

“EVERYTHING HERE IS SO POLITICAL....” SEPARATING THE ORGANIZATIONALLY NORMAL FROM THE POLITICAL IN COMMUNITIES OF ORGANIZATIONS

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The rhetoric of “community” is common in talk of social programs. With it comes imagery of common interests, overcoming turf battles, working together, and getting along. When programs fail to achieve goals or turn into outright fiascos, personal, organizational, and community pathology, or simply “politics” are common explanations. Problems are assumed to be endemic and intractable or remediable only by gifted leadership or transcendence of business as usual. This article argues that such thinking is rooted in a false assumption. “Community” needs to be reconceptualized as a community of organizations, not people, and organizations as constrained actors not analogous to individuals. Organizations interact in peculiar, but analyzable ways, giving rise to unanticipated outcomes that could be labeled pathology or mere politics. Community alcohol and other drug AOD programs might be more successful if their logic models were based on realistic concepts of community that can distinguish the actually political from the organizationally normal.

INTRODUCTION: COMMUNITY INITIATIVES

In recent years, social problems interventions have heavily emphasized “community” involvement (Aguirre-Molina & Gorman, 1996; Davis, 1991; Kubisch, Weiss, Schorr, & Connell, 1995). Programs aimed at one particular problem, the abuse of alcohol and other drugs (AOD), for example, range from citizen organized “take back our streets” campaigns to federally funded demand reduction programs (Butterfoss, Goodman, & Wandersman, 1993; Chavis, 1995; Falco, 1992; Goodman, 1993; Winick & Larson, 1996). Much of this emphasis

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on community comes with imagery of everyone learning to get along and funder mandates that differences be overcome in the name of common needs. When such community programs falter, fail to achieve goals, or turn into outright fiascos, there is a tendency to explain things in terms of personal, organizational, or community pathology, or simply politics. The experience is taken as evidence of the target problem's intractability, the futility of social programs in general, or the dependence of success on gifted, charismatic leaders. This article proposes an alternative view of the community in which such programs take place as a "community of organizations" in order to distinguish between difficulties that can be called "organizationally normal" and those that actually merit the name "politics."

THE CASE

As a part of the slight shift in the war on drugs toward demand reduction in the late 1980s, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) developed a program called Fighting Back (FB), which conceptualized substance abuse as an urban public health problem (Jellinek & Hearn, 1991). Subtitled "Community Initiatives to Reduce Substance Abuse," it would support community efforts to form broad coalitions, stretching across professional sectors and from the grassroots to the elites to build working systems of prevention and treatment to reduce the demand for drugs and alcohol (Jellinek & Hearn, 1991). Communities would be chosen on the basis of their ability to design a program that could be implemented and that would be likely to have a significant impact on demand. Fourteen medium-sized cities,¹ chosen from among over three hundred applicants, were awarded one or two year planning grants in early 1990 followed by five-year, \$3 million implementation grants.²

This article is based on interviews by the author and other researchers, analysis of documents, and several years of fieldwork in one FB site, New Haven, Connecticut, as well as materials provided by fieldworkers in several other cities where Fighting Back initiatives were implemented (Jones & Fisher, 1997; Jones & Suazo-Garcia, 1998; Lindholm, 2001; Ryan, 1999; Ryan, Lindholm, Kadushin, Saxe, & Jones, 1997; Still, Jones, Kadushin, & Saxe, 1998). The research was part of an evaluation study investigating whether Fighting Back works, but the emphasis here is on what urban communities such as New Haven are like as settings for the implementation of Fighting Back rather than on program outcomes.

