

Reflections on Organization Development Through the Lens of Social Justice Change Methodologies

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Context for Inquiry

We are a group of Organization Development practitioners who are committed to social justice and who work with organizations devoted to racial and economic justice and progressive social change. This paper emerged from our dialogue in a peer-led study group. The study group began in the fall of 2003, meeting monthly and contracting with each other for six month blocks to share tools, approaches, and methodologies, and to support each other's growth and development. A handful of participants have stayed involved from the beginning, while others have participated for one or two rounds. In all, about fifteen people were involved over several phases of the study group.

We gratefully acknowledge the support of the Movement Strategy Center for convening and hosting the group and fundraising to support this work. In addition, the C.S. Mott Foundation generously provided financial support. We also acknowledge the work of Sam Kaner, of Community At Work, whose teaching and writing on core principles and practices of Organization Development undergirds much of our thinking about the field. Another foundational source for this paper is Zak Sinclair's master's thesis, "Organization Development Success in Grassroots Social Change Organizations: How Change Happens." This document provides a qualitative look at the main psychological dynamics within social movement organizations, and how these dynamics both hinder and facilitate organizational change.

This inquiry compares and contrasts Organization Development (OD), Community Organizing, Spiritual Activism, and Power Analysis frameworks. The notion of comparing these frameworks emerged organically over the first several months of the group's dialogue. That is, the group didn't set out to compare these frameworks, but found that our practice in OD and in the social movement worlds called us to interrogate the relationships among them. We realized that these frameworks are present in social justice organizations, and also in ourselves, as OD practitioners who have been involved in social movement work. These frameworks enter social justice organizations through their own histories and strategies, but also via individual staff and board members, who are often activists, and who – via their own experience, family or cultural background, and education as activists – have internalized these frameworks. Although the frameworks differ in terms of whether they constitute disciplines or fields of practice, what they do have in common is that all are frameworks for transformation.

The group engaged in a collective inquiry and writing project, taking each of these four frameworks, and exploring them along multiple parameters:

- Origins
- Purpose / Desired impact
- Values and beliefs
- Strategy
- Practices and methodologies
- Theory of change¹

We continue to develop this material, and for now, we are focusing on two principal applications. One is to strengthen approaches to OD work in social justice movement-oriented organizations. The other, and the focus of our presentation for the Bay Area OD Network, is reflecting on OD as a field through the lens of the other transformation frameworks. The inquiry raised questions, such as:

- What does it mean to take OD seriously as an approach to transformation? Has OD strayed from its roots?
- When OD practitioners occupy our typical role as third-party change agents supporting others to own and bring to fruition their own goals, how do we relate to issues of power and inequity?
- Can we identify and expand our contribution to transformation beyond increasing the effectiveness of organizations, one at a time?
- Can OD practitioners draw insights and practices from other approaches to change and transformation?

In the following sections we will examine differences and commonalities between these four frameworks. In the first section, we will look at the key contributions of each framework. We then analyze their fundamental values, assumptions and beliefs, and their different concepts of change and power. Finally, we outline the insights gathered through this inquiry, and list some of the possibilities for deepening Organization Development practice, based on these comparisons.

The Distinct Offerings of Each Framework

Each framework contributes something valuable to individuals, groups, and organizations seeking transformation for the purpose of social justice. Organization Development works to unravel the mysteries of group life, including the relationship of the individual to the group. It offers the potential to create organizational communities in the present that reflect the values and aspirations of social justice activists' vision for the future. OD can help groups align their vision, values, structure, and purpose, and enact democratic principles of power sharing. Ultimately, this framework honors both the inherent worth of each individual and the power of collective process to achieve its highest aspirations. OD addresses the "how" of making change, especially in organizations and collaborations.

¹ Sinclair, Zak, Susan Lubeck, and Lisa Russ, eds. Unpublished manuscript. *Four Approaches to Transformation in Social Justice Work*. OD chapter by Susan Lubeck and Ernest Mark; Power Analysis chapter by Pia Enfante and Zak Sinclair; Community Organizing chapter by Zak Sinclair and Susan Lubeck; Spiritual Activism chapter by Pia Enfante and Nghia Trung Tran. Oakland: Movement Strategy Center, 2006.

