



Organizing for Tenants' Rights: Insights and Approaches From Both Sides of the Fence

Marietta Anne Barrett

To cite this article: Marietta Anne Barrett (2009) Organizing for Tenants' Rights: Insights and Approaches From Both Sides of the Fence, *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, 20:1, 8-25, DOI: [10.1080/10428230902871140](https://doi.org/10.1080/10428230902871140)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10428230902871140>



Published online: 15 May 2009.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 209



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

ARTICLES

Organizing for Tenants' Rights: Insights and Approaches From Both Sides of the Fence

MARIETTA ANNE BARRETTI

Department of Social Work, Long Island University, Brookville, New York, USA

The initial discussion includes musings about learning community organization as a graduate student in social work during the late 1970s and subsequently practicing as a tenant organizer in the inner cities of New York City. Three major areas are addressed: (1) the tensions between educational models of practice and community organizing; (2) the critical role of the organizer in constructing the problem and shifting perceptions of power and; (3) how confrontations with legitimate channels of power can foster the development of oppositional consciousness and thus promote social justice efforts. This article argues for greater educational emphasis on the claimsmaking role of community organizers because problem construction is inextricably tied to definitions of power and thus to its redistribution to exploited classes.

KEYWORDS *community organization, tenant organizing, social constructionism, social problem construction, perceptions of power, claimsmaking, oppositional consciousness, social justice*

The goal of this article is to shed light on some of the differences between learning community organizing in the classroom and practicing it in the field.

After I completed my master's degree in social work with a major in community organization in the late 1970s, I worked for nine years as a community organizer for a New York City housing/human rights agency.

This article is based on an unpublished paper presented at the Panel on Urban Movements at the Organize! conference at Columbia University, New York City, April 9, 2000.

Address correspondence to Dr. Marietta Anne Barretti, 256 West Beech Street, Long Beach, NY 11561, USA. E-mail: mbarrett@optonline.net

I also spent about twice that amount of time living as a tenant and teaching about organizing for social change in both sociology and social welfare policy classes. Thus I have experienced both the theoretical and the practical sides of the organizational divide. This article (1) addresses some of the tensions between educational models of practice and community organizing; (2) discusses the critical role of the organizer in constructing the problem and shifting perceptions of power; and (3) explains how the process of confronting legitimate channels of power can foster the development of oppositional consciousness and thus promote efforts to achieve social justice.

For most of us, the notion of community evokes many images, meanings, events and relationships. We think of the people, places and things that reside in our neighborhoods and the associations that congregate in our churches, schools and clubs. More importantly, we think of the common bonds, interests and identifications that we share with like-minded others that transcend geographical and institutional boundaries. Today, these affiliations never cease to broaden, multiply and seep into previously inaccessible corners due to expanding technological capabilities that persistently erode circumscribed limitations once determined by location or tradition (Hardcastle, Powers, & Wenocour, 2004). We now participate in more diverse and sophisticated community networks than were ever thought possible, and we moderate our participation, commitment and membership to fit our transient, ever evolving identities and needs. Arguably, this selective, whimsical, willy-nilly entrance into and out of communities can exert fragmenting rather than integrating effects on our society, promoting exclusion as much as inclusion (Specht & Courtney, 1994).

Despite technological advances and virtual communities, people still have to physically live somewhere. For many urban residents in the five boroughs of New York City, that location is a rent-stabilized apartment (though the supply of regulated apartments in NYC declines steadily). Historically, tenant associations have originated and convened in the physical territory within which members live, usually the lobby or common space of an apartment building. The tenant organizer engages with her or his clients in this space and strives to create a microcosm of the larger community in the nascent organization, an organization based on location, an organized purpose, and a shared identification (Ginsberg, 1998).

TENSIONS BETWEEN EDUCATIONAL MODELS AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

My graduate education in community organization (a concentration slowly nearing extinction) occurred during the late 1970s, before power was conceptualized as a fluid, dynamic resource that is ever expandable (Lappe & Du Bois, 1994) and well before chaos theory influenced community practice

(Elsberg & Powers, 1992). In fact, the unsettling message imparted to the community organization majors of my time was that community organizing had no supporting theory (Moore, 1967; Morris, 1962; Ross, 1967).

It should be recognized, first off, that there is no “theory for community organization” as a social work method. The literature of community organization does contain a collection of theoretical concepts for guiding practice, but even these are not highly developed or well integrated. What are often regarded as “principles” for community organization are usually untested propositions, which might be better described as normative beliefs, traditional assumptions, or the like. . . . During its history, community organization has been defined by several educators and practitioners, and yet has seemed to defy or elude definition at the same time. . . . Nor has there been great continuity in conceiving the objectives of community organization which, of course, is important to a definition (Moore, 1967, in Klenk & Ryan, 1974).

It occurred to me at the time that social work’s view of casework was somewhat more approving despite the fact that casework heavily borrowed psychiatric and psychological knowledge (Haynes & Holmes, 1994) to circumscribe its clearer historical, theoretical, and practical foundations.