Whether those outcomes are positive or not has been debated (Saxe et al., 2006), but what is not open to debate are the difficulties that Fighting Back sites around the country had in implementing the program. New Haven's experience with Fighting Back wavered frequently between uncertain opportunity and outright

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disaster. At times, the funding seemed to be more trouble than it was worth, and on several occasions the grant was nearly lost. In the name of combating drug and alcohol abuse, dormant battles within the community resurfaced. In the name of community involvement, hopes were raised and then dashed in places hard hit by substance abuse and related problems. In the name of collaboration, partners were brought to the table only to be alienated by what they saw unfolding there. At the start of the fieldwork, one informant suggested to the author that it was the worst grant funded project New Haven had ever had, and this was a city that had seen more than its share of projects. Starting in the late 1950s, New Haven participated in, or was the showcase site for, almost every major national urban initiative including urban renewal, the Ford Foundation's "Gray Areas" program, the Mobilization for Youth, War on Poverty, and Community Action programs (for example, see Dahl, 1961; Lowe 1967; Moynihan, 1970; Powledge, 1970).

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By 1996, the project had survived and was even being considered for further funding. Despite its survival, New Haven Fighting Back had accomplished little identifiable substance abuse demand reduction. Mention of the program's name to individuals active in New Haven during the 1990s would frequently elicit expressions of exasperation, the rolling of eyes, and the telling of tales of inept individuals, untrustworthy organizations, and a community that simply could not get its act together. In several other sites, there were similar diagnoses.

What most seemed to trouble informants was not being able to square the belief that everyone wanted the same thing with the in-fighting and lack of cooperation within the community. Informants talked longingly of the need to "pull [the] community together" and to stop "fighting over turf and dollars" (interview, 1990) and said that the program would only succeed if the "community can be organized to work together" (interview, 1990). Time and again the failure of Fighting Back was attributed to the exceptionalism of the community. "You have to understand," one said, "this town is different: everything here is so political."

This pronouncement was often the end of the story: the Fighting Back idea could never succeed here because the community was so political. But when pressed to explain what "political" meant, informants simply described all the problems Fighting Back had encountered: inflexible or opportunistic partners, agendas crowded with extraneous projects, disagreements over the nature of the problem, the sudden reemergence of presumably bygone issues. In addition to being vague and circular, explaining away the difficulties as merely political smuggles into the analysis the unexamined assumption that projects like Fighting Back would succeed in a so-called "normal" community. Actual experience is continually

contrasted with a romantic view of communities pulling together for a common purpose. The disappointing reality then encouraged a cynical view that success depended on rescue by charismatic leaders, as occurred in New Haven and several other Fighting Back sites, or some other transcendence of business as usual.

How helpful, though, is this view that there are “good” and “bad” communities (or as the funder put it, “communities that are ready to turn the corner” and those that are not) in understanding how and why New Haven and other sites encountered the problems they did? What can planners, evaluators, and activists learn from these experiences other than an imperative to pick the right communities and the right leaders? Our field observations led us to suggest that a more nuanced perspective is possible. In the pages that follow, I want to focus on “community” as an object of intervention and define it in terms of implementing an intervention like Fighting Back. I also want to explore whether some of its normal properties can account for some of what participants called “political.”

COMMUNITY AS OBJECT AND ARENA

One of the more frustrating aspects of studying programs like Fighting Back is the rhetorical slipperiness of the term “community.” Participants, program designers, policy makers, and social scientists all use the term interchangeably to refer to structures, groups, places, and interests. This denotative diversity was most famously characterized by George Hillery (1955) when he identified some 94 different meanings of “community.” Notably, for our purposes, the one thing these definitions had in common was “people” (Diaz, 2000).

And certainly, most of the ambiguous usages we heard in the field did involve people. The community was “those most affected by the problem,” residents of target neighborhoods, the grassroots, the bottom (of “bottom up solutions”), those who would be served, those who fell through the cracks. But the more we observed Fighting Back, the clearer it became that it was an organizational intervention. The individuals who were physically at the table were there as organizational representatives. The program’s goal was to build a system that connected service-providing organizations, and the conflicts that needed to be overcome were turf wars among these entities. The gaps in services were gaps between organizations.

The Fighting Back model was an explicit effort to reorganize a network of organizations, not people, into a community-wide effort to combat substance abuse. Both the object of the intervention and the arena where it would take place were a community of organizations, not a population of persons.

When community is misclassified as a group of people, we are led to make false assumptions about its elements. We expect organizations to be just like people, to be relatively unconstrained, voluntary actors with the capacity to overcome

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selfishness and to think and behave in the common interest. But organizations are not like people.

