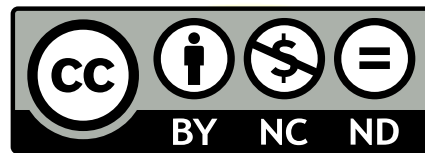


DIRECT ACTION, DIRECT SERVICES, AND BACK AGAIN: Functional Community Organizing and Community Change

**Joel Izlar, MSW
PhD Candidate
University of Georgia
School of Social Work
jizlar@uga.edu**



WHO AM I?



Polly

- Born and raised in the Deep South
- Community worker and community organizer; 10+ years
- Have worked in food justice, economic justice, labor justice, housing justice, digital justice, environmental justice, and more (!)
- PhD Candidate; Dissertation on Functional Community Organization
- Soon to be Dad!



WHO ARE YOU?

- **What interests you about this topic?**
- **What do you hope to learn?**
- **Are there any community projects you are currently working on?**



COMMUNITY CHANGE

What does it look like to you?



COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

What does it look like to you?



COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

- What is it really? We hear a lot about it...and we “know it when we see it.”



COMMUNITY ORGANIZERS

What does a “community organizer” *look like* to you? What do they do?

What is the first image that comes to your mind?



COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

- Common Definition

- “Community organizing is a process where people who live in proximity to each other come together into an organization that acts in their shared self-interest....community organizers generally assume that social change necessarily involves conflict and social struggle in order to generate collective power for the powerless.” (Wikipedia, 2018)

- Not So Common Definition

- “Community organizing [is] inviting friends over for a dinner party, meeting with a group in a church basement, organizing a group bike-ride, an all-women’s surf afternoon at a local beach, or a walk in the park with friends.” (Shepard, 2014).



BABIES IN THE RIVER



A photograph of a massive glacier wall, likely the Perito Moreno Glacier, showing a deep blue color and jagged, rocky peaks. The glacier is set against a dark, mountainous background. In the foreground, there is a body of water with small icebergs floating on the surface. A semi-transparent red rectangular box is overlaid on the center of the image, containing white text.

**WHAT PART OF GLACIERS
DO WE NORMALLY SEE?**

MASCULINIST COMMUNITY ORGANIZING (PUBLIC SPHERE)

Deeply rooted in 20th Century community organizing as espoused by Saul Alinsky.

Orientation: Conflict.

Top-down.

Associated words: battle, win, strategy, adversary.

Focuses on short-term struggle through public “battles” and “wins.”

Locus of struggle is the neighborhood.

Organizing is accomplished primarily through the Alinskyist community organization that “represents” members.

COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

An iceberg floating in a dark blue ocean under a cloudy sky. The tip of the iceberg is above the water, and the much larger base is submerged. The text is overlaid on the image.

**MASCULINIST COMMUNITY
ORGANIZING (PUBLIC SPHERE)**

**FEMINIST COMMUNITY ORGANIZING
(PRIVATE SPHERE)**

Deeply rooted in 19thth Century social work as espoused by Jane Addams and other women community organizers.

Orientation: Cooperation, prefiguration.

Bottom-up.

Associated words: cooperation, coalition, mediation.

Focuses on short-term and long-term struggle through community projects and interpersonal organizing.

Locus of struggle is the public sphere.

Organizing is accomplished primarily through direct services as direct action.

ORGANIZING COMMUNITY

DIRECT ACTION

- Direct action is an *act of power* that *directly* reaches certain goals of interest, contrasted to actions that appeal to authorities. There is non-violent direct action and violent direct action.
 - For example, instead of waiting for housing (which can take months or years in some places) people experiencing homelessness, along with others, may take direct action and occupy an empty building for shelter.
 - Instead of waiting for a city commission to decide whether or not to remove a rotting tree in a neighborhood, neighborhood members may take direct action and remove it themselves, bypassing the commission.
- Direct action is often seen as a way to address root causes to social problems.
- “*Direct action gets the goods.*”