The language of macro theory substituted for what we now conceptualize as “the context,” adopted today by the person-in-environment, or ecological perspective (Germain & Gitterman, 1995; Pardeck, 1996). Conflict theory was the favored lens for viewing political contexts (i.e., Dahrendorf, 1959; Marx, 1906), and field theory (Lewin, 1951) and force field analysis (Brager & Holloway, 1978) offered useful guidelines for viewing and planning dynamic strategies for organizational change. However, Bertha Capen Reynolds (1963) and her insightful application of Marxist principles to alleviating oppression and empowering the exploited were scarcely a footnote in my syllabus.

Prior to my graduate education in community organization, the generalist model debuted in my bachelor of social work curriculum carrying the indefatigable message that “a generalist shares certain basic knowledge with the caseworker, groupworker, and community organizer but is not all of these at one time” (Klenk & Ryan, 1974, p. 6) and that a quasi-scientific problem-solving process neatly applies and readily transfers to practice across casework, groupwork, and community organization modalities. I do not remember any academic critique attending these assumptions, perhaps because no Council on Social Work Education accreditation guideline requiring critical thinking existed back then! So no allusion was made to the distinct possibility that any intervention mode claiming universal application constitutes essentialism and, paradoxically, provincialism, with all their attendant dangers, including that of bigotry. However, in all fairness, one revered professor of community organizing intuited some of the inconsistencies in the generalist model and instead urged the antithesis of what was

professed—complementarity among the three methods rather than commonality among them. He asserted that whenever possible, generalists coordinate and supplement each method with the other two so as to deliver the most effective and ethical practice possible, regardless of the practitioner's predilection.

Early in my professional practice, my professor's words of wisdom became evident in the inextricable complementarity between community organization and groupwork. Groupwork emerged as the essence of community organization. It soon became clear that the functionality and success of one strongly depended on the functionality and success of the other. The task-oriented action groups from which my community associations sprang and thrived were rendered senseless when removed from their organizational purpose and context. However, the generalist model did not address the differences in essence, context, and interdependence among the modalities in my education; they assumed only a standardization of process contained within each yet circumscribed and divorced from each other.

Although the generalist framework originated as an alternative to the disease model that long dominated social work (Klenk & Ryan, 1974, p. 2), clinical social workers continue to embrace the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual to assess and treat the "diseases" of their clients. Thus, the generalist model as a step in the profession's evolution seems to defy outward practice; large numbers of clinical social workers typically premiere in their clients' post-victimized states to assess and treat, arguably sending their clients back to society "with better weapons, thicker armor, a higher level of morale" (Ryan, 1992, p. 372). Organizers, on the other hand, typically abide with their clients during the day-to-day grinding battles of exploitation, sending them back to society equipped with tools, information, and interventions.

Second, in defiance of the generalist model, organizing does not follow a neat, problem-solving formulary of successive stages to guide the organizer's work.

. . . some form of the problem-solving process supplanted the earlier clinical model of diagnosis, treatment and evaluation as a longitudinal paradigm for conducting practice with the various sizes of client systems. This process may have different formulations and usually includes progressive phases of preparation and reconnaissance, engagement, assessment, planning, implementation, evaluation, and termination or disengagement (Landon, 1995, p. 1102).

The problem *is* the problem in organizing, not how to solve it but how to define it. In clinical social work, there is an emphasis on timely diagnosis and a planned intervention based on that diagnosis. The therapist as an authority figure ultimately determines the definition and assessment of the

problem. In organizing, the definition of the problem is a negotiated, shared process between organizers and clients that is continually in flux, and it takes substantially longer than the initial assessment phase in psychotherapy. In organizing, it is not unusual for the intervention to precede the definition of the problem, though the tenants and organizer might initially agree on the basic, concrete problematic realities that brought them together; for example, that it's bitterly cold outside and they have no heat or hot water. However, in view of the crisis conditions, an immediate joint strategizing plan (usually reserved for the working phase) often kicks off the earliest phases of the organizer-client relationship, which commonly occur long before the organizer and incipient tenant association have agreed on a definition of the problem.

To an outside observer, it would seem that the organizer simply uses crisis intervention strategies just as any social worker would in a similar situation, a process that doesn't always follow the generalist formulary. However, although both the crisis worker and the organizer may work toward securing heat and hot water for the tenants, the organizer continues to work with the tenants long after crisis conditions have stabilized so as to reframe the problem that originally brought them together.