ORGANIZATIONS AS HIGHLY CONSTRAINED ACTORS

THE MORE, THE MURKIER: ORGANIZATIONS, PROBLEMS, AND SOLUTIONS

New Haven and other Fighting Back sites operated under the mandate to include "all those institutions, organizations, and public and private agencies whose participation is required to implement the proposed initiative, including news media, civic and religious organizations, schools, businesses, major health care providers, human service agencies, drug and alcohol treatment providers, ... local government and law enforcement..." and "those members of the community most affected by the problem" (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 1989). In theory, such participants bring to the table resources and expertise, experience and legitimacy. Indeed, as Fighting Back in New Haven quickly grew from a small grant writing team to a task force of substance abuse organizations, businesses, churches, hospitals, and Yale University, site visitors noted that "[t]his is an extremely impressive group of leaders who appeared to be dedicated to addressing the problem of substance abuse in the Greater New Haven Community."

The broader the range of partners, though, the more diffuse the discussion and the more scattered the project's agenda became. Treatment providers advocated the continuum of care as an organizing principle for the whole project, and prevention specialists suggested the latest prevention strategies as Fighting Back's core. Others offered minority-focused treatment, youth activities, ancillary services, attacking root problems, or environmental improvement as the silver bullet. Of this cacophony a task force member said that the problem was that "people have different backgrounds. [They] get stuck on what is a priority other than treatment. Perhaps it will be economic development and families, or the criminal side not working." Fighting Back was designed precisely to foster such a diversity of approaches, but no allowance had been made for the resulting loss of focus.

The chaos that informants described was a classic example of what March and Olsen (1976) call an "organizational garbage can" in which organizational decision making is complicated by the way participants bring divergent goals and miscellaneous problems and solutions to the process. The result is frequently random matching of problems and solutions and apparently irrational organizational behavior. Partners bring to the table things their organization knows or cares about and activities it knows how to do. The basic courtesy of listening to such contributions, even in the absence of active lobbying, can lead to log jams and time spent on issues that could never become a rational priority in other circumstances. However, to keep partners at the table program, leaders bounce from one extraneous idea to the next, often losing sight of their original

goals. The result looks like a simple inability on the part of leaders to manage and an unwillingness on the part of partners to be team players. One informant said, "These folks just don't get it. They don't understand what RWJ is really looking for, they can't change their ways." The last point may be correct, but it is not "these folks," it is "these organizations" and the constraints they face as members are a very ordinary organizational phenomenon. This suggests my first proposition: By their nature, organizations bring to the table menus of problems and repertoires of solutions. The more organizations involved in a community program, the more diffuse and unfocused it is likely to become.

WHY CAN'T PARTNERS SEE EYE TO EYE? ORGANIZATIONS LIVE IN DIFFERENT COMMUNITIES

The organizations brought together by programs like Fighting Back are assumed to be united at least by geography. The recognition that they all "live in the same community" (Jellinek & Hearn, 1991, p. 80) would motivate them to get past their differences for the sake of the community as a whole. Frequent disagreements occurred over what the problem was, where the target neighborhoods should be, and what the numbers meant. For participants, this inability to see eye to eye in their assessments of their environment confirmed that their community was hopelessly fragmented into organizational fiefdoms led by individuals who put the survival of their own organization before the good of the community. Most informants could name a long list of organizations that were "corrupt" or "ineffective" or "hadn't done anything in years." There was agreement about who the worst offenders were, but almost everybody was on somebody's list. The root of the problem, most seemed to think, was that the other guy did not really care about the community.

As the program began, there was almost no disagreement that substance abuse was a major problem in New Haven. Each organization, however, saw the substance abuse problem differently. Asked in 1990 about the major consequences of substance abuse, responses ranged from crime and neighborhood deterioration to birth outcomes and family problems. Depending on where in the city they worked and what problem they were trying to solve, organizations knew completely different slices of the city. For a treatment provider, the community was a map of where their methadone patients came from and where their clinics are located. For the fire or police departments, the community was a mental map of recent incidents. A neighborhood council might see it in terms of where all the crack houses were. Knowledge about the community was ghettoized along lines of expertise so that each entity operated with its own distorted view of the city – the prevention specialists' view of New Haven, the birth outcomes view of New Haven, and so on.

