Abstract

Can Community-Based Organizations be 'Managed'? An Exploration by Margaret Harris and Carl Milofsky

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This paper focuses on one type of third sector organization (community based organizations or 'CBOs') and notes how such organizations often struggle with implementing 'management' advice. It offers four theoretical frameworks for understanding CBOs: small groups; community embeddedness; local social movements; and organizational evolution. It then discusses the practical implications of the theoretical analysis for those running CBOs. It concludes that CBOs need to avoid the application of 'management' principles where these seem to threaten to destroy the very characteristics for which CBOs are most valued by their participants.

Can Community-Based Organizations be 'Managed'? An Exploration

Introduction

The international expansion of Business Schools over the last seventy years has been associated with the development of a now-extensive body of theoretical and empirically-based knowledge about 'managing' (Cornuel, 2005; Kaplan, 2014). That accumulated body of management knowledge includes not only theoretical frameworks about the nature of organizational behaviour but also techniques and analytical tools. Within the management field there are many specialisms such as marketing, financial accounting and control, strategic planning, organizational design, leadership, decision-making and regulatory frameworks (see, for example, Clegg et al, 2021).

Is this extensive body of management knowledge applicable to all kinds of organizations, irrespective of their sector, size, age, purpose or main activities, and irrespective of the research sites from which it derives? In particular, is it applicable to the voluntary (or 'non-profit' or 'third') sector? Authors vary in their responses to this question.

Some do indeed assume that management ideas are generic and have uncritically transferred ideas about 'management' to the voluntary sector (eg Anheier 2005; Handy, 1988). Others have been more cautious. Some, while noting that concepts like governance, leadership and strategizing may be useful for the voluntary sector, endeavour to <u>adapt</u> management principles to the circumstances of the sector or <u>select</u> those that are most salient(Helmig et al, 2004; Oster, 1995; Tschirhart and Bielefeld, 21012).

Beyond those seeking to adapt management ideas, some authors see management ideas as simply inapplicable to the non-business sectors since they rest on erroneous assumptions; for example, that organizations are profit-seeking and/or that they are rational, bounded and structured entities (Scott, 2002); whereas many of the groupings of the voluntary sector are in practice loosely-structured, fluid and informally run (Wollebaeck, 2009). In fact, some scholars fear that the application of management principles to the voluntary sector can threaten the founding purposes and principles for which voluntary and non-profit organizations are most valued by participants and policy-makers (Frumkin and

Andre-Clark, 2000). Such writers see the voluntary sector's constituent groupings as having distinctive features, largely different from those of other sectors; characteristics which need to be protected and nurtured in the interests of organizational sustainability and in the interests of social policy implementation (Balser and McClusky, 2005; Billis and Glennerster, 1998).

The aim of this paper is to further explore this question about the applicability of 'management' ideas to the voluntary sector. It focuses on one particular type of voluntary sector organization (community-based organizations or 'CBOs'), an important but often neglected constituent of the sector (McCabe and Phillimore, 2018).

We focus on CBOs because we have noted in our own empirical research [references to be inserted after blind peer review], how CBOs often struggle with implementing 'management' advice offered by participants, leaders and funders and, indeed, how well-intentioned advice can adversely affect the growth and development of CBOs. CBOs can be challenged, for example, by externally imposed imperatives to formalize or to institutionalize their governance and staffing structures, or to institute set procedures [references to be inserted after blind peer review]. Again, pressures to measure outputs and outcomes can be anathema to CBO participants who place more value on processes of involvement or on adhering to founding goals (Phillimore and McCabe, 2018).

The purpose of this paper, then, is to explore the organizational nature of CBOs in order to consider the extent to which 'management' is an idea which might be helpful or appropriate for them.   We take a theory-development approach to understanding CBOs and a practitioner-focused approach in subsequent discussion. We take 'community-based organizations' (CBOs) to be small, low-budget, informally structured groupings that are started by people who want to respond to a perceived problem or common interest or who wish to engage in a process-activity, like musical performance, spiritual celebration, or political expression. We are talking about groupings that operate within, and orient towards, a limited geographic area (Stoecker, 2018). CBOs may have some paid staff who are responsible for organizational maintenance tasks but most participants are involved

voluntarily and the very process of participation is valued in its own right (Danley, 2018).

In the first part of the paper we seek to develop a theoretical understanding of CBOs as organizations. We go on in the second part of the paper to suggest some implications of these theoretical insights for practitioners and activists who run CBOs, as members, participants, volunteers or paid staff. We conclude by returning to our starting question about whether CBOS can be 'managed'.

CBOs as 'Small Groups'

We began our search for theoretical insights into the organizational nature of CBOs with the observation from real life that CBOs are in practice 'small groups'. This led us to begin our exploration by looking at social science literature on small groups and their behaviour.   That literature suggests that when groupings of people get together repeatedly to tackle a task or a problem, social processes create structured patterns of interaction, power relationships and procedures for getting work done, and for celebrating (Myerhoff 1978). These processes do not require any explicitly defined organizational identity or articulated rules and in practice these are simply 'informal' or embryonic organizational forms, especially in their early stages. They may emerge within communities or among people who come together over time with no external reference at all (Homans 1950).

