

Special Thematic Section on "Rethinking Health and Social Justice Activism in Changing Times"

Re-Engaging Social Relationships and Collective Dimensions of Organizing to Revive Democratic Practice

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Abstract

The weakening of the everyday practice of democracy around the world presents profound challenges for social scientists working with an applied focus on issues of inequality and justice in social change. This paper examines community organizing (in the US) as an instrument for equitable and just social change, and argues that three interrelated trends are subtly undermining a core practice of organizing: developing social relationships. An expanding technocratic influence on politics, an inflated focus on individual-level metrics for evaluating organizing, and a growing belief that digital technologies and big data leverage greater power, combine to engender an atomized view of people, who are increasingly treated as consumers rather than producers of social change. In contrast, cultivating social relationships fuels the building of community and expanded networks that enables the exercise of social power necessary to effect change. Scholars promoting change for social justice should work to shape tools and measures to serve social dimensions of organizing and support people and collectivities as agents of democracy.

Keywords: community organizing, power, social justice, democracy, participation, collective action

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There is no shortage of evidence for the challenges posed by the degradation of democracy and democratic practice around the world (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). As political leaders embrace ideologies of neoliberalism and global capitalism, economic power and wealth have become more concentrated, and people around the world experience greater degrees of social disfranchisement and economic precarity. Meanwhile, the hollowing of democracy across the globe diminishes the ability of ordinary people to use levers of democracy to respond to these challenges. Too often, social and political actors conceptualize democratic voice as akin to consumer choice, turning people into clients of the public sphere instead of agents within it (Brown, 2015).

Rebuilding democratic societies' capacity to respond to pressing social problems requires rebuilding the core relational practices that constitute the everyday practice of democracy (Ganz, 2018). The logic of democracy derives from the idea that ordinary people can exercise individual and collective voice. This ability to exercise voice distinguishes the logic of democracy from the logic of markets, in which consumers do not exercise voice but instead choose exit when faced with unsatisfactory products (Hirschman, 1970). The ability to exercise voice, however, is not born but made. People must learn the skills, capacities, and motivations to exercise citizenship in a democracy (Munson, 2009; Skocpol, 2003; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995). At the heart of that learning are social relationships, through which people cross the bridge from being passive consumers of democracy to becoming agents within it.

This paper argues that three interrelated societal trends are subtly undermining a focus on this core practice of cultivating transformative social relationships. In particular, we focus on how these trends manifest in the sphere of US community organizing, a practice explicitly dedicated to solving social problems through people building democratic power. These three trends undermine relational practice, because they shape the context within which community organizers work. First, an elevated value ascribed to both social scientific and professional expertise in the practice of politics has lessened the appreciation for citizen input and participation. Second, an emphasis on individual-level outcomes in both practice and theory has de-emphasized the importance of social relationships. These two trends shape the way a third trend – the rise of new technological and data capabilities afforded by internet communications – affects the practice of organizing. Social scientists and public affairs consultants enjoy increasing prominence in evaluating efficacy and strategy in the practice of organizing. Combined with the new affordances created by information and communication technology (ICT), such evaluations often overlook the value of critical social processes in organizing. We argue that these trends diminish the capacity of organizing to exercise power, direct social change, and bolster vibrant democratic practices. We begin by describing community organizing as a practice for social change and examining its evolution within the American context. Then, we outline why social relationships are crucial to the practice of organizing, focusing particularly on how social relationships enable organizing to become a vehicle for challenging power. Then, we examine how the three trends have evolved, and how they impact the dominant social contexts within which organizing happens. Finally, we conclude by reflecting on how these trends link to undercurrents of neoliberalism, and the implications for scholarship and practice.

Community Organizing as a Practice for Social Change

Community organizing brings together mostly low- and moderate-income people – through organizations or collective structures – to promote social justice and the common good, and this is done by developing their individual and collective capacities to exercise voice in socio-political processes (Pyles, 2009). Diverse other approaches to social change, such as information sharing, service provision, and moral persuasion, are based on causal assumptions about the social problems addressed. For example, the approach of information sharing presumes that those suffering from social problems simply have a lack of information; that presumption reflects a view that individuals have informational deficits, but that the social system itself is fair and just (Brager, Specht, & Torczyner, 1987; Ginwright & James, 2002). In contrast, community organizing operates from the causal assumption that systems create social problems, and that systems change requires the exercise of power (Mills, 1959; Pyles, 2009).

