

RESEARCH AND EDUCATION
IN
COMMUNITY ACTION PROJECTS
BY
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This paper is designed to set some guide lines for discussion and thought for people who are working with research and education projects. As areas of work, programs in these fields are either inadequate or lacking altogether. The amount of interest that is currently being shown in their development is part of what we should view as a generally healthy move toward intensifying the efforts of protest organization as well as broadening their base. It is not within the scope of the piece or the experience of the author to provide a blueprint or set of step by step instructions about research or education. Partly this is a result of the generality of the paper which makes a blueprint difficult, but even more it is a product of the fact that no one has been doing what we're doing today long enough to produce a blueprint. Whether that is fortunate or unfortunate I leave to the reader, who is likely to be less sanguine about these matters than I. Note as well please that this is a working paper and is not considered by its author and should not be thought of by the reader as comprehensive or finished or adequate.

The notion of research is one that is easily bandied about these days by people who want to improve the quality of our work organizing. However, many still substantially lack a clear conception of what is meant by research and what we expect it to accomplish, not to mention how we expect to organize research once we have charted a direction for it. Many of us are guilty of thinking that in "research" lies the missing link between us and the revolution. It is simply not true. There is a function for research (especially if that concept is broadly defined) but the function is limited, even at its best, research is a somewhat more organized way of discovering and talking about a variety of organizing and political problems. It has limited predictive value in any area of social science and it has even less potential (and virtually no history) as a tool in social revolution. Its virtue (that it is systematic and analytic) is also one of its limitations; research should not lead people to forsake their intuitive sense if the direction of local movement, the mood of the people, the issue that can be best used to move masses, the time to act, etc. Given the complexity of the situations in which we work and the infinity of variables that alter and effect it, in the final analysis the decisions must be made through the intuitive sense of the people close to those situations. Research is an important but partial way of enlightening that intuition.

Our view of research encompasses education. The two are so closely related that a good piece of each must be discussed in relation to the other. Too many inside the academy, where people have an investment in maintaining the esoteric tools of their trade, research continues to be a mystery. But we must find ways to understand in simple terms the research that we do for ourselves and that others do for us if it is to be useful. In part this means that we must educate ourselves to the meaning of the research we are doing and educate researchers to the reality of community organizing. One of the reasons that so much of what is currently called research is not usable by the people who need it is because they have failed to develop the skill to bend accumulated data to their purposes. It is in this particular sense that the distinction between research and education becomes blurred. When an

organizer studies the basic information about the economic condition of the community in which he is working, he is, it is safe to say, educating himself. But the effort by this same person to discover what that information implies for action is a kind of research. It is this simple process of putting questions to data and finding data that helps to answer questions (with or without the paraphernalia of written reports, chi squares, and the like), that must comprise much of the research we do. This attitude of mind which organizes material and experience to somewhat systematically deal with problems of organizing is critical for us to develop in organizers.

Given this framework, there are three reasonably straightforward research areas. First, is a basic or analytic approach to finding out what needs to be done and how best to do it. Second, is a muckraking and polemical function of exposing conditions, formulating a set of demands, and developing a factual basis of argument to support action and gain support from relevant publics; third, which is really a combination of the first two, is the development of staff and community educational programs directed in part toward equipping people to carry out research and to apply a quantity of new information to their action. The research/educational function will of course operate in different ways for different groups (staff, professionals, community people, and students), but it seems possible to involve all of these people.

a) the organizer is clearly the most critical individual in the research operation no matter how it is construed if for no other reason than that he must with his colleagues and people from the community decide what research is to be done and how the information gained is to be used in shaping and developing the project. This does not mean that the organizer should commit himself to substantial and elaborate research programs; that is the job of the professional or perhaps of students. His job in relation to formal research is primarily that of co-designer and interpreter.

On the other hand, the organizer is probably the only person who can gather the most critical information about the community because he is the individual who is in the community, who develops access to people and their ideas, and who must test their responses to his work through the implementation of program. The research aspects of his work are discussed in another section, but it should be clear from what is mentioned here that the organizer must develop a capacity to deal with the interpretation of material and the collection of information.