Organizations, in this sense, do not live in the same community. The language of "setting aside differences" or "all wanting the same thing" suggests

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that participants are voluntary actors that share a common environment (the community). In practice, though, organizations are constrained to see only one (or at most a few) dimension(s) of what is actually a multiple dimension reality. And for the most part, this is exactly what organizations are commissioned by society to do. We want the fire department to focus on fires and fire prevention and the youth advocates to concentrate on where the kids are after school. But this means that each sees the city in terms of its own categories and may be blind to the city seen by others. This leads to our second proposition about communities of organizations: Organizational “neighbors” in a community of organizations do not necessarily live in the same city. Professional competence and service specialization cause organizations to see “organizationosyncratic” slices of the community.

WHY IS PARTICIPATION SO INTERMITTENT?

The comprehensive nature of community-wide initiatives is often manifested in broad recruitment efforts aimed at getting as many partners as possible to the table. In New Haven and other FB sites, representation was indeed diverse. However, as more and more organizations and agencies joined the program, it became increasingly obvious that Fighting Back would struggle to maintain the active participation of those already on board. A small number of partner organizations formed the core participants, but the most common pattern was for new members to show up for a few meetings and then only intermittently, if at all, after that. This pattern concerned the funder because it seemed to undermine the program’s claim to being “of the community” and because it raised questions about the premise that success depended on everyone’s participation.

Program leaders were also concerned that it was not easy to keep partners at the table. There seemed to be an implicit standard that once an organization became active in the program, a representative should always be at meetings, and so 100% attendance was taken as the norm. Different tactics such as required attendance or “contracts” in which partners agreed to attend a certain number of meetings were tried, with little effect. An early project director noted that “People are too busy. [And there was] not enough effort to invite people who [do] have the time.” While this observation implied that the problem was overreliance on “the usual (overcommitted) suspects” in a community, it overlooked an important fact: partners were chosen largely because they were highly involved already.

In other words, participation was intermittent first and foremost because member organizations had more, or at least, other, important things to do. Almost by definition, the more important a partner was to have at the Fighting Back table, the more things that partner had on its organizational plate. In contrast, smaller organizations were subject to a different phenomenon. For small organizations

with fewer staff members, a single meeting could consume a large fraction of a week's resources. Large organizations – hospitals, the major treatment provider, the city, and the university – had staff whose primary job responsibility was going to meetings. And so, participation is more costly for smaller organizations.

Together, these normal organizational traits lead to our third proposition: A community of organizations is a population of highly distracted actors. Initiatives that bring them together will be marked by intermittent participation.

"IS THIS WORKING TOGETHER?" THE TECHNOLOGY OF COLLABORATION

The designers of Fighting Back saw substance abuse organizations operating in isolation, leaving gaps for clients to fall through, duplicating efforts, or even working at cross-purposes. The need for more coordination was obvious. On the macro level, fragmentation has been an explanation for failure throughout the history of U.S. drug and alcohol control efforts (Musto, 1987; Zimring & Hawkins, 1992), and since the 1970s each new federal policy promised some variation on a "thoroughly coordinated national attack" (Zimring & Hawkins, p. 47). Fighting Back would do so by constructing single community-wide systems. And working together was ideologically attractive as it suggested efficiency, on the one hand, and reflected an American ethic of community cooperation, on the other.

In the field we frequently heard people reason that "since we all want the same thing" we should be able to "come together." In New Haven and the other sites, though, the goal proved elusive. Systems were often discussed and elaborate diagrams were drawn, but implementation did not occur. Organizers soon learned that successful efforts involved limited and carefully selected groups of partners, rather than being community-wide (Ryan, 1999). When something was successful, it was attributed to Fighting Back's neutrality and to the project director's ability to "work people" and "do deals." Informants and outside evaluators alike were uncertain whether such things count as collaboration, cooperation, or a coalition. The absence of the romanticized "everybody working together" that the project had envisioned, the failure to coordinate and collaborate and build a system, was explained in terms of ongoing turf battles and the obstructive behavior of particular individuals and organizations.