Organizing has many styles, traditions, and contexts, including the labor movement (Milkman & Voss, 2004), iconic social movements like the civil rights movement (Payne, 2007), and neighborhoods (Boyte, 2004), as well as issue-specific efforts like ableness-advocacy (Fleischer & Zames, 2001) or environmental work (Gibbs, 2002). Across this range of contexts, organizing is one of the few practices that explicitly pursues social change through mechanisms engaging individuals in participatory and democratic civic practices (Pyles, 2009).

Organizing practices in the US have changed over the last four decades of upheavals in social, political, and economic circumstances. Deindustrialization and globalization weakened labor organizing, contributing to a shift toward organizing in residential or community settings (Christens & Speer, 2015). Urban disinvestment, suburbanization, and decline of social capital dramatically weakened urban institutions, which contributed to faith-based organizing rather than geographic or neighborhood models, as faith groups were one of few viable local institutions in lower-income urban contexts (Warren & Wood, 2001). Organizing efforts working explicitly with youth represent another adaptation (Christens & Dolan, 2011), which emerged in response to increasing alienation seen in increased youth violence and prevalence of youth depression and other mental/behavioral health challenges (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007). In addition, the rise of digitally-based communities like Black Lives Matter has sparked another debate about the extent to which digital tools are enabling development of a different set of organizing practices shaped by people of color, women, and leaders from other historically marginalized constituencies (Freelon, McIlwain, & Clark, 2018). In addition, as globalization pulls decision-making power away from local communities to broader regional, national, and international settings, the scale and scope of organizing expands, leveraging relationships and new kinds of partnerships to affect change (Christens, Inzeo, & Faust, 2014; Wood, Fulton, & Partridge, 2012).

These trends challenge the study of community organizing practices, confounding a clear classification system for the diverse organizing approaches that these trends have evoked. An early taxonomy (Rothman, 1996) identified social planning, locality development, and social action as the three most common organizing approaches. This framework no longer holds, as organizing efforts are conceptualized in diverse ways, whether through goals, methods, tactics, constituents, issues, or any number of other lenses (Christens & Speer, 2015; McCarthy & Walker, 2004). Organizing labels include power-based, constituency, youth, faith-based, labor, democratic, neighborhood, electoral, pressure group, congregational, identity-based, civic, transformative, women-centered, community-building, Marxist, participatory, school-based, progressive, and social-action, among others. Our analysis is most aligned with what is termed democratic organizing (Wood, 2002), which emphasizes broad and inclusive participation, bottom-up decision-making, and developing social power for affecting systemic change.

Social Phenomena at the Heart of Democratic Organizing

The heart of democratic organizing is its ability to build social relationships between people, and then transform those relationships into collective power. These fundamental social relationships stimulate interpersonal dialogue, the sharing of lived experience, and reflection on common struggles, and these relationships are the basis through which ordinary people engage meaningfully in ways that create new commitments and capacities. We argue that the investment in social relationships is what makes organizing a powerful vehicle for people to exercise voice in society. We begin here by describing our understanding of power and its relationship to organizing, and then describe the importance of social relationships in generating that power.

What Is Power in the Context of Organizing?

Because the goal of organizing is producing social change, power in the context of organizing is about the ability of organizing groups to influence social change outcomes. In this context, there are different dimensions of power to consider, as reflected by scholars studying this phenomenon in the past (Dahl, 1957; Fung, 2006; Ganz, 2009; Mann, 2012; Tarrow, 1994). For our purposes, the most relevant dimension of power in the context of organizing is the fact that power is, in many ways, dynamic and invisible (Lukes, 2005).