This does not imply higher degrees or years of training; on the contrary people who have suffered this experience will have to be "untrained" in many cases before they can lend their talents to organizing people as well as data. In practice, developing a capacity is likely to mean participating in some kind of regular educational meeting, where someone is responsible for making a presentation or an "expert" comes to speak, or a group discussion is planned. Giving careful consideration to what should really be discussed and putting that in coherent order can itself add immeasurably in enriching the examination of what's happening. Among other things the seminar can serve to acquaint people with existing studies--statistical data, attitude surveys, historical case studies--information about the community and the structure of city politics, techniques in other areas of organizing, etc.

Second, the organizer may initiate some research--such as the community survey discussed in Nick Egleson's paper.

Third, he needs research for propaganda purposes--when the union research team proves that assembly line speed-ups are nothing but profit-making measures, the interest and militance of the workers increases, and the corporation is exposed in the community, etc. Fourth, the keeping of analytical diaries by all staff members not only amasses valuable first-hand "raw" data but is a means of self-discipline which makes a person more probing in his daily routines.

b) the professional researcher is the man who is sympathetic and who happens to have certain skills and interests which can be of use. These persons, found in the labor, academic, church, city and other bureaucracies, are important for the kind of insights their work and their position gives them. If brought into an informal community-wide ring of thinking, and if they can be committed to spend at least some time in the organizing situation, their contribution to staff and community education can be phenomenal.

It also seems wise to think of bringing interested professionals together with staff in order to insure their sensitivity of problems that actually confront the staff and also to develop their capacity to deal with the impact of the movement on their institutional niches.

We should not simply look at professionals as individuals to be co-opted to serve our ends as organizers. We should instead be clear that the power of our movement can only be incorporated in the structure of some new society if it penetrates to all the strata of the society--if it is capable of making some professionals, and housewives, and students and others see new ways of organizing their own lives and trades. In this sense there is a tendency of a social movement to create a vortex of activity which draws together diffuse and normally segregated groups in the society. It is critical that we seize the potential in this kind of situation. (for a fuller discussion of this question see the transcript of my speech in this set on "Students and Intellectuals as Agents of Social Change.")

Thus the seminar and the whole series of contacts with outside people attracted to the movement becomes an important arena for extending the impact of the movement into other institutions and areas of the society.

There is of course the problem that "outsiders" may often seem to make more difficult the immediate tasks before the organizer. In whatever sense that is true, it is nonetheless offset by the importance of working with these people and the immense contribution they can ultimately make. Often the difficulty with outsiders is, I suspect, that organizers fail to recognize their potential.

c) the constituent community can also be involved in research. This especially is true in determining what the informal patterns of the community society happen to be, and also for discovering propaganda material. In addition to these, research contributions, which come naturally from the life experience of a community resident, there are other important functions of a research nature that the indigenous person can play. For instance, it can be vital to involve local people in community attitude surveys, because of the contacts and issue discussions which occur between neighbors (for instance, if Mrs. Jones of the fifth floor, went door-to-door through her apartment house asking about the educational level and needs of the youngsters...) Then also, there is the need for all of us, community people and radical organizers, to learn together how to study and understand the important features of the social structure. There is very little reason to exclude community people from staff discussions and

planning. It also seems possible to think of creating special seminars for the staff and community people which in themselves can act as valuable information-gathering sessions where exchange between staff and community about attitudes and thoughts about program is formalized, and where community people begin to learn the skill of successfully monitoring and eliciting attitude and discussion about the program and effect of the local movement.

d) students, so long as they continue to play a critical role as a support group for protest activity and so long as they continue to provide most of the recruits to our organizations, need to be kept in touch with the work of local movements. One way of doing this may be through research which university centered people are particularly suited to do i.e. survey work over weekends, library research, case studies, etc. Again, there is a need to establish an educational function to insure that their research is relevant but more important to ensure that contact with organizing has effect on the material they study.