The Spiritual Activism framework offers tools and practices to build authentic connection with oneself, with others, and with the outer world. In the context of spirit and healing, one's full humanity is recognized—emotions, intuition, creativity, motivations, desires, and struggles. This framework offers powerful practices and methods for addressing core wounds and trauma in an organizational context. It also offers a contrasting perspective to the distinctions between individual and collective which are fundamental in mainstream Western society. In the Spiritual Activism framework, the distinction between individual and group/society is illusory: all beings are one. Its relationship to time also contrasts with the linear conception of time in mainstream Western culture. Thus, for example, both wisdom and wounds of our ancestors can be present in our current experience.

Community Organizing translates community concerns into collective action. It holds a distinct understanding of systemic injustice and the transformative power of outrage. This framework offers community members the power and satisfaction of acting boldly in the direction of justice, and lays out concrete practices that help to convert deeply held personal values into action. It also presents a unique opportunity to be in direct relationship with others who are “walking the talk.” Importantly, this framework offers individuals, groups, and communities tangible outlets for creating social change. Community Organizing values action, and uses action as a lever to build commitment, community, and capacity. The role of the community organizer, a third party who works to build the capacity of others, bears some interesting parallels to that of the OD practitioner. Community Organizing works to create change at the community level, by working at the individual level, the organizational level, and the community level – which itself is ever-evolving as the organizing unfolds.

Power Analysis provides activists with a deep understanding of the broader context in which we live as seen through the lens of power dynamics – the social, economic, and political systems that shape our material, personal, cultural, and even spiritual realities. This framework creates a collective analysis of structural inequalities, and how they play out in our lives, with the desire to motivate committed action. Activists apply Power Analysis to the external world at the societal and community levels, and also internally to their own organizations.

Values, Assumptions and Beliefs

This inquiry uncovered the significantly differing values, assumptions and beliefs that underlie each framework. For example, through this project, we connected with our appreciation for the humanistic basis of OD, including the radical notion that human beings are ends in themselves, and not means to an end. Overall, we consider the underlying values, assumptions and beliefs of Organization Development to include the following:

- Humanism is the underlying philosophy of change, and leads to client-centered practice. Thus, the client, not the consultant, is the “agent of change.”²
- Individual culture and behavior and organizational culture and behavior influence each other, and together create systems.
- Group life is a potential source of powerful change.

² Kaner, Sam. *Organizational Diagnosis*, unpublished manuscript. San Francisco, CA: Community At Work, 2000, 2004.

Some of the central values, assumptions and beliefs in the Power Analysis framework include:

- Power is the central question.
- Power relationships in society are unequal.
- Systemic oppression, in particular economic and racial oppression, exists and must be challenged.
- Capitalism is a system of domination and oppression.
- Systemic social change is necessary to address inequity.
- Raising consciousness leads to social change.
- Strong analysis is critical to effective action.

Thus, Power Analysis, which de-emphasizes relationships and subjective reality, and embraces analysis and us/them binaries – not to mention its anti-capitalist ideology – contrasts most sharply with OD. Yet there are OD practitioners who do, or attempt to, include Power Analysis in their OD approach. While OD presents some challenging questions to Power Analysis practitioners, Power Analysis may look askance at OD as an approach to transformation. The question this framework raises for OD is whether its humanistic roots and emphasis on the subjectivity of meaning, amounts to a failure to take into account the realities of power.

Spiritual Activism harmonizes most easily with OD. Here is a sampling of values, assumptions, and beliefs from this framework:

- All living things are always already connected and in relationship.
- Change is constant and cyclical.
- Connection/ love is a powerful motivator for social justice.
- Transformation is a journey, not a destination.
- Change at any level (individual, collective, etc.) stimulates change at every level. Thus, healing self contributes to healing of others.

For some practitioners, these values and beliefs will seem strange or irrelevant, but others see them as a natural extension of their work to strengthen and empower individuals and groups.³ Many OD practitioners, like clinicians, use themselves in their relationships with clients as instruments or vehicles for the change process. Some subset of these practitioners, spiritual practice is a critical support in their ability to be effective instruments of change. In organizations made up of activists who are in touch with injustice and suffering in their own lives, or that of their families or communities, some practitioners are finding that healing through spiritual practices is a powerful way in to organizational healing and change.⁴ Arguably the “holism” of Margaret Wheatley and others is informed by the Spiritual Activism framework, and resonates strongly with a connected, mystical, non-linear understanding of the world.