Political theorist Steven Lukes famously formulated power as having ‘three faces’ (Lukes, 2005). The first face of power refers to all the visible ways in which power is exercised in society. Visible power emerges in myriad interpersonal interactions—such as when a boss tells an employee what to do—and in more macro political processes, such as when one side wins a vote in Congress, one party wins an election, or a judge issues a ruling. Organizing groups seek to win visible victories that reflect the interests of their constituencies, including things like favorable policy outcomes, ballot initiatives, elections, or changes to corporate policy.

Lukes (2005) enunciates two additional dimensions of power which are harder to see. The second face of power is ‘hidden’ and occurs when constraints are activated out of public view, by parties or interests who, while influencing community values and manipulating political processes, keep more fundamental issues and resource distributions intentionally out of such public debate. The ensuing public struggles, then, relate to issues that are of less consequence to those powerful actors who are limiting public debate, thus determining who has a seat at the table and what is on the agenda. The hidden face of power, for example, goes beyond the first face to impact not only which side wins a vote in Congress, but who gets to determine whether Congress was even taking a vote. It also reflects the undercurrents that shape strategic calculations by political stakeholders about whether to engage in given debates; stakeholders may opt out of a particular political debate if they feel that chances of victory are too slim or their resources will be too greatly impacted. The forces shaping these choices are, Lukes argues, another reflection of the second face of power.

The third face of power, which Lukes calls ‘structural’ or ‘invisible’, is even harder to discern, and comprises the assumptions and ideas that shape people’s understanding of what is appropriate, proper, or possible in a given situation. What are the ideas in people’s heads? What are their conceptualizations of what is possible? These ‘invisible’ notions govern the way people interact with each other and with society. Lukes argues, however, that this third face of power is also ‘structural’, because these invisible assumptions govern the kinds of socio-political institutions and processes we construct (Lukes, 2005). Implicit racism, for instance, is a manifestation of the third face of power and governs not only our social interactions but also the kind of socio-political structures we create.

Illuminating the three faces of power in the context of organizing is important, because it means that when organizing groups seek to make social change, they are trying to change not only the visible face of power, but also the non-visible faces of power. Not only do they want to win policy victories, elect candidates into office, and force corporations into socially just practices, they want to shift the invisible assumptions people make about how the world works (third face of power), and whose voice matters (second face of power). In the context of racial justice, for instance, not only do organizers want police departments to adopt body cameras and state legislatures to reform sentencing laws, they want to win those victories in a way that challenges people’s implicit racism, and to reduce people’s reluctance for constituencies of color to have seats at decision-making tables.

How Do Social Relationships Shape the Ability of Organizing Groups to Build Power?

Social relationships are foundational to the power generated through community organizing. Only by cultivating and strengthening relationships with and between individuals can organizers transform people's understandings of themselves, each other, and their relationship to public life (Ganz, 2009; Han, 2016; Warren, 2001). Beyond merely activating people to act within political processes, organizing creates new individual and collective capacities within and amongst constituencies, and such capacities are stimulated by social processes.

These individual and collective capacities unfold over time, and require diverse processes and experiences, before the kinds of power we describe are realized. One way to understand the importance of social relationships in developing these capacities is to examine a foundational organizing practice called the 'one-to-one'. This practice is described in the civil rights movement (Morris, 1984; Payne, 2007), labor organizing (McAlevy, 2016; Rosenfeld, 2014), and community organizing (Alinsky, 1971; Whitman, 2018), and detailed in scholarship on community organizing processes (Christens, 2010; Han, 2014; Speer & Hughey, 1995). The one-to-one is time-consuming (Payne, 2007), requiring people to meet, listen to one another, reflect on the challenges of their lives, and generate new understandings of themselves and the world they inhabit, as well as new shared commitments stimulated from these exchanges (Ganz, 2009). The one-to-one is designed to develop a parity between those interacting, based on the commonality of human experience, even while confronting the roles of race, gender, class, and other social constructions that operate to divide and entrench hierarchies rather than allow parity between people. The one-to-one process becomes the basis for developing collective leadership, a notion built on the idea that everyone has inherent value (Payne, 2007).