But are failures at broad-scale coordination surprises in a community of organizations? Other than centralized bureaucratic control, there were few available models for transforming the substance abuse domain into a coordinated system. Everyone, from the Foundation to the neighborhood residents, talked incessantly about collaboration and coordination and systems, but it seem no one had a very clear idea of how to achieve it or what it would look like when they got there. Interorganizational coordination, collaboration, and coalition building are what

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can be called “ambiguous technologies.” They are nonstandard institutional forms, not off-the-shelf community institutions like police departments or chambers of commerce or parent-teacher organizations. This is perhaps especially so when they are formed against an unseen opposition. Their symbolic value is high, but attempts to operationalize them may cost more than any realistic expectation of payoffs. “Buying in,” “feelings of ownership,” and even “working together” are easy to talk about, but notoriously hard to detect. In general, it is difficult to tell when cooperation, collaboration, and coalition building are happening, when they are not, and to ascertain when enough is enough.

And, in the long run, it may be that everyone does not need to get along and that real changes come about through minimal amounts of targeted “cooperation, collaboration and coordination” among small groups of partners (Ryan, 1999). The ideal of community-wide cooperation may set a false standard against which inevitable and normal organizational behaviors in a community of organizations appear pathological. And so we can suggest a fourth proposition: Collaboration and coordination in a community of organizations are unnatural acts. Fragmentation may be overrated as a cause of ineffectiveness, while the cost and difficulty of collaboration and cooperation may be underrated.

THE PAST DOESN'T JUST TEACH: COMMUNITIES AS ORGANIZATIONAL JUNKYARDS

Insiders and outsiders alike were excited at the prospect of New Haven being a Fighting Back site. Its rich heritage in community organizing seemed to make it an ideal candidate for a community that could come together to address its drug and alcohol problems. The city had been conducting community programs on a large scale for thirty years. Its leaders had been amazingly successful at attracting grants and it was, for a time, the place to go for those interested in trying out new ideas for saving America's cities (Lowe, 1967; Miller, 1966; Moynihan, 1970; Powledge, 1970; Talbot, 1967). Unlike cities where outside experts would come and go, or where home grown talent would leave town for greater challenges, many of New Haven's experts were either affiliated with Yale University or attracted by the university's presence and considered New Haven a home base. And the steady flow of new programs meant that many local leaders could build careers working in and on New Haven. Indeed, some early Fighting Back meetings were virtual reunions of individuals who had been involved in community social problem amelioration for decades. Many were confident and others hopeful that they would, as one put it, “get it right this time.”

But history and experience were not kind to New Haven Fighting Back. From the start, the past was a persistent source of obstacles, stumbling blocks, and constraints. The program was constrained by a strong sense that “they (unspecified) won't let us do X or Y or Z again.” “You've planned on my neighborhood one too many

times,” said one resident in a 1995 meeting. Some task force members were afraid they might appear to be acting like their predecessors, others afraid of betraying their legacy. Some, veterans of stormy community politics of the 1960s, were leery of involving grassroots groups perceived to be stuck in the adversarial approaches of that era. Others made it their personal mission to make sure one or another group was not excluded again. In addition to these issues, the new initiative had to steer through an environment littered with broken promises, standard operating procedures, performance niches, real estate commitments, budget precedents, alliances and misalliances, and long unsettled scores.

The past also positively shaped the program. Recruitment of staff and member organizations depended on personal networks that grew out of participants’ experience with earlier programs, and so all new hires brought a trail of past affiliations with them. Whole parts of the Fighting Back operation were created by grafting on existing organizations, acquiring at the same time all of their historical baggage.