Finally, in terms of evidence-based practice, community organization can never be a single-intervention modality. Strategies cannot and should not be employed one at a time for the sake of monitoring their effectiveness. It should be noted that generalist social work supports this view: "The generalist perspective . . . stresses doing what needs to be done to address a problem" (Schatz, Jenkins & Sheafor, 1990, p. 223). Strategies combined are greater than the sum of their parts. For example, if tenants are threatened with illegal eviction in retaliation for organizing a tenant association, the organizer may demand police intervention and simultaneously call and write to the landlord, initiate a conference, and assist the tenants in filing harassment complaints with a state housing agency. Multilevel strategies are the rule, not the exception, in organizing. In legal situations in which there exists the risk that people will lose their homes, organizers often have to employ every possible intervention and sometimes some improbable ones. Although they are masters in extemporaneous improvisation and in producing the most with the fewest resources, one resource organizers usually don't possess is the luxury of time to sit back and assess whether or not an intervention had the intended impact. Nor can they use a preferred intervention just because they received specialized training in it. In short, organizing interventions do not originate with the worker. They emerge from the situation. Political necessity drives and defines the intervention because tensions and imbalances in the power-exchange market incessantly demand either an offense (an intervention initiated on behalf of clients) or a defense (responses to an opponent's initiated actions). There is a continual, almost intractable, dynamic that must be reckoned with in organizing. Although it

may not be completely absent in clinical social work, it is arguably more easily contained and controlled when the target system for change is the individual.

THE ROLE OF THE ORGANIZER IN CONSTRUCTING THE PROBLEM AND REDEFINING POWER

My graduate education in social work taught me that to generate movement toward a shared strategy, clients' disparate definitions of the problem must first be unified into a consensual definition. However, it soon became apparent that agreeing on what to do about the problem was often easier than agreeing on what the problem was. How people define a problem and how they choose to respond to it depend upon how they define and respond to power. The relationship is dialectical. One cannot be resolved without addressing the other.

In New York City, tenants are diverse in every way possible. Some of the disparities in perceptions of problems and power are the result of cultural dissimilarities. Many immigrant tenants and immigrant landlords arrive in the United States with pseudofeudalistic notions of landlords' rights that may include the idea of tenants as serfs. The tenants' definition of the problem ultimately hinges on these notions of power. If no precedent for tenant rights exists in their country of origin, tenants will not be apt to identify the landlord or the housing system as the problem. When the authority of the landlord or the system is assumed to be immutable and uncontestable, tenants believe that there is no use in considering any recourse to it.

However, dealing with conflicting and disparate beliefs about power may hinder the organizer's efforts to generate unity simply because time is often not an ally during the initial, critical phase of assistance. The housing status of tenants can change more quickly than their belief systems, leaving tenants homeless before they're unified. Tallman (1976, p. 29) argues that after perception comes action, but the reverse may often be true. Whereas the action part comes more easily in tenant organizing, the perception part takes substantially longer.

Changing people's perceptions of power constitutes one of the most critical long-term goals of organizing. As holds true for the other modalities, the organizer may serve as an agent of or trigger for changing these belief systems, but the resulting reorganization of perception is ultimately up to the tenants. Before change can occur, the *possibility* of change must first be planted by the organizer. This possibility includes not just awareness of the problem at hand but also a broader view of the forces of exploitation in society. Broadening that view yields practical and tactical benefits—as tenants may respond to the notion of societal exploitation first, they then

recognize parallel forces in the larger environment at work in their personal circumstances.

Defining power and recognizing exploitation almost always entails grappling with the notion of possession, that is, who has power and who doesn't. There are probably more variations in what power implies to tenants than there are definitions and taxonomies in a sociology textbook. Yet the linchpin of these many disparate perceptions includes a shared perception that those in positions of "legitimate" authority possess power, and the ordinary citizen does not. For that reason, academics argue, the worker often has to begin where the clients live and consider their "constructions of their individual and collective worlds" (Saleebey, 1994, p. 351). Many tenants believe that power is about control, a fixed property or quantity, something that is gained and lost (Willer, 1999), a zero-sum game. They may believe "if I have more power, then you have less" and that once one side has power, that side controls and maintains the lead position, which can never change. However, the lead position is not fixed, as the organizer continually reminds the tenant organization. The front-runner in a race cannot see what's going on behind, whereas the runner in the rear holds an advantageous position and can survey the entire field and more clearly assess how much advancement is needed to approach the front line. However, tenants often forget that the lead position can shift at any time and that "power structures are rarely as unified or monolithic as they are usually considered" (Kahn, 1970, p. 83). Tenants often err by forfeiting the advantage of their fleeting rear perspective and feeding the belief that the lead position remains fixed and unattainable.

When tenants define power in terms of absolute positions or dichotomies, including win-lose, top-bottom, official-unofficial, and front-rear, they extinguish the possibility that power can veer at any time or that a middle ground of varying intensities and combinations is possible (Tannen, 1998/1999). Power is not a limited resource nor is it confined to a specific group of people (Hardcastle, Powers, & Wenocour, 2004). Power changes its shape, orientation, and direction. Power is dynamic.

A Brief Digression

A brief digression is indicated here. Adjusting tenants' perceptions of power is not the same as and may not accompany what we may think of as a real shift in sociopolitical power. Shifting real power may not be a practical or attainable short-term goal, however critical it may be for the long term. Si Kahn (1970) who, unfortunately, was not required reading in my community organization classes, made this point most eloquently in his discussion of power tactics. The tactics that tenant associations use to draw attention to their housing conditions, such as tenant-initiated court actions and rent strikes, though once viewed as formidable weapons, are no longer perceived today by the

power structure as tactics capable of affecting “the real centers of power in a community” (p. 80). Through these strategies tenants may win important battles such as obtaining their own repairs but will probably not tilt the tables toward the collective rights to decent housing for all tenants. Although the tenant organization may accomplish formidable concrete improvements in their immediate living conditions in less than a year, more significant shifts in tenant rights and power in the social system may take decades.