As with professionals, there must be a recognition that students have an important role in the development of an overall movement. Some of them will move directly into organizing work, but most are going to wind up in professions and other white collar occupations. Their ability to resist the corrosion of their vocations and to begin to develop radical perspective on them will be deeply affected by their organizing experience, even if tangential. Where this can receive some sort of organizational expression, either local or national, the effect is likely to be even more profound, e.g. the Law Students Civil Rights Committee or SDS.

The Organization of Research

The organization of these research tasks is a substantial job. It is probably necessary to have within each project one individual who acts as a research/education director. His job is not primarily one of doing research, although he must be in a position to follow research work and take personal supervision of its development. We are describing an individual with substantial organizational ability who among other things must be able to deal with a large variety of people ranging from leaders in the community to people who have been isolated in institutional slots for thirty years. Not only must he be able to work with these groups individually, he must also be able to make them work together to a certain extent, to come to speak a common language and deal with one another as constituents and equals in a movement. Given the pervasive segregation of our society on class as well as racial lines, the ability of a research/education director to direct situations of contact and exchange is critical. Suffice it to say that this role invests him with a major political position within the organization and as an interpreter of it.

Although it should be clear from the above, we want to underscore our conviction that there is a vast array of talent to be put at the disposal of organizers if they have the imagination to capture it. There are like-minded people in almost every institution and occupation who can be put in touch with one another, at least in part, through the kind of research we are discussing. They are a potentially very powerful unorganized group. This fact in itself should encourage organizers to select carefully the people who are initially brought in to aid in research; they will tend to recruit people who are like them and fend off those of differing political views or organizational experiences.

Although we have insisted that research is not esoteric, that it arises out of the immediate needs of community organization, there are still quite legitimate

questions about methodology that can be employed by untrained researchers as well as the actual areas in which to focus research i.e., the kinds of questions that can and should be asked.

It is difficult to deal with these problems in much detail outside of the actual situation. Much depends on what the organization is, what its initial interests are, and the kinds of skills that are represented within it. A project dealing with unemployed workers has different needs from one working with the effect of defense spending on a local community, and these again are different from the needs of a community-based civil rights action program. Thus any suggestions about what needs to be researched are likely to be frustratingly vague within the confines of this paper. Several formal areas of exploration can nonetheless be suggested.

a) approaching the problem or community. An organizing effort may range in initial specificity from fairly exact knowledge of what is to be done and who is to do it (e.g. setting up the local office of the March on Washington) to a rather vague and general notion of what is being done (e.g. organizing unemployed or extending civil rights action into a new community). The survey suggested by Nick Egleson in his contribution to these papers seems to be an excellent device. What his experience suggests (that the survey itself is less important than the opportunity it gives for people to get to know the community and vice versa) can easily be extended beyond the form of the survey. There are many individuals and groups in any community who should be met and sounded out at an early date. Some may be the enemy (e.g. talk to the police), some may be well acquainted with the community and its problems (e.g. radical type social workers or scholars), while most are part of the area to be studied in the sense that they alter and effect political, economic and social life within the area. It is probably as important to see and smell the inside of the police station, school and welfare office as it is the inside of people's homes. In short, early work should concentrate on getting to know the area and the people in it and the institutions of that community. An essential ingredient of the idea of a survey or familiarization is the notion that there is a period of grace in which specific commitments to program need not be made. Depending on the availability of human resources and time the survey process may be formalized into questionnaires or interviews or library research. In experienced workers will probably find it difficult to discount the advice of "experts," but it is probably wise to do so until one feels that he has enough information of his own to begin to critically evaluate what they have to say.

b) determining the effectiveness of the organization. Beginning with the formation of any organizing effort should be some system of evaluation of the effectiveness of the program and the people in it. This is particularly important to structure self-consciously since we so frequently find ourselves working in alien communities (i.e. places where we don't know how to tap the community to get "feed-back"), or even in communities which have as one of their features their tendency to withhold or disguise information. The frustration that organizers feel in working in these situations has already been discussed. The ideal is probably to find indigenous people to the community who are initially sympathetic to the program and who will carefully watch the activity of the organization and report to people on the impact they are making and why. However, most projects spend a long time working before they develop such contacts. Other devices might include frequent staff discussion on kinds of personal approaches that seem to open people up and team work

in survey situations where one individual observes the work of the other and then comments on his effectiveness. Other "out-siders" may have developed contacts in the community which would allow them to get information on your impact and relay it to you.