When participants talked about such things it was in personal terms: the importance of keeping the “Smith” family’s hands off the group or of being able to do things without needing “Bill’s” approval.³ The dominance of a large service provider was seen in terms of “Caroline’s” control tendencies, and “Caroline,” on hearing that someone had criticized her organization, said “... that must have been Tony; he’s never really liked us” (author’s field notes). The reemergence of the past as a constraint was frequently a part of the characterization of the community as being so political. But these obstacles suggest another property of communities of organizations.

The population of a community of organizations rises and falls as new programs are initiated and old grants run out and associated organizations are born, change their shape, or disappear into community history. New programs often survey the competition, but seldom pay attention to history. Programs do not disappear when they expire. Both the organizational obstacles that Fighting Back encountered and many of the patterns it adopted were leftovers and remnants from earlier programs, now defunct. New Haven residents often refer to such organizational junk when they point out that the community bore the burden of “30 years of innovative initiatives.” What they saw around them, and what Fighting Back encountered, were chunks of social organization created and left behind by earlier programs.

They include dormant organizations and alliances for which the new initiative provides a reason to become active, past networks of cooperation or conflict that a new initiative inadvertently absorbs, or past leaders and groups empowered by earlier programs but who are left with no agenda or resources. Individuals who are active in a community carry with them traces of their former organizational

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memberships. As a new initiative hires them, their resumes embed the new organization in a network of past affiliations. There are also dormant relationships ranging from funding to service provision to taking the criticism for government agencies. Expired programs leave behind a litter of such expectations that new programs are frequently expected to fulfill.

Old organizations may also have supplied the community with such varied "facts" as where neighborhood boundaries lie, what a youth program is, that city hall is useless or the university opportunistic, or that a particular percentage of resources has to go to a particular local organization just because it has always been that way.

Among long-time residents and activists, experience with past organizations supports a culture of "it's been tried," and veterans of unsuccessful programs develop theories of their community's exceptionalism. Past programs may have failed to transform community outcomes, but they often succeed in engendering and leaving behind high levels of shrewdness with respect to community initiatives.

The arena in which Fighting Back attempted to set up shop and build an organization of organizations, to construct a "single community-wide system of prevention, early identification, treatment, and aftercare services" (Jellinek & Hearn, 1991, p. 79), was full of visible and invisible remnants of 35 years of urban repair programs, which leads us to our fifth and final proposition about communities of organizations: The "organization" of organizations does not simply disappear when projects, programs, or initiatives expire. Instead, it accumulates in the form of "organizational junk" that can be either a resource or an obstacle for new programs.

DISTINGUISHING "POLITICAL" FROM "ORGANIZATIONALY NORMAL"

Fighting Back's designers recognized that they were asking communities to "orchestrat[e] the efforts of their many public, private, and voluntary organizations" and that this was something that "few communities, if any, [had] successfully achieved in response to any issue..." (Jellinek & Hearn 1991, p. 80). They also noted that early feedback from Fighting Back sites indicated that a frequent problem was conflict between grassroots and project leaders over whether the project was too top-down and insufficiently community-based. Many Fighting Back sites also experienced major disagreements between those who wanted to concentrate on substance abuse and those who saw it as a springboard for addressing a broader social agenda and advocated attacking root causes. To prevent such disputes from "paralyz[ing] the process," it was suggested that "project leaders will have to show that ... neither group is likely to succeed without the active participation and commitment of the other" (Jellinek & Hearn, p. 81). The real question, they said, is whether "concern about the drug crisis is sufficiently broad and deep for diverse

community groups to finally set aside their differences in favor of what is widely perceived as a greater common interest" (Jellinek & Hearn, p. 80).

This logic converts the challenges of interorganizational relations into a classical collective action problem (Hardin, 1968; Olson, 1971). Can the actors (here "community groups," but primarily formal organizations) overcome self-interest so as to achieve a collectively beneficial result? A community is ready when it possesses the social capital or political will sufficient to inspire such communal orientation in its members. When cooperation is not achieved, when members do not "play well with others" explanations are couched in terms of "what's wrong with these people."