A body of theory developed in the latter half of the twentieth century, often derived from research into work or therapy groups, throws light on the dynamics of such informal organizations or 'small groups' (Merton and Lazersfeld 1950; Bales 1970). It shows not only the importance of personal interactions for members of small groups but also the diversity of ways in which such groups may grow or change. If the setting, focal issues, and participants remain stable, group structures may evolve (Lancoursiere 1980; Mills 1984) and the initial small group may become, in effect, a proto-organization. If, on the other hand, the setting, the participants, or the issues that frame the group change frequently, crystalized structures may never develop and the group may remain "stuck" in an early stage of development or even dissolve and disappear (Lambek 1990). Alternatively, small groups may become

more formalized and explicitly structured over time – a point we will return to later in the paper.

The way small groups develop structure is shaped by the historical moment, the issues in play, the traditions, and the values of participants (Macmillan, 2020). Thus, while group development may follow a general pattern, each group tends to develop its own nuanced patterns by which issues are discussed, conflicts are handled, and projects are carried out (Dayson et al, 2018; Meyerhoff 1978). Groups may also develop strong values or ideological principles specific to the group that must be maintained over time if the group is to continue operating successfully. Among the most important concerns in some organizations are steps that can <u>block</u> the emergence of formalization or bureaucracy, including preventing individuals from building up personal power (Messer 1994; Rothschild, 2018; Schneider 1999).

Applying these ideas about small groups to what is known about CBOs, led us to see that at any one time, they too might be at different stages of organizational development; or that their development may be 'stuck' at one point or may be in process of change. Framing CBOs as 'small groups' also pointed us to the importance of their internal dynamics and the processes of personal interaction within them.

CBOs in Community Context

CBOs can be seen as 'small groups' but also, as their name implies, they are constituents of local communities. This second observation from real life, led us to explore what insights about the nature of CBOs we might gain from community-focused literature.

We take a local community to be a setting for living where people engage in basic social activities like raising a family or setting up and managing a physical household, and economic activities such as shopping, production of goods or consumption of entertainment (Wilkinson 1991). As community members become more densely interconnected with each other a local culture may build up (Hunter 1974), perhaps related to shared work places (Aurand 2013). Janowitz' (1952) idea

of 'community of limited liability' showed how some organizations actively encourage residents of a locality to think of themselves as a 'community'; they try to create events or actions that bring people together to heighten their sense of identification. Communities become stronger when residents develop meaningful overlapping relationships, thereby creating what has been termed 'social capital' (Putnam 1993; 2000).

The literature tells us that capacity for communities to act in response to perceived issues and problems in practice has to do with the nature and density of 'social capital' shared by members (Cattell 2011). Social capital provides what has been termed 'a primordial ooze' (Hunter 2007) out of which new movements and groupings can emerge; what Comas (2018) calls 'organizations in the wild'. So CBOs can appear with rapidity, ferocity, and intensity but they can also subside or cease to exist equally rapidly as the initial issue which led to their emergence passes (Milofsky, 2008).

In short, the community literature leads us to see CBOs as 'embedded' (Kusenbach, 2008) within their communities. Although 'organizations' are generally conceptualized as bounded, internally integrated systems that can be understood in functional terms, we can see CBOs, by contrast, as community-embedded actors (Halfpenny, 1999) with ability to carry out tasks; an ability often contingent on the culture, resources, governance systems and structures of other entities (Milofsky and Harris, 2017). Since communities are diverse, CBOs, as organizations embedded in communities, are also diverse. The different cultural and organizational styles that prevail in communities results in them generating different 'kinds' of organizations (Hall, 1992).

The literature also tells us that CBOs can be 'embedded' in their communities in two different ways. Many CBOs are 'horizontally embedded' in their local communities or in some other, larger structure within the local context (Warren 1963). Straightforward examples of horizontal embedding involve organizations that have minimal structure themselves but that engage in leadership or cooperative projects with other, more structured organizations to address problems and to bring about change. For example, a CBO may be part of a larger structure like a Catholic

Diocese that has rules and restrictions. The CBO must accept those rules in order to benefit from the partnership (Feeney, 1998).

As well as, or instead of, being *horizontally* embedded in their communities, some CBOs are *vertically* embedded in structures beyond the local situation; they are local manifestations of extra-local, regional, or national organizations (Skocpol 2003). Such CBOs are effectively local chapters of larger organizational systems or franchises of regional or national organizations (Oster 1992). Vertical linkages can bring organizational benefits to CBOs (Bacon, 2003) and to their local communities, even while, as with horizontal linkages, they might limit some of their freedom to make their own operational decisions and pursue their own goals. As pluralist political scientists (eg Dahl 1961; Mansbridge 1980) have argued, where local-level leaders form vertical relationships with people in other communities they contribute more effectively to the broader political process. Extra-local ties bring in technical know-how to community-based CBOs (Harris and Milofsky, 2019) which benefits the CBOs themselves, the local community and the local polity.