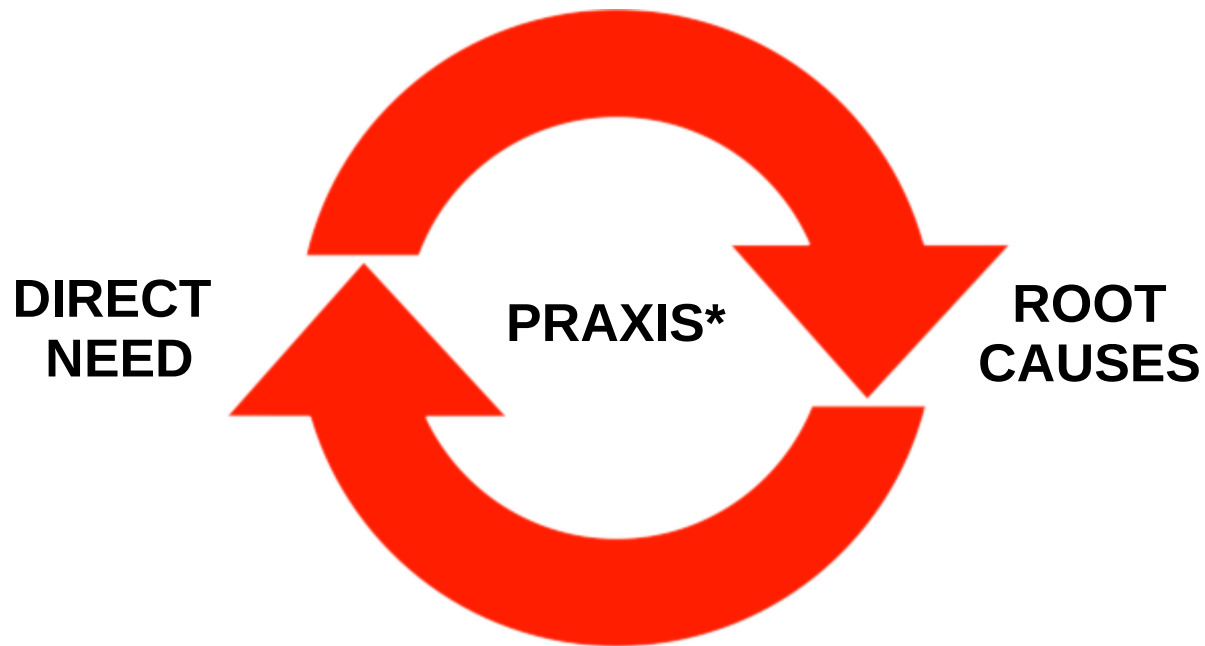


DIRECT SERVICES

- **Direct services are *acts of power* within social services that *directly* reach certain goals of interest, contrasted to actions that appeal to authorities. Also known, in certain contexts, as “aggressive case advocacy” (Shepard, 2014).**
 - For example, women within the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) effectively started their own mutual aid-based clothing organization that empowered them to publicly demand clothing they were rightly due from the federal government.
- Direct services are often seen as a way to meet immediate need, chip away at structural causes to social problems, and to receive services denied.



HOW DO WE MEET DIRECT NEED WHILE ADDRESSING ROOT CAUSES?



*Here, praxis refers to the process of enacting and re-enacting theory and practice.

Whoa, wait!

How did we end up with such *complex* problems *and* ways of organizing?

Which one is correct?



BRIEF HISTORY OF COMMUNITY ORGANIZING IN THE UNITED STATES

- **Community organizing (CO)** began in 1880s US.
 - Focus of time was organizing community around ecosocial issues, as well as health, sanitation, and welfare.
- **CO, post-1880s**, moved toward more inward-focused, process-oriented theoretical models.
- **1960s and 1970s** saw new embrace of Alinskyist CO; with the exception of few components of the BPP and AIM.
- **1980s and 1990s** see a rise of the **Global Justice Movements** and the effects of **globalization** and the **ICT revolution**.
- **The New Community Organizing** is born out of the intersections of the Global Justice Movements and processes of globalization/the ICT revolution.



THE NEW COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

- **The New Community Organizing** is distinguished by “play, creativity, joy, peer-based popular education, Cultural activism, and a healthy does of experimentation.” (Shepard, 2005).
- The New Community Organizing has not only emerged as popular resistance struggles in public sphere Alinsky-style “battles” and “wins,” but in the creation and empowerment of **community projects** that act **as their own forms of protest, organizing, direct action, and direct services.**



FUNCTIONAL COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION

- A New Community Organizing **practice model**.
- A **Functional Community**, or a **community of interest**, is a community that has formed with an aim of “commi[ting] positive change in a specific area of concern” (Weil, 1996).
- **Organizers in Functional Communities** are often “people who have a **common interest** about something they would like to change, but may not live in close proximity to one another” (Gamble & Weil, 2010).



FUNCTIONAL COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION

- **The model stresses**
 - Deep understandings of issue(s) at hand
 - Strategies for change
 - Communication that promotes inclusive networking
- **Functional Community Organization** is often an **active effort** to craft social change around a concern, and this process **empowers individuals to advocate** for issues that affect them (Weil, 1996)



