Part One

Essential Elements of Community Organization

Community has played a vital role in American history. In the absence of an aristocratic tradition, community was the place where citizens exchanged information and resources, developed and enforced norms, and created and sustained meaning. Often these were religious communities, but a matrix of communities—communities of interest and communities of commitment, among others—also influenced the course of American history.

COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION IN SOCIAL WORK

In social work, helping communities to change, improve, and become more viable has a history as old as the discipline itself. Community—both its problems and its growth—has been a part of discipline-wide social work discussions since the American Social Science Association meetings in the 1870s through the more recent National Conference of Charities and Corrections, and the National Conference of Social Welfare (Garvin & Cox, 1995; Lane, 1939).

CITIES EXPERIENCED "DISORGANIZATION"

Community leaders, academic professionals, and citizens at large felt strongly that the trend toward urbanization and industrialization, which

characterized the United States after the Civil War, was profoundly disorganizing to the old, somewhat idealized, rural community (Schwartz, 1965; Wilensky & Lebeaux, 1956). They tended to view the city as the antithesis of community. In the city, the ties that bound were either broken or failed to take root. Social problems—juvenile delinquency, urban crime, dependence on the dole, and unemployment—were seen as failures of community, a result of community disorganization. What better solution to problems of community disorganization than attempts to organize community to rebuild the connections that bound individuals interdependently to each other (Bernard, 1968).

COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION AS A SUBDOMINANT EMPHASIS

For all its historic presence in society, and in social work particularly, community emphasis and community organization are often subordinated to more individualistic views about the solutions to social problems. Americans seem to prefer the mountain-man lore of western settlement to the more community-focused, wagon-train explanations of the historical record. For this reason, perhaps, casework (and to some extent group work) specializations have been more popular in schools of social work than have community organization and, later, administration, planning, and policy specializations. The reasons underlying these preferences are manifold, complex, and not completely clear.

Suffice it to say that Americans' penchant for individualism in sports and business, as well as their interest in rewarding good deeds and punishing wrongdoers, also appears in the helping professions. Just as in medicine, where individual physician-provided care is preferred over systemwide care, public-health prevention, in social work. Individual counseling and other micro-level interventions are more popular than macro-level solutions.

Americans' preference for freedom and lack of intervention also appears in its emphasis on remediation rather than prevention. Practically speaking, Americans tend to avoid preventive intervention, waiting instead until some problem has presented itself (Burk, 1965). This view emphasizes, then, remediation over prevention. To a certain extent, however, social work's macro-level specializations (community organizing,

administration, policy) focus a bit more on the preventive, rather than remedial, work.

Though emphasis on individualism and remediation produce social work practice dominated by interests in casework and counseling, there is, nonetheless, a long history of community focus as well. It is to this area that we now turn our attention.

This section contains three chapters. Chapter 1 focuses on definitions of community and considers the implications of these differences. Naturally, there are many situations in which definitions intersect, and the resulting intersections produce the community matrix.

Chapter 2 considers community development, community action, and community planning as three different approaches to successful community organization and leadership. These approaches overlap in a phased sense, since development, which addresses problems of community cohesion, usually occurs first. The second phase, community capability, blends existing groups into an effective unit focused on specific advocacy issues using community action. The third phase, community competence, blends elements of community action into an ongoing effort and uses community planning as its main tool. Chapter 3 examines stages of the successful community leadership and organizing process. As in many aspects of life (working out, eating, sleeping), community organizing has beginning, middle, and ending phases. Somewhat different skill sets are useful at each phase.

Chapter 1

Understanding Community Matrix and Community Stages

We live in a pluralism of communities, a community matrix, as it were. Communities, as mentioned, are bonds created by commonalities. What are these commonalities? What things can a group of people hold in common? They can, of course, vary, but familial, interest, location, belief, identification, or activity bonds, among others, are common (Fellin, 2000; Johnson & Tropman, 1979). Communities can also be formed around a personal feature or experience. Let's consider some examples.