While foundational, one-to-one conversations are but one step in a longer process of producing social change. Describing other elements of the organizing process leading to social change is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is critical to understand that these relational conversations designed to generate new commitments are essential for the production of the kind of transformational change we are addressing. Fundamentally, one-to-ones are 'radical' in that they open up the possibility for change. Rather than presuming people are fixed in opinions and beliefs, organizing stimulates reflection on experience, inviting an exploration of one's life, meaning, and choices. Such a process is indeterminate, but the possibility for change lies in this uncertainty. Describing the work of Gerard Duveen, Gillespie and Cornish (2010) focus on direct interpersonal interactions as "the engine driving change" at individual, psychological and identity levels (termed ontogenetic change). Furthermore, when these interpersonal interactions produce psychological and identity change, this then becomes the 'motor' for change at social and cultural levels (termed sociogenetic change). Community organizing, at its foundation, employs a dialectical process between interpersonal practices (like the one-to-one) and systemic analyses facilitated through collective efforts at community change (Christens, 2010; Han, 2016; Speer & Hughey, 1995). This process reflects the interdependency between lived experience and social structures, in turn undergirding the understanding that developing social power is necessary to produce systemic change impacting people and communities.

Interpersonal interactions like the one-to-one are thus the bedrock of community organizing. They allow people to understand that the challenges and pain they experience in their own lives is often shared with others in ways previously unknown, building the bridge from private pain to public problems. As C. Wright Mills (1959) asserted, the main challenge for our modern era is to translate private pain and personal troubles into social issues, by cultivating an understanding of how the public milieu that creates personal troubles is a function of social structure.

Processes Undermining the Relational Focus in Democratic Organizing

The ascent of neoliberal values prioritizing efficiency, expertise, and a focus on individual-level outcomes, along with the rise of ICT, erodes the focus on relational dimensions of organizing in several ways. In describing how these trends have manifested in recent decades, we recognize that we are not painting a complete picture; as with any rule, there are exceptions, and important pockets of work are certainly underway, in which organizations and leaders are resisting these trends. Nonetheless, our argument is that these trends are dominant, and shape the socio-political context within which organizers work, and thus merit examination.

The Increasing Influence of Professional ‘Expertise’ in Organizing

A major shift in the practice of organizing in recent decades has been towards an increased focus on professional expertise as a valued resource, and the concomitant rise of a class of professional consultants who shape people’s understanding of how to generate democratic participation and what it means. Skocpol (2003) describes the replacement of organizers with professional managers and aptly titles her book, *Diminished Democracy*. Writing about public affairs consultants in American democracy, Walker (2014) describes the evolution of a new professional class at the intersection of marketing, public relations, polling, data analytics, political consultancies, and civic engagement. He defines public affairs consultancies as “professional service firms that contract with an organizational client in order to manage the client’s political and social environment strategically through campaigns that mobilize public participation, often in coordination with traditional forms of lobbying” (p. 23). He documents the rise of these consultants since the 1970s, and their increasing dominance in the world of politics. Similarly, Sheingate (2016) describes the transformation of democratic practices driven by the political consulting industry. For example, he describes how big data and new analytic methods have been combined to identify and target refined subgroups that can be mobilized for electoral outcomes. His conclusion is that US politics have been transformed from a civic practice into a business practice, and that professional control of politics is so pervasive that the magnitude of this shift is difficult to discern.

The rise of professional consultants who shape people’s understanding of democratic participation has also become a major conduit for the expanded influence of social scientists in democratic engagement. This trend is perhaps clearest in the world of electoral organizing. *The Victory Lab* (Issenberg, 2012) chronicles the increasing use of social scientific expertise in political campaigns, showing how both partisan and issue-based campaigns work with academic researchers to identify the most efficient strategies for identifying and activating voters. For example, the level of private investments in deep canvassing shifted up and down around controversy regarding social scientific evidence for the efficacy of the practice (Van Noorden, 2015), demonstrating the elevated role of social science in shaping professionalized campaign practices.