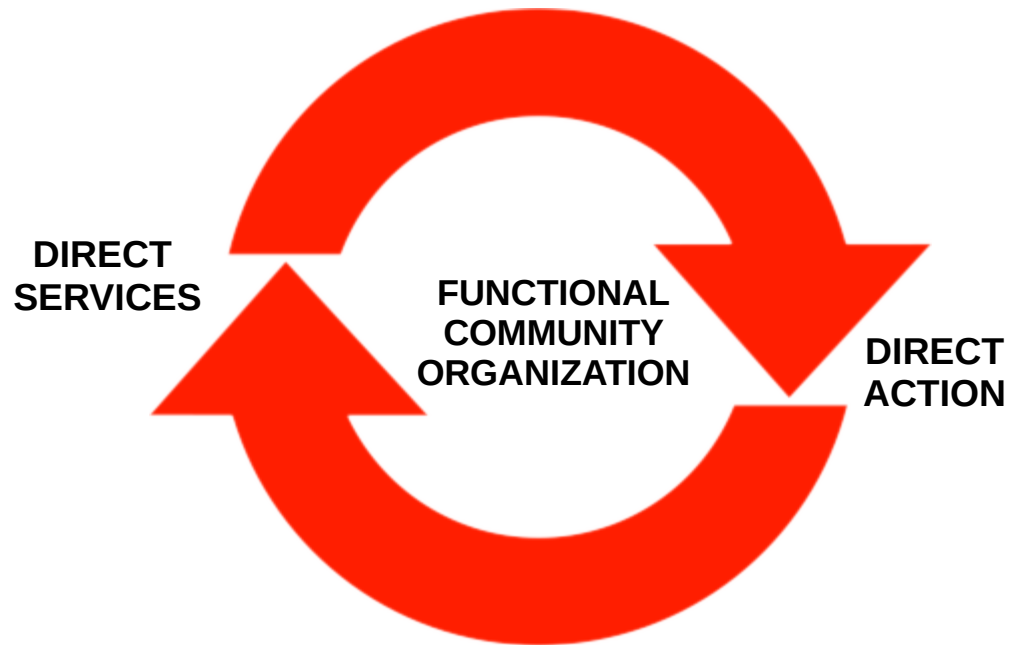
FUNCTIONAL COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION

- **In other words:**

The **aim of Functional Community Organization** is to **organize around an issue** that **directly affects** people—while providing services, if needed—**simultaneously** drawing attention to, or even directly addressing, the systemic or global issues that **cause social problems.**



HOW DO WE MEET DIRECT NEED WHILE ADDRESSING ROOT CAUSES?



MODEL EXAMPLE: SHELTER

- **Location:** Athens, Greece “Drop-In” Center
- **Direct Action:** Bypassing government bureaucracy (or lack thereof), immediately providing shelter—no questions asked
- **Direct Service:** Shelter, food, clothing, safety, solidarity, no paperwork, no bureaucracy.
- **Impacts:** Immediate need met, protest of lack of shelter, empowerment of service users and participants, policies changed.



MODEL EXAMPLE: ALTERNATIVE CLINIC

- **Location:** Canada, Alternative Clinic
- **Direct Action:** Bypassing government bureaucracy and regulation via harm reduction clinic; provide immediate help if people want it.
- **Direct Service:** Safe space, clean needles, counseling (if wanted/needed), no judgment; service users are brought into the organizing
- **Impacts:** Immediate need met, protest of lack of harm reduction clinics, empowerment of service users and participants.



MODEL EXAMPLE: ALTERNATIVE CLINIC

- **Location:** The Bronx, New York
- **Direct Action:** Bypassing nonprofits and city government services by creating a number of community gardens.
- **Direct Service:** Outlet for building community, service user-led, healthy food.
- **Impacts:** Meet immediate need, increase health, build community and solidarity, build skills, protest lack of healthy food.



MODEL EXAMPLE: SAFE SPACE

- **Location:** Sydney, Australia
- **Direct Action:** Bypassing nonprofits and city government services by creating a public safe space for low-income workers and people experiencing homelessness.
- **Direct Service:** Food, shelter, solidarity, counseling, community building.
- **Impacts:** Meet immediate need, empower service users and participants, build community and solidarity, protest lack of housing.



OTHER EXAMPLES

- “Really Really Free” Markets
- Free Schools
- Free Stores
- Repair Cafes
- Mutual Aid Disaster Response Groups
- Community-Run Wireless Networks
- Hyperlocalized Infrastructure Networks
- Community Technology Centers



DIRECT ACTION, DIRECT SERVICES, AND BACK AGAIN

Takeaways

- **Rethink** what **community organizing** *is* (and what it looks like for *you* and *your community*)
- **Contemporary community organizing** is *difficult* due to myriad social problems: find an **intersection** between **direct action** and **direct services** and run with it!



REFERENCES

Community Organizing (2018). In *Wikipedia*. Retrieved from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Direct_action.

Gamble, D. N., & Weil, M. (2010). *Community practice skills: Local to global perspectives*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Shepard, B. (2005). Play, creativity, and the new community organizing. *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, 16(2), 47–69.

Shepard, B. (2014). *Community projects as social activism: From direct action to direct services*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Weil, M. (1996). Model development in community practice: An historical perspective. *Journal of Community Practice*, 3(3/4), 5–67.