Although significant in its own right, securing decent and humane housing conditions for one tenant association constitutes an important foundation for a much grander organizational goal—a shift in how power is viewed that in turn shifts the definition of the problem. It can also work in reverse; a shift in the problem definition can shift how power is viewed. This shift includes the realization that attainment of decent housing doesn't rest simply with the individual landlord but also with a number of other entities and ultimately with the tenants themselves. They are the only ones that can ultimately mobilize a response to their conditions. Therein lies the difference in focus between the clinical worker and the organizer. From the organizer's perspective, attaining decent housing does not signify merely the fulfillment of a basic human need but the enforcement of a basic human right, where the tenants are critically irreplaceable key players. Reframing the problem from one of needs to one of rights emerges as a persistent theme in organizers' efforts.

In the fight for decent housing, one tenant association can trigger a process that yields more than short-term gains. Through partnerships brokered by the organizer with collateral tenant and neighborhood associations, coalitions and various forms of indigenous leadership emerge; when coordinated, they have the potential to chip away systematically at a nonlevel playing field and facilitate progress toward the realization of rights for tenants everywhere. Tenants who live in rent-stabilized apartments share certain statutory protections concerning habitability, the right to a lease, and so forth. Many tenants unacquainted with their rights benefit from the presence of community coalitions that continually provide information and support and reinforce the message that the tenants' right to organize and fight for the attainment of decent housing must never be rescinded. Facilitating new interactions and constructing new realities with new meanings are at the core of community work (Pozatek, 1994), and they take on even greater significance when one is working with diverse populations not yet acculturated to the notion of statutory rights.

PERCEPTIONS OF POWER

Returning to the previous dilemma, how should the organizer handle the tenants' many conflicting perceptions of power, which translate into conflicting definitions of the problem? Some scholars recommend reducing the

similarities among definitions to the lowest common denominator. Moving the group to a shared, minimally objectionable, mutually acceptable definition of the problem that is broad enough to appeal to as many tenants as possible is known as “cutting the issue” (Mizrahi, 2001; Staples, 1997). According to this view, the organizer negotiates perceptions until a joint vision is eventually achieved (Hardcastle, Powers, & Wenocour, 2004).

That strategy may arguably work in the initial phases of organizing, but it loses momentum considerably when applied to the long-term goal of political empowerment. Once a crisis erupts concerning violations of housing rights, the organizer must work less as a negotiator and more as an agitator, because cutting the issue first requires the tenants’ willingness to recognize a problem as a problem. The circular dilemma emerges again. “People will differ in both the kinds of situations they view as problems and the number of situations they are willing to consider to be problems” (Tallman, 1976, p. 151). Oppressed groups are socialized to accept what those in “legitimate” positions of power tell them is and is not a problem (Hall, 1977). In some blighted neighborhoods where tenants live their whole lives in substandard housing, considerable effort must be expended in convincing tenants that their conditions are problematic and warrant remediation. Desensitized to the insidiousness of substandard housing (or no housing) in a society that intimidates those who assert their needs, many tenants acquiesce and adapt to deterioration, learning to deem what is inhabitable as acceptable and immutable. It is then that the organizer must expose and challenge long-held societal and culturally ingrained beliefs that nothing has to be or can be done by proposing resistance as an alternative to succumbing to conditioned responses that leave tenants feeling powerless and subservient.

Thus, in convincing tenants that a problem exists, the organizer also influences tenants’ beliefs about power—that the environment is not something that wrests control away from them and that they can assume control over it (Powers, 1993). Reframing initial perceptions of needed repairs into the language of entitlement and empowerment is a tough task because tenants, socialized by a system purportedly designed to help them, are programmed to individualize, normalize, and depoliticize their deteriorated living conditions; to conform and submit to the adversity, rather than change it. However, an organizer cannot just convince the tenants that a problem exists; it must be “constructed” as well.

The theory of social constructionism argues that an objective reality does not exist and that instead, reality is socially constructed through the subjective meanings people assign to seemingly objective facts or events (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). These meanings emerge from the process of social interaction among people through symbols and language (Blumer, 1969) and that, in turn, organizes and orders people’s thinking and beliefs. On a political level, language is deliberately manipulated to construct

people's view of social problems. Thus, the sense of what is and is not a social problem is a product that has been constructed through social activities known as claimsmaking (Spector & Kituse, 1977). Claimsmakers draw attention to seemingly neutral conditions that are typically not viewed as innately troublesome, and they reframe selected aspects of them as being problematic through a process known as typification (Best, 1995).