The rise of this kind of professionalization impacts community organizing because it reshapes how people understand what it means to participate in democracy. In her study of labor organizing, McAlevy (2016) describes a kind of ‘shallow’ mobilizing that characterizes many organizing efforts run by consultants and experts. Such campaigns rarely suggest that people link their actions to the production of power for social change. In contrast, she articulates how relational processes that build trust and stimulate the sociological imagination develop into collective structures for exercising social power. McAlevy emphasizes the importance of a thoughtful and sys-

tematic power analysis that constituents themselves conduct. Only by moving from the one-to-one relational process into analysis of political power will constituents develop the sustainable commitment to affect social change. She describes constituent engagement and leadership development as flowing from member participation in every step of the organizing process: issue identification, causal analysis, strategy development, and power analysis of the opposition. One hazard to outsourcing this work to experts is that some organizers internalize these practices and privileged positions. McAleve describes:

... professional staff directs, manipulates, and controls the mobilization; the staff see themselves, not ordinary people, as the key agents of change. To them, it matters little who shows up, or, why, as long as sufficient numbers of bodies appear – enough for a photo good enough to tweet and maybe generate earned media. The committed activists in the photo have had no part in developing a power analysis; they aren't informed about that or the resulting strategy, but they dutifully show up at protests that rarely matter to power holders (p. 10).

McAleve's analysis illuminates how the role of expert, itself, is a concern. In our large and complex society, experts are a valued resource. However, the role of expertise is in tension with the role of expansive democratic participation.

As a result of these trends towards professionalization, the world of traditional community organizing has come to occupy a smaller and smaller space in American democracy, with far more resources going towards electoral campaigns and other organizations run by consultants and professional managers. Large community organizing networks still exist (Han & Oyakawa, 2018), but they often lack visibility on state and national stages. Instead, most people's understanding of democracy is dominated by ideas and experiences determined by technocratic civic professionals (Sheingate, 2016). This professionalized form of participation, however, lacks a relational component. Without the kind of transformative relationships that turn people into agents of democracy, people become props in campaigns and organizations run by professionals. Use of the acronym "RP" by some political campaigns to refer to "real people" – as in, 'We have to find some RPs to stand behind the candidate' – exemplifies how professionalization of politics has turned ordinary people into pawns. Organizers seeking to do the kind of transformative work that has long been the provenance of community organizing are thus facing an uphill battle, having to dismantle the internalized assumptions that constituents, donors, the media, and other actors have about their work (Oyakawa, 2017).

A Focus on Individual Rather Than Relational Accountability

A second inter-related trend is the shift towards holding organizers accountable to a set of individualistic instead of relational metrics. Community organizers of all kinds are accountable to a wide range of stakeholders, from funders to the media, from academics who give voice to organizing, to constituents themselves. In many of these domains, organizers are increasingly beholden to individualistic outcomes as indicators of their work.

Social science research on community organizing has increasingly tended to focus on individual attributes rather than relational or collective qualities of organizing efforts (Brady, Schoeneman, & Sawyer, 2014). Many scholars studying organizing concentrate on perceptions and behaviors of individuals involved in community organizing processes (Granner & Sharpe, 2004). Often, this is for methodological reasons such as available data sources or ease of data collection (i.e., behavioral activities or participant perceptions). Quantifying individual behaviors and attitudes, while less challenging and expensive than, say, accessing relational qualities of voluntary activities, largely misses critical organizing processes. Furthermore, scholars draw on similar metrics when comparing organizing processes between groups and over time. In the end, much organizing research focuses on participant

characteristics at the expense of scholarship about relational or collective dimensions of organizing practices. This individual focus is not limited to the academic sphere; organizers themselves are held accountable to individualistic metrics as well, due to professionalization of organizing (Brady, Schoeneman, & Sawyer, 2014; Fisher & DeFilippis, 2015) and funder priorities (Kubisch, Auspos, Brown, Buck, & Dewar, 2011), where efficacy is mischaracterized as aggregation of individual activities (Oyakawa, 2017). Collective outcomes, in other words, are often conceptualized as the sum of a series of individual actions, ignoring the transformational, collective capacity that organizing engenders when the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts. The logic of a politics of aggregation instead of a politics of articulation (de Leon, Desai, & Tuğal, 2015) dominates this thinking and results in deprioritization of relational qualities and, ultimately, diminished expressions of social power.