Happily, one can test many elements of community response by actually testing program. People should not consider the rejection of a particular program as either a categorical rejection of them or the program. Something is wrong, and intelligent and sensitive observation of what in fact comprises the program you are attempting to develop will probably suggest ways in which it can be altered or reasons for junking it.

Finally, through organizational affiliation or inter-organizational contact, a system should be maintained in which people sympathetic to your work and preferably experienced in similar or related activity come into the staff to observe the way it is functioning in the community, converse with them, draw out problems, and try to assist in planning. This kind of approach has proved dramatically successful in numerous instances.

It is also possible to develop more academic kinds of evaluation especially in areas where some concrete service is being offered, such as the tutorial.

c) developing a community program. Although this section is partially submerged in the section of familiarizing oneself with the community, it is conveniently treated as a separate problem of research. The difficulty here is in making worthwhile general statements about something so specific as program development.

The aspect of the approach that is most easily specified is the problem of finding out the condition of the people in the community and their perception about that condition and their desire to change it. Much of this is handled in the survey approach discussed above. However, there are more difficult problems that are not likely to be seen clearly simply through familiarity with the community; these may be called structural problems or conditions in the economy or polity that over the long run must be comprehended and dealt with. For example, information about the industrial structure of the area can tell one a good deal about what long-range job prospects are likely to be, what kind of a labor market is developing. Knowledge about the political machine in the area, its support and areas of strongest commitment can reveal much about what programs will meet the strongest resistance and which are likely to have relative success. Knowledge about the general economic condition of the metropolitan and regional area can indicate the kinds of responses that can be made within the city, for example, before it must turn to the state for help and in turn the kind of flexibility the state has before it must seek federal support.

Students and academicians are likely to be of much help in securing this information as are trade unions which increasingly take a concern in long-range economic prospects as they effect jobs. The problem here is getting information broken down to the level where it can be of help in making decisions about program development. This requires that people who are doing research be clear what it is for and know a good deal about the conditions under which the project is working.

There is another level at which this kind of research can operate as well. Most simply stated, this is the process of tracing people's problems one or two steps beyond their actual incidence in the community. This kind of investigation is suggested in Jack Minnis' piece in these papers. A more direct approach, however, is to take a problem, for example the wholesale repossession of personal property, and try to get at the higher structure of the problem, i.e. why can't lower class people get low interest loans, how is interest officially regulated in the municipality and the state, what kinds of differentials in rates are found on class lines and caste lines, who owns the lending institutions and regulates the credit structure and are those people vulnerable politically or otherwise, what other groups would or do have an interest in fighting consumer credit, is property deliberately sold in a way to allow repossession, etc.

There are numerous problems of this sort in any organizing situation and the question as to which will be researched will depend on an intuitive judgement as to which is most promising.

d) muckraking and polemics. There is a large amount of research that falls into the category of exposure or the development of good propaganda. Again the Minnis paper suggests a way at and a reason for much of this material. We want here to more carefully enumerate some of the functions for this kind of research and the various audiences to which it may be geared.

A first area is exposure of the extent and nature of the problem you are working with, e.g. getting at local living conditions, the deterioration of the schools, the indecency of public institutions in the area and their inhumanity, public health problems, crime rates, etc. -- all couched in terms of the inadequacies of existing approaches.

There are a number of audiences for this kind of material. First it can be used in the general community as a justification for radical action, i.e. as a method of at least neutralizing general hostility toward what you are doing. Second, in areas with "liberal" political machines it can be used to keep politicians off balance and to threaten their base of support. It may also serve to put other institutions or groups on the defensive. In addition, this kind of material can be used with sympathetic people as part of a fund-raising appeal. Finally, and by no means least important, a convincing, well-written document distributed to the people in the community might aid in gaining support for your work partly because indigenous people are not used to listing their problems in some sort of summary way, or thinking through the causes of those problems.

