy. They raise important questions about how to retain the core strengths of traditional organizing including relationship-building, leadership development, and strategic issue focus while transcending its limits to incorporate new strategies and tools. They provide concrete examples of the ways organizers and community leaders reimagine organizing given they contexts and challenges they find themselves in, be it an authoritarian regime or a global pandemic.

Exploring Power Dynamics

Several papers in this issue explore power relations and decision-making within organizing groups, elevating a critical dimension of what needs to be disrupted in organizing and what practices can and should endure. Below we highlight the contributions authors make to our field’s understanding of power – how to build it and how to use it. We believe a focus on power is paramount given the changing nature of racial capitalism, the intensifying climate crisis, and escalating authoritarianism in the 21st century. Petitjean challenges us as organizers to engage in deep. This analysis exposes the ways organizers can constitute a professional class. Especially in the Alinsky tradition of bringing organizers in from outside the community, organizers may develop a near-monopoly of expert knowledge over the craft that creates distance and power over community members. Moreover, this expert knowledge produces barriers to the democratization of organizing strategies. As an executive director of ECCO, Alexandra understood the tension between maintaining the nonprofit organization and democratizing institutional decision-making with the community as fundamentally about power.

We found Barrow’s case for the importance of vulnerability, empathy, and reciprocity as essential elements to power sharing and social transformation compelling. Both Betscher and Falge and Ashley argue for the importance of political education and knowledge construction as power methodologies. These articles describe the importance of space, whether a community college classroom or a community-situated research center, for the kind of personal transformation needed to subsequently build community power. As a Participatory Action Researcher (PAR) for

over 20 years, Alexandra was encouraged by the innovation described by Betscher and Falge and their co-researchers. This paper effectively argues that community members can develop power through the co-construction of knowledge. The authors challenge us to imagine how power lies at the intersections of community organizing and community knowledge. Indeed, community-driven knowledge construction, that results when community members engage in research, is a counter balance to the expert knowledge wielded over community leaders through orthodox traditions of community organizing described persuasively by Petitjean and several others in this issue. For those of us who teach organizing in both university and community settings, Ashley agitates us to integrate our community organizing experience into the classroom. This article describes how we can build power from below towards a “bottom-up...we-worldview” grounded in organizing praxis. For Ashley, power lies in developing “liberatory agency” by producing a “revolutionary collective subject.” We applaud the urgency that this article incites.

Heins and Clifford argue for a liberatory feminist approach to organizing that challenges zero-sum conventions of power. By interrogating the “culture of urgency and crises”, they develop a compelling analysis of time, its uses and abuses, that prevent the development of a “sustainable power shift.” Having spent much of the last decade experimenting with a womanist model of organizing, Alexandra found their article to be a very important contribution to advancing a feminist organizing future. Problematizing western and patriarchal grounded Alinsky power frameworks is essential to strengthening and amplifying the field of organizing. Given the current context of intensifying globalized threats to community and democracy, these articles constitute an important and urgent agitation to use intersectional lenses to dissect power relations in our organizing practices.

Conclusion

We believe that these articles, collectively and individually, advance our search for answers to the questions we set forth for this first issue of COJ. The editors hoped that exploring what organizing practices can endure and what needs to be disrupted would invite the scholars and practitioners of organizing to consider both lasting impacts and opportunities for change. Asking how the academic study and teaching of organizing can contribute more effectively to the practice of organizing is an essential question for the sustainability of the field.

Defining community organizing and describing the diversification of organizing strategies are connected, ongoing processes that seek to balance identifying enduring core elements of community organizing and recognizing, appreciating, and critiquing new forms of organizing. Doing so establishes the basic parameters of the conversation around the first two guiding questions. Given the prominence of Alinsky-style organizing, historically and in terms of scholarship, problematizing this work is also a key part of addressing the first two questions. For the third question, we believe that all these articles represent engaged scholarship that comes from and speaks to scholars, organizers, and those whose careers have included both roles. The Journal, we believe, seeks to advance organizing through providing a forum for robust discussion and debate, informed by practice, scholarship, and teaching.

Reading all the articles gave us much hope. For those of us who are still actively doing community organizing work, the Journal will be instrumental to creating a space for reflexive practice. We should acknowledge though, that most of us in the field of community organizing are coming from an oral tradition so writing about our practice will be a continuing challenge. We envision this Journal as a learning community where organizers and academic can reflect together. As practitioners we are confident that this Journal will provide an essential platform to

interrogate organizing practices and challenge us in life-giving ways to innovate and improve our frameworks and strategies. In *An Act of Bravery*, four organizers share their stories and highlight the need for “calculated vulnerability” which we believe is essential for the work ahead. López-Chang’s realization, “organizing is not about formulas” is an important lesson for all of us as we steward this field together. Finally, the transnational nature of the Journal is pregnant with possibility to be a source of learning new ways to promote powerful collective action and transnational solidarity needed in a time of many threats to community, democracy, and the environment.