Community Organizing presents both contrasts and some non-obvious commonalities with OD. Though there are multiple “schools” of Community Organizing, as a whole its values, assumptions, and beliefs include:

- Through collective action, oppressed people can effect change.

³ See, e.g.: Ott, John and Dave Potter, et al (eds). *Centered on the Edge: Mapping a Field of Collective Intelligence and Spiritual Wisdom*. Kalamazoo, MI: Fetzer Institute, 2001.

⁴ Pia Infante, Unpublished interview with Lisa Charley, Movement Strategy Center, 2005.

- People are motivated by self-interest, and can form powerful bonds of relationship through recognition of common or overlapping self-interest.
- Power can be gained and leadership strengthened when shared self-interest is tapped through action.
- Building relationship, expressing the pain of injustice, supporting individual leadership development, and taking concrete action generates a powerful synergy which creates social change.

One commonality with OD is the emphasis on building the courage and clarity of individuals, and tapping the power of individuals in **relationship** with one another. The most striking contrast is the focus on power and inequality, which are not present in the traditional OD framework.

Concepts of Change

Each framework has its own unique relationship to change in terms of where it starts, how long it takes, and what makes it successful. As discussed above, the Spiritual Activism framework focuses on the necessity of touching and healing each being – although its approach to strengthening and healing the individual may occur through a group or community context. Organization Development's emphasis has been on the group as a primary driver of systems change in a given system. While group life undoubtedly concerns individuals and can impact larger social change, OD focuses its energy on the relationship between individuals and the larger dynamics of group interaction. Community Organizing relies heavily on groups, but is primarily concerned with building community power that extends beyond smaller group formation. Therefore, the locus of change for community organizers is entire neighborhoods, cities, or regions. Finally, Power Analysis believes that entire systems and social structures are the critical areas for change, even though this analysis is applied to groups and individuals through political education and anti-oppression work.

Spiritual practitioners allow ample time and space for change to occur. The Spiritual Activism framework believes that change is constant and emergent, meaning that there is no need – or ability – to “make” change happen, rather only the need to create a space in which it can occur. In this framework, the outcome of change is often unknown and not prescribed. It involves a high level of trust and faith in an individual's own inner wisdom, and a capacity to connect with the forces that will lead to their own healing and transformation.

OD is similar to Spiritual Activism in terms of pace and approach – the change process might be mapped out initially, but there is often acknowledgement that to some extent the path of the change process will become clearer as the process unfolds. At its roots, OD's humanistic basis requires a developmental and organic relationship to change, an antidote to the mechanistic mindset which governs so much of our public and organizational lives. Unlike Spiritual Activism, though, OD sets clear goals and outcomes with the organization in order to measure progress and movement toward external results, so the outcome is prescribed and ideally attained in a tangible, measurable form. This concrete “goal orientation” is one of the main tensions between a Spiritual Activism approach and an OD approach to change.

While spiritual activists and OD practitioners face some level of conflict with each other, the gap is even wider between these two areas of organizational life and the other two areas, Community Organizing and Power Analysis. Neither one of these frameworks believes that change “emerges” naturally, rather they believe that change is “made” according to human design. Consequently, any

change can be traced to specific decisions made and actions taken by particular societal actors. And the outcome of any action depends very much on who is involved and what level of power each player possesses. Because these frameworks rest on a belief that the fate of humanity hangs in the balance and the outcome is determined by human action (or inaction), their pace of change is urgent and highly directed.

Approach to Power

A principal contrast among the frameworks has to do with how they relate to power. Each framework concerns itself with very different aspects of power. Starhawk's distinctions between "power-over," "power-with," and "power-within" provide a useful tool for comparing these approaches to transformation. Starhawk differentiates three kinds of power⁵:

Power-over: "Power-over" is linked to domination and control. It is enforced through threat of disapproval, estrangement, imprisonment, economic scarcity, or ultimately death. Power-over enables one individual or group to enforce control and make decisions that affect others in a way that limits their dignity or self-determination.