What this article argues against is making organizations that are important for a program like Fighting Back analogous to people. Such logic may be appropriate when talking about individuals in a group, but this logic does not apply to organizations. Interactions among diverse organizations are frequently conflictual. The conflicts seen in the Fighting Back program were frequently characterized as evidence that a given community was "so political," as if, were it only less so, the conflict would be absent.

However, much of what frustrated the implementers of Fighting Back may be characterized as organizationally normal. Painting it as political, and especially when this is done with the broad brush of virtual dismissal, reduces the likelihood of intervention success by making problems look intractable, by saddling communities with ill will, and by making it easy to miss real political differences and to inhibit the development of structures and institutions that could address the real challenges of interorganizational relations.

The certainty that implementation challenges are primarily due to politics tends to make the problems targeted by programs appear intractable. If the impediments lie in a general community pathology, then no program can expect to ameliorate problems. In addition, it tends to focus all available optimism on the discovery of especially effective leaders, miracles and miracle workers. This tendency was seen in several Fighting Back sites where the local narrative told of nearly insurmountable problems until a charismatic executive director came along and rescued the program (Jones & Suazo-Garcia, 1998; Lindholm, 2001; Ryan et al., 1997).

The "everything here is so political" logic also saddles communities with more intracommunal ill will than may be deserved. In New Haven, for example, the mismatch of the organizational schedules of public agencies and neighborhood groups often made finding a mutually convenient meeting time difficult (Ryan, 2005). The actual conflicts of interest between the two parties were unaddressed as attention focused on mutual insults around the question of meeting times. And,

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in general, the interpretation of past implementation problems primarily in terms of politics meant that each instance of interorganizational friction contributed to community members' lists of scores to be settled and their collective sense that the community's problems were its own fault.

To be sure, there are in every community real political differences. Calling all challenges "political," though, obscures those real differences (for example, among AOD practitioners) and makes it easy to leave them unresolved. In a book on AOD prevention, a chapter on community organizations discusses common political problems that arise among organizations in a community, referring to cases that are quite reminiscent of *Fighting Back*: "numerous examples of conflict between [grass-roots groups and formal organizations], [and examples of] impeding or completely terminating efforts to develop comprehensive community-based prevention programming" (Pentz, 1995, p. 72). Interestingly, this is a part of what *Fighting Back*'s designers expected, and it occurred in almost every site we studied. Those sites, however, were frequently too busy trying to look like a successful community-wide group of organizations, dealing with all the attendant normal problems of interorganizational relations, to address such fundamental conflicts.

CONCLUSION

Politics, of course, is not to be ignored as merely residual or epiphenomenal, nor is it a particularly useful concept if it is merely a label for blithely reified unexplained variance. The point of this essay is not to dismiss politics as a factor influencing the outcomes of community initiatives, but rather to extract from the overly broad category of the politically pathological the organizationally normal features of communities that often militate against the success of interventions.

If analysts and policy makers follow participants' leads and label all impediments as "politics," they sacrifice explanatory leverage by mystifying the causes of difficulties. And the presumption that community interventions would generally be successful in the absence of pathological conditions has the unintended consequence of uncritically validating both the intervention idea and the implementation, while blaming the community. This deprives all three parties of potentially important feedback about how better to proceed next time. The irony of the self-serving qualities of this logic are not lost on the critical observer: the first two get to go home to write books or plan the next program, but the participants live with the nonresults.

We have described five normal characteristics of communities of organizations that make interventions stressing cooperation, collaboration, and coalitions extremely challenging strategies: the more organizational participants the murkier

the program; organizations live in different cities; organizations are distracted partners; collaboration is an unnatural organizational act; and communities are organizational junkyards. But does the analysis lead to anything other than smug naysaying? In fact, yes, though not in the usual form of neat formulations of “10 characteristics of successful interventions” or “five things to avoid....” In fact, the characteristics described here are probably not avoidable. Instead, we counsel a sort of pragmatism that explicitly recognizes contradictory characteristics of communities and organizations. There is, in short, no silver bullet. Is the matter hopeless? No, but there are tradeoffs between representation and participation, between the costs and benefits of working together, and between using existing social capital and being trapped by it.