The overemphasis on organizing outcomes as an aggregation of individual actions distorts fundamental concepts in organizing, such that scale often is equated with power. For example, ‘community actions’ have traditionally been viewed as collective efforts of organizing groups to alter or change a community policy. However, some studies tabulate each individual acting as part of an organizing effort as executing a ‘community action’ (Fawcett et al., 1995), thus supplanting the notion of a collective community acting together, into a focus on how many individuals are acting within a particular community and equating many individual acts with one collective act, thereby gutting the meaning of community action. This shift deemphasizes collective capacity, community cohesion, and social power. Research exclusive to the individual level of analysis captures one side of a dialectical process, thus marginalizing the social and relational processes foundational to social change outcomes. Paralleling a hidden form of power, social science metrics equating aggregated individual counts with collective impacts reflects an unstated assumption that exercising social power is not required for social change.

The Rise of Technology and Big Data in Organizing

In ways that many scholars have documented and debated, the rise of digital technologies have fundamentally changed the landscape in which organizing is embedded, interacting in important ways with an individual-level focus and social science methods for conceptualizing and measuring practices of organizing (Bennett & Seegerberg, 2013; Bimber, 2003; Bimber, Flanagan, & Stohl, 2012; Karpf, 2012; Tufekci, 2017). In addition, because people leave digital traces all over the Internet, these new technologies have also enabled the rise of big data, or data about current and potential constituents, on a scale never before imagined, leading many social scientists to envision ‘better’ ways to organize communities. In many cases, the way technology and big data has been used has sublimated the focus on relational commitments and replaced it with individualistic actions.

There are many examples of how the use of new technologies, big data, and analytic techniques have transformed our understanding and practice of social change. Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring are perhaps most emblematic of this thinking. The use of Twitter in those major political upheavals highlights the potential of social media to uniquely generate participation in social change efforts (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011), and many activists have embraced these changes. Penney and Dadas (2014) conducted interviews with Occupy Wall Street activists who used Twitter in conjunction with face-to-face interaction in the service of protest efforts. Those interviewees identified Twitter as the linchpin for the success of their movement, despite acknowledging shortcomings and vulnerabilities of that platform. Similarly, in a survey of advocacy organizations, Obar, Zube, and Lampe (2012) found that most advocacy organizations believe social media is a mechanism for effective social change. Bond and Exley (2016), architects of the digital engagement strategy behind Bernie Sanders’ 2016 run for president, argue that new digital tools are “... not brilliant new inventions. They are just a part of good old-fashioned mass

movement organizing coming back to life – shaped by the communications technology of the day – in an environment that made it easy for people like us to orchestrate the resurrection” (2016, p. xix). They contrast the dynamic potential created by these tools with what they describe disparagingly as the “plodding, one-by-one organizing orthodoxy” that dominates traditional organizing.

Alongside the use of new technologies in organizing sits the use of big data. Big data, drawn from people’s online behavior, consumer actions, and other publicly or commercially available information, is distilled to generate predictions about who will vote, take action on certain issues, or likely participate in grassroots activities. However, big data analytics draw on existing records to pull data about what has happened in the past to predict the future. These analytics draw heavily on attributes of individuals, conceptualizing and classifying groups of people by demographic characteristics, consumption patterns, and the like (Kitchin, 2014). A number of cautionary notes about the way big data is used have emerged, focusing on things like the way they fuel reproduction of existing patterns of behavior (Barocas & Selbst, 2016), create ‘echo chambers’ that drive increased social and political divisions within society (Wagner-Pacifici, Mohr, & Brieger, 2015), or fracture collective identity and behavior through the constant segmentation of information and action (Fenton & Barassi, 2011).