Power-with: "Power-with" is not the power to command, but to influence others and the decisions that impact our lives. This kind of power can be seen as "the power of an individual in a group of equals, the power not to command, but to suggest and be listened to, to begin something and see it happen." This power comes from the group's respect for the ideas and character of a person, as contrasted with deference to their position or role.

Power-within: "Power-within" arises from self-development, self-love, and a "sense of connection" with other human beings and our environment. Starhawk writes, "Although power-over rules the systems we live in, power-from-within sustains our lives. We can feel this power in acts of creation and connection, in planting, building, writing, cleaning, healing, soothing, playing, singing, making love." Power-within empowers.

The roots of Spiritual Activism are undoubtedly grounded in *power-within*, the power of self-acceptance, sanctity, and immanence. This power grows with recognition by self and others. *Power-within* is a durable form of power – once you fully embody it, no one can take it away from you. Importantly, *power-within* in its most fully evolved state should not lead one down the path of self-focus or isolation, rather it should be a vehicle to connect through oneself to others and ultimately to cultivate *power-with*, in a public context. Spiritual activism provides a path that leads from *power-within* to *power-with*. Other frameworks, particularly Power Analysis and Community Organizing, gravitate towards *power-over* and at their most critical consider *power-within* an often all too convenient diversion from grappling with the "real" power structure. Their perspective is that as long as most people focus their attention on cultivating their own individual power, oppressive power structures will go unchallenged and remain intact.

⁵Starhawk. *Truth or Dare: Encounters with Power, Authority and Mystery*. New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1987.

Organization Development's humanistic orientation allows for a certain measure of affinity with Spiritual Activism, so far as it encourages individual growth and empowerment. At its core, however, OD's focus is on building the strength of *power-with*. OD is distinguished by its focus on how to optimize the power of collective process and group life. In fact, OD believes that a group's *power-with* exceeds the effectiveness of what any single person can accomplish on their own. As a result, when OD refers to "systems change," it utilizes strategies that draw upon *power-with*, such as full group processes that allow all levels of the organization, from the administrative staff to the board and executive director, to strategize future goals together. OD fundamentally has faith that individuals, *regardless of their access to power*, can grow, change, and willingly become more open to power sharing approaches. This includes people with enormous access to power. Community Organizing and Power Analysis do not agree. Instead, their experience shows that groups and communities generally have to use force (or *power-over*) in the form of direct actions or strikes, to achieve a more *power-with* orientation from power holders.

Community Organizing believes that community members must cultivate *power-with* among themselves in order to achieve *power-over* institutions that significantly impact their lives. In this framework, both individual empowerment through community leadership development (*power-within*) and collective power sharing are both means to an end, because ultimately, organizers consider *power-over* to be the most effective way to transform systemic injustice. On the other hand, collective power is the engine that drives Community Organizing success – it is the power of numbers and the democratically run organization that make the difference. Personal relationships among members and organizers are the glue that holds together this collective power. This internal commitment to *power-with* coupled with the external use of *power-over* presents an inconsistency that can cause a great deal of organizational conflict.

Similar to Community Organizing, Power Analysis is keenly aware of the systemic exploitation of marginalized communities who are subject to *power-over*. In very concrete terms, Power Analysis recognizes that groups such as poor and working-class folks, people of color, women, and LGBTIQ people do not have equal access to health care, jobs, education, political power, resources, legal representation, etc. While working closely with community organizers to heighten people's awareness of the systemic roots of these problems, popular educators and anti-oppression trainers are also highly sensitive to how the replication of dominant *power-over* plays out in activist groups. In fact, part of the process of education is learning how to address power differentials in the group itself and to employ *power-with*, so that activists are better equipped to address power externally. One difference between this approach and Community Organizing is that there is a fundamental belief that people with access to power and privilege are actually capable of giving up that power. Ultimately, the vision for a just society is one that is guided by collective principles of *power-with*.