In a sense, the organizer takes on the role of a claimsmaker by drawing attention to conditions that tenants may not have categorized as more than individually problematic and reshapes them into social problems. Because reframing the problem inevitably leads to a reevaluation of who takes responsibility for it, well-positioned organizers acting as claimsmakers influence shifts in perceptions of power while constructing "newly" perceived social problems, thus guiding tenants through a process of collateral change.

In sum, successful organization does not necessarily involve unifying conflicting perceptions of power but challenging conventional notions of power and reframing them into the language of empowerment.

CONFRONTING LEGITIMATE CHANNELS OF POWER

The process of organizing may be thought of primarily as a game, and the tactics the tenants employ to obtain some service or secure some right constitute the moves or countermoves in that game. These moves, or smaller units of interventions-responses-adaptations, are ensconced in continuous cycles that play out in an arena of varied permutations of forces and contexts. As mentioned earlier, organizing is totally context-sensitive. Organizing strategies cannot be extricated from the situation in which they evolved. A protest action is not a protest action unless both the protesters and the target of protest engage and in some way exchange information about an issue that has achieved political significance in the game. Exchange (Blau, 1964) serves as the currency in organizing and fuels the lifeline of the tenant association. The organizer mentors and supports tenants through continuous relays of political exchanges and strives to facilitate a modicum of equilibrium when tenants destabilize from the sometimes disturbing reverberations resulting from these manipulations. When the tenants fail to garner a response to an intervention they initiated, the exchange process ceases and the game may be temporarily suspended until a strategy can be found to activate a new response. This holds true for both sides.

As in all other modalities, the organizer can only guide the tenant group as much and as far as they are willing and able to go, given their level of development and consciousness. The importance of the organizer's relationship with the group and the relationships of the members to each other as major determinants in this endeavor cannot be overstated. Despite

formidable relationships, many tenants will abandon the organizer and the group early in the process. These tenants may feel apprehensive about the volatile nature of collective bargaining for their individual repairs or about employing confrontational strategies as a means of obtaining them. Some tenants may never accept even a negotiated construction of the problem and, consequently, will not accept the validity of a tenant association as a means of addressing it. Others will enjoy a free ride as a result of the tenant association's hard work. Despite the defections, many tenant associations persevere in their commitment to tenants' rights despite considerable odds.

Because the dynamics of the game constantly shift the assumed positions of power, tenant groups can easily mistake losing the battle for losing the war. For example, if a chosen strategy such as a tenant meeting with a landlord about hazardous building conditions doesn't succeed, tenants will think the game is over. The organizer's job is to get the group to see the road ahead, to reframe the dilemma as a temporary setback, simply one play in the game, and an opportunity to re-strategize. By the same token, the organizer must caution tenants about battles won. Just as the game may not end when tenants lose a battle, it isn't over when a battle is won either, much to tenants' chagrin. The organizer must again assist the tenants in understanding that the gain or loss of a single play does not equate to a permanent gain or loss of power. Of course, tenants may choose to end the game when gains tallied are considered adequate. Tenant associations differ in the reach of their goals, the stability of their resources and, most important, the cohesiveness of their leadership and groups, which in sum heavily determine the intensity level of their engagement in or disengagement from the game. The tenants may retreat temporarily or permanently from the game at any point in the process and then reenter when circumstances demand.

What is the nature of the trajectory in the game for those who fight until they're exhausted or their remedies are? Is it progressive and linear? Should it be? Some academics direct organizers first to suggest conciliatory strategies to help clients achieve their goals and then advance to contest or conflict strategies if the more consensual strategies fail (e.g., Parsons, 1991; Wood & Middleman, 1989). However, what is conciliatory and what is conflicting is a matter, again, of perception. For example, a landlord may view what was meant as an amicable meeting with a tenant group as confrontational. Other savvy landlords may not blink at a rent strike. Similarly, some tenants perceive filing a complaint against a landlord as too risky, whereas others may think a mass protest on the landlord's front lawn isn't confrontational enough. Again, this dilemma in typification emanates from conflicting beliefs in power. Consequently, strategies may not always work in succession from least to most confrontational because sometimes the situation calls for a combination of adversarial and collaborative strategies (Patti & Resnick, 1972). The context drives the strategy. In times of crisis, an

organizer may advise a tenant group to respond to a confrontational move by a landlord with an initial strategy of equal force. For example, landlords who illegally turn off a building's heat or water or changes tenants' door locks commit a criminal act known as an illegal eviction. In this case, the tenants require immediate police intervention to halt the landlord's actions. Afterward, a more productive dialogue between the tenants and the landlord may ensue. The result is that sometimes conciliatory strategies become possible and effective only after the deployment of a confrontational strategy because the playing field, at least for the time being, is perceived as being level.

No real distinction exists among the three models of practice in community organizing: locality development, social planning, and social action. The prevalent view in the field now acknowledges that these three approaches often work together in various forms (Rothman & Tropman, 1987). No disconnect exists among housing organizers when it comes to organizing a local tenant association in a building, researching abusive housing court practices, and forming a city-wide tenant coalition or task force. True community organizers work concomitantly within local, planning, and action spheres in the course of any given day. All three approaches complement and supplement each other in the attainment of one goal; the advancement of social justice for tenants.