COMMUNITY PLURALISMS

Communities of Common Relationship

In one sense, the family might be the primary community. There are families of origin, families of creation, and extended families. These familial connections may extend over wide space and other societal divisions and, with the current emphasis on genealogy, may in some sense reach back in time. As interest in family legacy grows, these communities might extend into the future as well.

Communities of Common Interest

People can share common interest; this interest can be in sports, helping others, great books, travel, or any other common interest around which individuals within each interest sector can form a kind of community, building bonds of appreciation and connection between them. Common

knowledge about the activity creates familiarity among members. People may engage in common activities as a result of shared interest, attending sporting events or meetings together. The phrase *community of interest* refers to this kind of communal bond.

Communities of Common Location

Alternatively, individuals may share a common location. Typically, this kind of community is referred to as a geographic community. It may begin with a block or neighborhood and extend to a several-block area of a large city (the south side of Chicago, the north end of Boston, a barrio, or a ghetto). Common residence often leads to, or is linked with, common interests and interactions, which reinforce the bonds of common location.

Communities of Common Belief

Another kind of community grows out of a common belief or identification. Often religious communities are of this nature, and the phrase "community of believers" refers to this collection of communal identifications. Beliefs are often linked to common identifications, especially ethnic ones (the African American community, the Italian community, the Jewish community). When an individual recognizes herself or himself as of Italian or Jewish or black ancestry and holds ideas, beliefs, interests, and locations very different from those who do not share these, an ethnic (or racial, or gender) subcommunity exists. The concept of subculture or subcommunity refers to ideas or identifications that arise when beliefs are present and identifications and behavior patterns (foods, holidays, and the like) are a defining characteristic of the group. The Jewish community, the Irish Catholic community, and the scientific community, are all examples of communities of common belief.

Communities of Common Features

Similarly, the presence of a common identifying feature or quality can create communal identification. Red-haired individuals have a common identifying feature that might cause them to get together with each other and, at least, promotes a certain common identification. Other individuals with racial and ethnic features may also find themselves commonly identified, even if they may not feel such a common identification.

Individuals who share an affliction or a disease may also form a community of common feature.

Communities of Common Action or Activity

Communities may form around common activities. The organizational community or the community of the workplace is a prime example. Individuals who hold the same kind of job or work in the same place may form social roots or form unions to press for better working conditions and more pay. These individuals may have little else in common but the time that they spend together, day in and day out, over a series of years. The bond created by this kind of interaction can become a very strong community (King, 1997).

COMMUNITY MATRIX

As must be evident by now, we are all members of many different types of communities. These individual elements or features are related to particular kinds of communities. The communities that are most powerful to us often develop when several types of community exist together. Hence, people with common beliefs often live near each other, creating a subcultural and geographic bond. Similarly, areas of a city are identified by race, class, or other common characteristics. Thus, specific community identifications tend to reinforce each other.

COMMUNITY CONFLICT

Communities, because of the element of commitment that is involved in being a member, often generate conflict. Conflict situations frequently arise within communities of belief and identification, for example in religious communities. This can occur less often within communities of interest, such as communities of stamp and coin collectors. Members come to be at odds with other members, and within themselves, because they possess conflicting commitments. Often this situation occurs when one element of a community insists that all aspects of the subculture (or sub-subculture) be observed and followed. Such adherence often requires that ties to all other communities be cut—including families of origin, creation, affiliation, and

so forth. Such groups may be considered fundamentalist and totalitarian, and their members may be termed "zealots" or "true believers."

STAGES OF COMMUNITY GROWTH

Social units—families, groups of people, organizations, or societies—exist in different phases of growth, maturity, decline, and renewal. Different problems are generally associated with each phase. The community social worker should be aware of these phases as part of an overall awareness of community issues and difficulties, though entire communities cannot be easily typed. Some, for example, contain both growing and declining sections. Others have conflicting components—a young population in a very old geographic area. Many other combinations present themselves when we examine stages of community growth.