Insights

- The comparison with the other frameworks raises provocative questions for OD practitioners working in every sector. In particular, we challenge OD practitioners to take OD seriously as an approach to transformation, as opposed to, for example, a set of tools and techniques for improving efficiency. The OD field would be strengthened by a more rigorous examination of how we stand for original OD values. For example, how do we support human dignity and

meaning as integral to the creation of “productive workplaces,”⁶ and what does it mean to seriously commit to humanistic values?⁷

- These four frameworks are all approaches to transformation – in some ways competing, and in others complementary. Each framework has a distinct strength and therefore holds its own unique attraction for those committed to social change and transformation. Major contrasts among the frameworks appear with respect to the interlocking parameters of concepts of power, theories of change, and assumptions about human nature.
- On first pass, OD as an approach to transformation appears to have the most in common with Spiritual Activism, and have the most tension with Power Analysis and Community Organizing.
- Arguably, Spiritual Activism offers a natural extension of and way to deepen OD practice. Many practitioners have spiritual practices, and may incorporate them into their work with client groups. Challenges include (a) avoiding simplifying, appropriating and cheapening spiritual traditions that are not our own, and (b) the ethics of incorporating spiritual practices into the commercial, fee-for-service context.
- With respect to Power Analysis, it is important for OD practitioners to unpack the ways OD consultants can relate to fundamental issues of power, including the overlap between societal power dynamics (e.g.: racism, classism, sexism, ableism, ageism, etc.) and organizational power structures. It is also important to examine the ways *not* addressing larger structural inequities in organizations and society actually undermines both the values and effectiveness of OD in practice.
- Community Organizing has much to offer OD as an approach to transformation. Some of the aspects of Community Organizing that may be most significant for OD include: its action orientation, its mindfulness about power relationships, its ability to build leadership and commitment in participants, and its emphasis on building success and capacity through incremental victories. Finally, Community Organizing has developed skills for working effectively with multiple levels of stakeholders where fluid membership boundaries are a prominent feature.

At minimum, these four distinct approaches to transformation act as a kind of “mirror” to OD and can help practitioners, and the field as whole, think more clearly about its own values, assumptions and beliefs, as well as the effectiveness of its change strategies. Perhaps, there is some possible synergy between these frameworks that could lead to some more sophisticated change practices, and perhaps not. Most importantly though, our inquiry attempts to place OD explicitly into the context of a more holistic social justice framework, so that we can begin to see how OD work is tied to a collective process of social transformation. We hope that this discussion will spark interest among our colleagues and provide a starting place for future dialogue.

Sources

⁶ Our understanding of the origins of OD draws heavily from Marvin Weisbord, *Productive Workplaces Revisited*.

⁷ Kaner, Sam. *Organizational Diagnosis*. Unpublished manuscript. San Francisco, CA: Community At Work, 2000, 2004.

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About the Authors

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Lisa Russ has worked in the field of training, experiential education, and program development for over fifteen years. After five years as an educator, trainer and manager in outdoor education, Lisa went to Global Exchange where she founded and directed Exploring California. This program provided opportunities for young people to explore issues related to immigration, trade and labor and how they impact communities around the state. Since 1999, Lisa has worked with community-based

organizations to strengthen their capacity, support young leaders, engage Boards of Directors, develop and implement strategic plans, design and implement effective leadership transitions, and provide training in fundraising, staff development, program evaluation and planning. Lisa has served on several advisory boards, boards of directors, and has been involved in the founding of several programs and organizations.

Zak Sinclair, M.A., is currently the Executive Director of Movement Generation, a new Bay Area strategic leadership project for organizational leaders of grassroots groups who mobilize communities around issues of racial and economic justice. Before initiating Movement Generation, Zak was a Program Officer at Vanguard Public Foundation for three years and was primarily responsible for Vanguard's Technical Assistance and Capacity Building program for grassroots groups in northern California and the Central Valley. From 2000-2002, Zak was the Associate Director of Capacity Building with the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, an organization that mobilizes youth of color, low-income transgender folks, and parents around issues of police and prison reform in California. In 1994, Zak received a Bachelor's degree in History from Brown University, and in 2003 completed a Master's degree in Organizational Psychology at JFK University. Zak's thesis is titled: "Organization Development Success in Grassroots Social Change Organizations: How Change Happens."