However, though the consolidation of strategies within the three spheres may come naturally and comfortably to the organizer, they may sit less comfortably with fledgling tenant groups. Thus, the organizer presents strategic options one at a time, emphasizing the potential of their greater impact when used together. Careful to distinguish among those that are legal, quasi-legal and illegal, she or he explains that the last two are most likely to cause significant reprisal. Socialized to play by the rules and understandably uncomfortable with confronting authority, tenants initially will most likely endorse the legal remedies. If these measures do not prove fruitful, the tenants may then file complaints of housing code violations with city agencies or with state housing agencies for breaches of rent regulations such as overcharges or harassment or may make a request for rent reductions based on violations. If the state and city agencies function effectively, these strategies may offer satisfactory results, and the tenants may disband or retreat until the occurrence of the next incident that demands their attention. However, many tenant associations, especially in deteriorated or life-threatening housing conditions, must continue to plug away at long-standing deterioration and stubbornly persisting violations. Their trajectory to some semblance of habitability is often longer and more arduous. Strategies chosen and used in various combinations and intensities result in varying levels of success, depending on a number of factors, including (1) the group's willingness to persevere and take risks and (2) the response level of the landlord and other key players.

As in other sectors of social work, the organizer's entrée into a multiple dwelling is usually preceded by crisis; often when numerous residents start receiving legal papers requiring them to appear in court. As more buildings in New York City are bought by private equity firms eager to vacate apartments in an effort to deregulate them and charge market-level rents, the intent of many of these lawsuits for nonpayment or illegal occupancy of an apartment is to harass tenants to move out. This is known as predatory equity (Morgenson, 2008).

Nonetheless, tenants must answer these summonses or risk expedited eviction proceedings. In so doing, they experience an unsympathetic, overcrowded, and overburdened court system and realize they lack the expertise and relational advantages of the daily-attending landlord's attorney. When finally given their place on the court calendar, the hearing may never materialize on the day scheduled. When it does, their time before the judge is harried. Oftentimes, against their will, tenants never get to present their case to the judge and are often coerced to negotiate a settlement with the landlord. Because of the lack of adequate space, negotiations often occur in the hallways.

Tenants also quickly learn that the city agencies with the power to enforce housing codes often serve as handmaidens to the current political party in power and may thus be reluctant to or constrained from exerting their authority. City attorneys and inspectors are scarce, city fines for housing violations remain largely uncollected, and landlords rarely serve even the sparse number of court-ordered jail sentences. Similarly, state agencies may defuse the severity of tenants' complaints. Complaints filed with the state for rent reductions on the basis of housing violations are likely to take months or even years to be decided, and damages or restitution promised may be delayed indefinitely. Although state-ordered rent reductions do motivate landlords to make needed repairs, the commonly tenuous quality of the repairs leave the tenant refiling the same complaint after the problem has been certified as corrected, and then the cycle begins anew.

In sum, rent-regulated tenants find that many of the available legitimate remedies lack sufficiency or effectiveness to fully vindicate violations and illegalities with the type of sanctions and accountability originally envisioned. Disenchanted with city and state housing agencies, the tenants may turn for redress to the more elusive legislative process itself. In that circumstance tenants confront formidable opponents such as real estate industry groups and rent regulation organizations—landlord interest groups by another name. Both employ literally dozens of paid lobbyists working for laws benefiting owner interests while donating untold sums of campaign contributions to the same elected officials to whom tenants also turn to for help. In turn, the tenants' elected officials pass the buck from one level to the next. The tenants soon learn that the legislative process works progressively well for landlord interests but is less effective for their own interests.

The tenants may suffer defeat after defeat. With each strategy tenants learn to use to get their services and protect their rights, they have also learned, however reluctantly, to play within the system. With their choice to play within the system linger conventional beliefs and erroneous perceptions about the system's power, legitimacy, and hegemony. Tenants start out by believing erroneously that if complaints are presented to the right agencies, and if the right court proceedings are employed, the landlord will be exposed, and services and justice will ultimately be obtained. More likely, they will reluctantly come to realize that the political vindication they're aspiring to is not likely to occur through the courts and the housing agencies. However, without having experienced this refutation in problem identification and construction themselves, tenants could not have foreseen that the channels instituted to rectify their housing injustices are limited and, as a result, limit their success.