Young Communities

New communities tend to have the problems associated with youth everywhere: lack of control and resources. Young communities often grow in a haphazard fashion. In a neighborhood community for example, there may be an absence of regulation or structure that focuses the community on where to place what kind of facility, and so on. Community development workers may need to assist in developing such processes and structures.

Resource problems are another typical difficulty for young communities. Being new, young communities have not had the time to develop information networks and referral centers where individuals can come together and exchange information and help. They may not have had the time to discover which of their members are community leaders and influencers.

Community development workers in young communities try to assist in the creation of community leadership, which, in turn, helps others to identify needed resources and, together with the community development worker, to begin the process of resource development. New communities are typically communities of strangers, and community workers may assist in the development of legitimate mechanisms for interaction and interpersonal contact.

A young community, for example, may be a community of the newly separated and divorced. Community workers may assist in establishing

parents-without-partners groups and other places where newly single individuals can meet others, talk with them, and develop patterns of mutually satisfying interaction. Overall, young communities tend to be characterized by the need for community development, followed by community action and community planning. (Although planning can be very useful in young communities, the motivation to plan may be low until the community has matured.)

Middle-Aged Communities

Middle-aged communities have existed for some time and function reasonably well. In fact, it is this "reasonably well" functioning that creates a problem. Middle-aged communities are often beset by conflict. What kinds of conflicts might be present? Multiple community identifications to geographic locations; work, business, and profession; religious belief; and political interest might be among those competing for the identifications of individual community members.

Community development is useful in such circumstances to blend different identifications and seek to create common purpose. Community action to improve civic facilities is helpful, and planning can help determine and clarify the direction a community should pursue.

A second major problem middle-aged communities face is failure to change. The young community is constantly changing and needs stability and organization; the middle-aged community, however, needs to adjust and improve its houses, local facilities, social structure, and orientation to take account of the changing world around it. Community workers can help middle-aged communities chart the forces acting on them and prepare for action by planning for positive change.

Old Communities

Older communities are often in need of renewal. Geographic communities are not infrequently characterized by older industries and populace. (Although an older populace does not always indicate the presence of an older community.) Younger individuals may well have left to follow job opportunities in new industry; small rural towns and big cities are frequently found in this category. A sense of depression and inadequacy may pervade an older community. Community ties may exist, but

community conflicts may preclude the community from taking action. Therefore, community action to begin the renewal process is a good first step, because community planning cannot proceed without a sense of efficacy.

Older physical communities frequently demonstrate a decline in facility upkeep, and they maintain preexisting, outmoded patterns and forms. The community action worker may seek to revivify and reinstitute some of these elements with the cooperation of local leaders. Additional features associated with an older geographic community include crime and decay. These difficulties provide a good basis for community action. Neighborhood watch programs and other activities crystallize community energy around social activities that are helpful to the community as a whole, and present a good place to begin a renewal process.

Communities that are not geographically based also experience problems of renewal and recruitment. The commitments, feelings, and emotions that promote community identification need to be passed on to newer members and recruits. Sometimes reorganization of the community—establishing different goals, purposes, and emphases—is needed as well. The community worker can help in this renewal process.

CONCLUSION

Communities, then, assume many different forms, because common elements vary across many dimensions. These dimensions range from geographic, gender, age, affliction, and interests (hunting, fishing) to ethnic origin, religion, college and university affiliation, and workplace, to name just a few. For this reason, we are all members of many communities, some of which we recognize and cherish, others whose existence is unknown to us, and still others that are potential communities.

Of course, each community has its own subculture, with norms and values. There is, therefore, bound to be intra- and intercommunity conflict. Intracommunity conflict can occur, for example, between the more liberal and the more orthodox members of a large religious community (Catholics, Jews, Muslims, and so forth). Much effort goes into processing and managing the competing claims of our communities; sometimes we manage successfully, oftentimes not.

Successful community organization and leadership require workers and citizens to be aware of the many different types of communities, their conflicts, and their stages of social organization and the problems and concerns each stage presents. Young, middle-aged, and old communities have disparate sets of problems and concerns. As you will see in the next chapters, each set requires somewhat different strategies.