Second is a more selective exposure of people and institutions in relation to the issue of the moment. The obvious need here is to pinpoint the issues and the target of action, as well as to counter the lies that are inevitably put out in response to challenges. A good example of such a document was the report prepared on discrimination in public schools in Chicago for the use of the school boy-cott. Once again, the same grouping of audiences and functions can be used for this kind of information.

Third, and perhaps most important is the need to develop a program. This is a rather complicated problem since the need is not simply to have a few people sit down and think up a set of demands. That would be sufficient

were the program only to be used for polemical purposes, i.e. to show the establishment that we can and have thought of alternatives to their way of doing things. However, we are dealing increasingly with the problem of developing a program that will excite people and commit them to our effort -- a program that people will fight for. This is particularly important in non-Negro areas where the impetus toward action and protest is not strongly felt, where people must be convinced that there are alternatives worth fighting for.

Such an effort is particularly important in an area like Appalachia where the government is already talking about a regional development program. There is a critical need to counter the program of the government with a program of the people and this can be developed in part through research. The caution here is that we not simply arrogate to ourselves or some hypothetical research staff of sympathisers the job of developing a program. The real test of our imagination and commitment is likely to come over the issue of whether or not we can involve the people we are working with in the process of planning a program and a society.

It is clear that we cannot simply approach people in the areas where we are working and ask them to develop a program. There needs to be a careful and sustained dialogue between staff and community people in developing specific demands. Part of the role of staff here is to provide vision, to present alternatives, to begin as well to introduce the notion to people that somehow it is within their grasp to think about, choose among and effect those alternatives. Within this framework professionals can aid in developing ideas about how institutions can be redesigned. To be specific, we need plans not only of how to integrate schools in the North, but much more important, how to make them run for the benefit of students and communities.

A last level of this many-faceted problem is for more academic researchers to be involved with area and regional problems, e.g. what kinds of human and material resources are available on Long Island, and how could they be utilized in ridding that area of the defense economy and building something decent in its place.

A few words need to be said about education beyond the research-related aspects. Everyone is quick to recognize that there is a need for educational program in the community, but thus far there has been limited development of this kind of activity. In part this may be a result of inadequate staff, but as often we suspect it relates to inadequate conception. What after all are people to be educated about, particularly when they lack the kind of training or experience to allow them to participate easily in abstract or general discussions?

We seem too frequently to bring our own experience in schools into our programs on the community. Thus we think of education as a situation in which people read books and sit around in groups and talk about what they have read or listen to someone else talk about it. Mostly we know that this is sterile before we begin, which is undoubtedly one of the reasons that so few people have begun. It should be emphasized as well that the people we are working with have been even more traumatized by their educational experience than we.

Education begins, we hope, with the beginning of every community program.

It begins on stoops and in kitchens and other places where organizers meet the people they want to work with, it takes place in small groups or in twos, it is reciprocated between the organizer and the unorganized, it not called education, but it is self-conscious. Self-conscious in the same sense that each staff person recognizes a need to extend the framework of conversation, to follow up discussion about issues, to reach a level of rapport in which he and the people he is working with can begin to ask one another serious questions. At an early point the organizer should begin to seek out those individuals who have shown the most interest and talk to them periodically and purposefully. There is also a point fairly early at which indigenous people should begin to accompany the organizer on his excursions to meetings, foundations, confrontations with city authorities, city council sessions, etc.

In some respects this is a highly select program, but it may well be the only way to start. There are opportunities for other kinds of projects such as freedom schools or community theatre or a community newsheet, all of which have their virtues of making public in the community certain issues and questions and allowing people to discuss them. However, they are not substitutes for the richer kind of contact in which people begin to share experience as well as information. To the extent that experiential material can be brought into any of the media, they are likely to be improved. In much the same way as research blends into education, education should blend into the actual program of the organization and the set of experiences and encounters that are the first elements of a new society.