Every potential strategy for resolving the problem, rather than shrinking it, has expanded its boundaries to include larger, more formidable and more elusive targets. The problem has swelled to absorb more than the individual landlord; it has grown into the whole system—the housing court, the housing agencies, the landlord lobby, the elected officials, and the legislative process. Tenants now expend their scarce energies and resources fighting not only the landlord, the more elusive private investment firm that owns their building, and the laws, but also those legitimate channels that were designed to help them. When tenants placed trust in these institutions as a valid means of improving their living conditions, they compromised their ownership and thus their power over the issue. Arguably, their surrender constitutes a latent though implicit goal of these hierarchical layers of power—to frustrate tenants into giving up.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF OPPOSITIONAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Tenants reach an impasse when all legitimate remedies in every available sphere are exhausted. They have no choice then but to relocate and redefine the problem as one that allows them to devise strategies that will work within the newly defined parameters, one that can no longer be addressed and alleviated through socially acceptable, prescribed channels, one that puts the frustration of their rights into a broader context of social, economic, and political exploitation. Their perceptions now include the notion that legitimate and assumedly accountable institutions assigned to uphold law and policy, both historically and politically, create, maintain, and sanction a system that inequitably protects property owners' interests at the expense of tenants' interests. The resulting disproportionate distribution of power and resources to certain privileged sectors of the population denies power and resources to others like them, creating stratification and oppression.

This expansion in the perception of the problem and of power presages the transformative development of their oppositional consciousness (Mansbridge, 2001), which is defined as:

. . . an empowering mental state that prepares members of the oppressed group to undermine, reform, or overthrow a system of human domination. . . . At a minimum, oppositional consciousness includes . . . identifying with members of a subordinate group, identifying injustices done to that group, opposing those injustices, and seeing the group as having a shared interest in ending or diminishing those injustices. . . . (p. 5).

It is true that many tenant associations never reach the point of developing oppositional consciousness. The reasons for this were alluded to earlier and include the goals and cohesiveness of the group; the resources, energy, and leadership abilities available to the group; the group's risk-taking potential; and often, a compromised state of satisfaction with the gains tallied. Additionally, as in all efforts for change, many times clients will not readily accept changes in perceptions, beliefs, or values until these schemas no longer function for them. Thus many tenant groups never reach this point of transformative crisis. It is precisely because of this that the organizer's ongoing role as claimsmaker remains significant. Through the social constructionist activities of the organizer, incremental confrontations with the definition of the problem and perceptions of power should occur gradually over time, persistently challenging tenants' beliefs and contributing to the formation or heightening of a political consciousness. If the community organizer achieves even moderate success in progressively moving tenant groups toward the consideration of alternative expressions of power through her or his claimsmaking activities, the cumulative strides toward social justice could be remarkable. Does social work support this goal?

Fisher and Shrage (2000, p. 6) argue that organizing involves "building community and engaging in a wider struggle for social and economic justice." According to Saleebey (1990, p. 37), the four cornerstones of social work include indignation, inquiry, compassion and caring, and social justice. Freire comments that the social worker either "picks the side of change . . . or else is left in the position of favoring stagnation" (Kozol, 1990, p. 137). Despite firm support in the literature for the assertion that social work has an obligation to engage in social action and "cause advocacy" in order to promote the progressive changes needed in policy and practice to attain social justice (e.g., Johnson, 1995; Schneider & Lester, 2001; Specht, 1969), there is little or no emphasis in prescribed social work curricula on veering outside of socially acceptable channels of political and legislative change in order to attain it. Even if community organizers were ideologically and professionally ready to assist oppressed classes in using unconventional strategies that challenge the status quo, it is doubtful that the profession

would formally sanction any adversarial tactics that could potentially threaten the established centers of institutional power and authority.

Social work literature separates advocacy from social movements but sometimes views cause or class advocacy as the same as social action. The primary distinction is that most forms of advocacy stay within established employer guidelines and procedures and traditional political processes (Hardcastle, Powers, & Wenocour, 2004, p. 357).

It is with this critique that I conclude the discussion and indicate the point at which community organization classes in social work schools (if there are any left) should begin their work. My parting insights from the practical side of the organizing fence are these: (1) Attention must be placed on training organizers to make strenuous claims about the larger workings of power in society and how to confront them; (2) Without the organizer's attention to (a) the construction of social problems, (b) perceptions of power, and (c) the development of oppositional consciousness, significant advances against social injustices are limited.

Oppression produces the resistance which will in the end overthrow it. Fear creates panic only at first. Then it disappears in the release of unimagined reserves of power. . . . We shall learn how to struggle when we care most what happens to all of us, and we know that all of us can never be defeated (Reynolds, 1963, p. 187).

REFERENCES

- Berger, P. L. & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.
- Best, J. (1995). *Images of issues: Typifying contemporary social problems*. New York: Adline De Gruyter.
- Blau, P. M. (1964). *Exchange and power in social life*. New York: Wiley.
- Blumer, H. (1969). *Symbolic interactionism: Perspective and method*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Brager, G. & Holloway, S. (1978). *Changing human service organizations: Politics and practice*. New York: Free Press.
- Dahrendorf, R. (1959). *Class and class conflict in industrial society*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Elsberg, C. & Powers, P. R. (1992, November). *Focusing, channeling and recreating: Energy in contemporary American settings*. Presented at the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Washington, DC.
- Fisher, R. & Shragge, E. (2000). Challenging community organizing: Facing the 21st century. *Journal of Community Practice*, 8(3), 1–19.
- Germain, C. B., & Gitterman, A. (1995). Ecological perspective. In R. L. Edwards (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Social Work* (19th ed., pp. 816–824). Washington, DC: National Association of Social Workers Press.