PARTICIPATION VERSUS REPRESENTATION

Our first two propositions suggest that broad participation is, by its nature, messy and potentially counterproductive. Activists responding to the imperative to be inclusive and broad based encounter the tendency for more partners at the table to lead to murkier organization, in part because organizations, in effect, live in different cities. Broad participation and recruitment across conventional boundaries may be necessary to gain legitimacy and to overcome professional parochialism; such participation and recruitment should be pursued for these reasons (which might be labeled democratic and technocratic imperatives). But they are also the source of incoherence and loss of focus and should not be pursued as ends in themselves. If we acknowledge this tension, pragmatism allows us to look to these imperatives as means rather than ends. Interventions go beyond the “usual suspects” because legitimacy is important and because bringing multiple voices to the table enriches the information mix, but when it comes time to do something, they should not be afraid to ask “who needs to be involved in this task”. Community programs must complement the democratic and technocratic imperatives with an equally important pragmatic one.

DISTRACTION AND THE TECHNOLOGY OF COLLABORATION

Our second pair of propositions dealt with organizational participation in coalitions. Even well meaning organizations tend to be intermittent and unruly partners. We suggest that rather than interpreting this as politics as usual, it be seen as arising in part from organizations being naturally distracted. They should concentrate on what they do best (this is, after all, why they are invited), in part because they do not know how to collaborate. The pragmatic imperative is to find a position between accepting the status quo, at one extreme, and expecting full

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integration into a seamless system (in a community that "overcomes politics"), at the other.

Coalitions do need to invest in teaching potential partners how to work together and in building institutions that counterbalance natural mismatches across organizational types and sectors. At the same time, coalitions must recognize the basic autonomy of potential partners and the natural tendency of organizations to resist being absorbed into a system. This is the same tradeoff described by Williamson (1983) in his *Markets and Hierarchies*: the exhortation to all work together must be tempered by a recognition of the costs of collaboration as well as the benefits.

COMMUNITIES AS ORGANIZATIONAL JUNKYARDS

Community level interventions never take place in organizational deserts. Past programs produce social capital that accumulates in communities and can be either a resource or a hindrance. "Junk" ranges from program-related pathologies to expectations and definitions that leave residents and intervention entrepreneurs out of synchronization with one another. New initiatives do well to steer a path between assuming that a community is a social organizational *tabula rasa*, on the one hand, and an inflexible structure stuck in its ways, on the other. This presents a constant challenge of needing insider knowledge but avoiding being a captive of the past.

CLOSING THOUGHT

Behind the ideas presented above are two generic caveats: Do not romanticize communities as *Gemeinschaft* or organizations as persons. Outsiders, especially, but insiders, too, approach community programs like FB with images of bygone days when communities were united and avoided problems like those they face today. This romanticized *Gemeinschaftlich* past probably never existed, and it is unlikely, in any case, to be the right structural solution in a community of organizations. Similarly, the tendency to think of organizations as personal actors who can, if they would only make the decision to do so, come together and unite behind efforts to solve a community problem is best avoided. The characteristics that make organizations good at what they do also make them highly constrained actors and less than ideal partners.

If these caveats form the foundation for how we think about community initiatives like Fighting Back, we may be able to distinguish problems that are "organizationally normal" from those that are genuinely political. The latter category concerns, as Lasswell (1936) said, "who gets what, when and how." By recognizing conflicts that are normal, those who administer community coalitions

can focus the political process on actual political questions. Communities could then report that “building coalitions is a very tricky business and some things here are political” and, perhaps, add “and here is how the political process is dealing with them.”

NOTES

- ¹ Little Rock, Arkansas; Santa Barbara, Vallejo, and Oakland, California; New Haven, Connecticut; Charlotte, North Carolina; Columbia, South Carolina; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Worcester, Massachusetts; Newark, New Jersey; Kansas City, Missouri; San Antonio, Texas; Washington, D.C.; and North West New Mexico.
- ² Grants for several sites were supplemented and extended and the program continued in modified form throughout the 1990s.
- ³ All names are pseudonyms.

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