In recent years, social media platforms have been cast as new forms of community, and debates have unfolded between scholars who view these tools as the instruments through which social and collective needs will be manifested in the future (Mutekwe, 2012; Obar, Zube, & Lampe, 2012). Alternatively, other scholars claim that such tools undermine something fundamental about the way ordinary people build the kinds of social connections needed to generate power in democracy (McNutt & Boland, 2007; Tufekci, 2017). Tufekci (2017) argues that the ability of movements to achieve rapid scale through digital tools inadvertently undermines their ability to generate the kind of collective leadership and structures needed to translate that scale into political power. Thus, she argues, we see many large-scale public actions that do not lead to meaningful social change.

In practice, although not of necessity, the rise of technology and big data has reduced focus on the practice of generating relational commitments, because of the allure of generating far more actions at a larger scale. The appeal of scale has contributed to the shift away from an emphasis on relational commitments, and axiomatically to the shift toward an emphasis on individual actions. McNutt and Boland (2007) argue that technological advances provide the opportunity, or at least the idea of an opportunity, that grassroots engagement and activity can be generated without traditional, time-consuming, and often challenging relational processes. The ways big data are utilized seem to substantiate this belief in grassroots involvement without time-intensive relational efforts, as big data and social media ‘generate’ participants drawing on attributes of individuals, whether behavioral patterns and preferences, or indexes based on the aggregated behaviors of the individuals one is affiliated with (Kitchin, 2014; Wagner-Pacifici, Mohr, & Brieger, 2015). In this way, some assert that big data is altering fundamental epistemologies and replacing theory with data-driven science (Kitchin, 2014).

The Concern for Democratic Power

The trends we describe here create tempting shortcuts in the urgent and desperately needed efforts to create social change. Facilitated by ideas anchored in neoliberalism, this earnest impulse has undermined relational work within large pockets of organizing work in America. The uncritical embrace of elite expertise, individualistic outcome measures, and digital technologies and analytics has both shaped and become symptomatic of these

trends. Well-meaning social change organizations have absorbed these trends in ways that can be destructive to their effectiveness as well as to democracy itself. We should be clear that we believe that social science expertise, professional politics, and digital technologies have important value for organizing and social change, but they have in recent years been applied in service of efficiency, scale, and distorted social science metrics instead of equity, collective health and wellbeing, and justice.

The bias toward individual metrics is evinced by the dominance of mobilizing over organizing practices (Han, 2014; McAlevey, 2016). Organizing, as we have described, is a transformational process in which constituencies develop the individual and collective capacities to exercise voice over socio-political outcomes that matter to them. Mobilizing, in contrast, is transactional activation of people, in which scale is often substituted for power. That is, in traditional organizing, citizens ‘produce’ their own analysis about problems confronting their community, interpret why the problems exist, and strategize approaches for change and improved conditions (McAlevey, 2016). In contrast, mobilizing creates ‘consumers’ of public events, hosted by experts and others. Individuals who have been mobilized have not been engaged throughout the process as with traditional organizing; they are responding to an invite for a public meeting, much as they would attend a musical performance or a sporting event. The alteration of citizens from producers to consumers in social change activities corresponds to the rise of neoliberal ideology; this alteration is accepted by many organizers and advocates out of a belief in expert-defined metrics and an earnest desire to affect change.

Taken together, these processes shaping the field of organizing are an example of the third face of power, where invisible mechanisms shape the assumptions held by both scholars and organizers about how to effect change. The focus on individualistic outcome metrics, the value conferred to elite expertise, and an uncritical enthrallment with digital tools have all contributed to undermining relational strategies in community organizing practice. Relational organizing is about starting with people where they are, and engaging people in deep conversation about lived experience and reflection on those experiences. Bypassing this approach curtails basic elements of organizing practice.

Moving forward, we argue for a re-focus on understanding that human beings are fundamentally social, and intentional social change efforts are human endeavors; expertise and technology, no matter how new or innovative, are simply tools, rather than solutions. Our position is that technological advances, social scientific capabilities, access to big data, new analytic methodologies, and professional expertise are promising tools, but have value only to the extent that they magnify the efficacy of organizing practices that cultivate the relational processes which develop individual and collective capacities for power. Social science activism, to support social justice practitioners, must magnify the social dimensions of change processes, and develop technological and data tools that illuminate social and collective processes for organizing practitioners, as they work to build power for social change.

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