- Ginsberg, L. (Ed.). (1998). *Social work in rural communities* (3rd ed.). Alexandria, VA: Council on Social Work Education.
- Hardcastle, D. A., Powers, P. R., & Wenocour, S. (2004). *Community practice: Theories and skills for social workers* (2nd ed.). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hall, S. (1977). Culture, the media, and the ideological effect. In J. Curran, M. Gurevitch, & J. Woollacott (Eds.), *Mass communication and society*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Haynes, K. S. & Holmes, K. A. (1994). *Invitation to social work*. White Plains, NY: Longman Publishing Group.
- Johnson, L. C. (1995). *Social work practice: A generalist approach* (5th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Kahn, S. (1970). *How people get power*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Klenk, R. W. & Ryan, R. M. (1974). *The practice of social work* (2nd ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing.
- Kozol, J. (1990). *The night is dark and I am far from home* (Rev. ed.). New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Landon, P. S. (1995). Generalist and advanced generalist practice. *The Encyclopedia of Social Work* (19th ed., pp. 1101–1108). Washington, DC: National Association of Social Workers.
- Lappe, F. M. & Du Bois, P. M. (1994). *The quickening of America: Rebuilding our nation, remaking our lives*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Lewin, K. (1951). *Field theory in social science*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Mansbridge, J. (2001). The making of oppositional consciousness. In J. Mansbridge & A. Morris (Eds.), *Oppositional consciousness: The subjective roots of social protest* (pp. 1–19). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Marx, K. (1906). *Capital, Volume I*. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr.
- Mizrahi, T. (2001). Community organizing principles and practice guidelines. In A. R. Roberts & G. J. Greene (Eds.), *Social workers desk reference*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Moore, N. R. (1967). The practice of community organization. In R. W. Klenk & R. M. Ryan (Eds.), *The practice of social work* (pp. 278–294). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing.
- Morgenson, G. (2008, May 9). As investment firms buy up buildings, tenants see bullies. *The New York Times*, p. A1 & A20.
- Morris, R. (1962). New concepts in community organization. In *Social Welfare Forum, 1961* (pp. 128–145). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Pardeck, J. T. (1996). An ecological approach for social work intervention. *Family Therapy*, 23(3), 189–198.
- Parsons, R. J. (1991). The mediator role in social work practice. *Social Work*, 36(6), 483–487.
- Patti, R. J. & Resnick, H. (1972). Changing the agency from within. *Social Work*, 17(4), 48–57.
- Powers, P. (Ed.). (1993). *Stirring people up: Interviews with advocates and activists* (Monograph). Baltimore: University of Maryland at Baltimore, School of Social Work.
- Pozatek, E. (1994). The problem of certainty: Clinical social work in the postmodern era. *Social Work*, 39(4), 396–404.

- Reynolds, B. C. (1963). *An uncharted journey*. New York: Citadel Press.
- Rothman, J. & Tropman, J. (1987). Models of community organization and macro practice perspectives: Their mixing and phasing. In F. Cox, J. Erlich, J. Rothman, & J. Tropman (Eds.), *Strategies of community organization* (4th ed., pp. 3–26). Itasca, IL: P. E. Peacock.
- Ross, M. G. (1967). *Community organization: Theory and principles* (2nd ed.). New York: Harper and Brothers.
- Ryan, W. (1992). Blaming the victim. In P. S. Rothenberg (Ed.), *Race, class and gender in the United States: An integrated study* (pp. 364–373). New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Saleebey, D. (1990). Philosophical disputes in social work: Social justice denied. *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare*, 17(2), 29–40.
- Saleebey, D. (1994). Culture, theory and narrative: The intersection of meanings in practice. *Social Work*, 39(4), 351–361.
- Schatz, M., Jenkins, L., & Sheafor, B. (1990). Milford redefined: A model of initial and advanced generalist social work. *Journal of Education for Social Work*, 26(3), 217–231.
- Schneider, R. L., & Lester, L. (2001). *Social work advocacy: A new framework for action*. Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Specht, H. (1969). Disruptive tactics. *Social Work*, 14(2), 5–15.
- Specht, H. & Courtney, M. (1994). *Unfaithful angels: How social work has abandoned its mission*. New York: Free Press.
- Spector, M. & Kituse, J. I. (1977). *Constructing social problems*. Menlo Park, CA: Cummings.
- Staples, L. (1997). Selecting and “cutting” the issue. In M. Minkler (Ed.), *Community organizing and community building for help* (pp. 175–194). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Tallman, I. (1976). *Passion, action, and politics: A perspective on social problems and social problem solving*. San Francisco: W. H. Freeman.
- Tannen, D. (1998/1999). The rules of engagement and the argument culture. *The Responsive Community*, 9(1), 48–51.
- Willer, D. (Ed.). (1999). *Network exchange theory*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Wood, G. G. & Middleman, R. R. (1989). *The structural approach to direct practice in social work*. New York: Columbia University Press.