CBOs as Local Social Movements

Once we took note of the ways in which CBOs may be 'embedded' in their local communities, we recognized the importance of Stoecker's (2018) idea that much of the activity taking place at the local community level resembles that of social movements. Although, sociological definitions of the term 'social movement' were originally intended to apply to national and regional levels of activism, much of the activity which takes place at the local community level is in practice social movement-like. CBOs often respond creatively and flexibly to new problems and crises (Dayson et al, 2021); their activities are often directed at political change; and they are often small-scale in practice and focus. And, typical of social movements (McCarthy and Zald, 1977), CBOs must pay attention to 'resource mobilization' to survive.

Framing CBOs as local social movements gives further insight into the organizational nature of CBOs. It suggests that the conventional idea of an organization to which management principles are applicable, might be antithetical to CBOs' nature as flowing, constantly changing, and responsive entities (Keck and Sikkink 1998).   Indeed, even community actions that are 'organized' in the sense, for example, of Alinsky-style organizing (Reitzes and Reitzes 1988), may not themselves be organizations with recognizable boundaries and structure.

CBOs as Evolving Entities

In the section above where we considered CBOs as 'small groups', we noted that small groups may evolve and become more formalized over time. This point jibes with management literature which focuses on the way in which groups and organizations grow and change over time in response to internal challenges and factors in their environments.

One such perspective sees all organizations as changing according to a predictable linear pattern of stages; a 'life-cycle' view of organizational development (Haire, 1959; Phelps, Adams and Bessant, 2007). Another perspective sees organizations as 'evolving' over time, just as living organisms do. Both theories

suggest that certain patterns of organizational change over time – in particular formalization – are normal, even inevitable. Recently researched examples of this formalization pattern are AIDS support organizations (Chambre and Fatt 2002) and organizations of and for women experiencing domestic abuse (Fleck-Henderson 2017). In both these cases, organizations began as community-level groupings that involved people directly affected by the issue, along with political activists and concerned community members. They began with small groups voluntarily providing direct personal help to people in need, and were generally collectivist and democratically run (Chambre, 2006). Over a period of about fifteen years, these organizations went from informal meetings, often in people's homes, to being formal, externally-supported social services. In this way, a 'movement' that centers around the 'creation of a social problem' (Spector and Kitsuse 1987) today, may become tomorrow's formally structured, social service agency.

Yet empirical findings on CBOs shows that they do not necessarily evolve in a foreseeable or smooth pattern. They can appear with rapidity, ferocity, and intensity but they can also subside or cease to exist equally rapidly as the initial issue which led to their emergence passes (Milifsky, 2008). CBOs may dissolve into community life and then reappear when a critical issue arises. They may exist as action nodes in communities where they stimulate specific projects that are operated by other, more formal organizations but where those projects would not happen if the CBO did not stimulate action (Milofsky and Green, 2016). And CBOs may exist primarily as an experiential phenomenon that is important for participants but where it is hard to mobilize resources or manage them in an accountable way (Chen 2009).

All the same, it seems that small groups experience internal and external pressures to formalize. There are three particular imperatives towards formalization in small groups and emergent organizations such as CBOs. One is the need for division of labour which, over time, makes the occupants of some roles more powerful than others and encourages the development of formal systems for rotation of roles and the authority attached to them.

A second driver of formalization is the resource challenges which face any group which aspires to be sustainable beyond the initial enthusiasm and forming

phase. Grants and public sector contracts can be a dream that activists hope will stabilize the organization, yet the step towards accepting contracts from external sources can involve what Selznick (1966) termed 'cooptation' – an adaptation to the norms and values of the funding organization. For example, protest leaders may be brought into the governance structure of more dominant organizations. When this happens leaders may be deflected from pursuing the founding purposes of their own CBO (Piven and Cloward, 1979).

A third driver of formalization is the need as time passes to employ some paid staff to ease the load of key participants and volunteers. Not only may the paid staff bring in their own 'management' ideas about more formal procedures and structures, but also there may be a felt need for a group of advisers to 'manage' the paid staff and ensure that the founding purposes of the group are kept in sight.   This development can lead, in turn, to the creation of formal organizational structures where hierarchy and rules of procedure dominate; the group in fact becomes 'bureaucratized' (Weber,1978).

Implications for Practice

We have so far set out four theoretical frameworks which emerged from our quest to understand the organizational nature of CBOs. In this second section of this paper, we explore possible implications of the theoretical insights for practice, for leading and running CBOs. We look across the four theoretical frames in order to pull out some ideas which seem to be relevant to the practical question about 'managing' CBOs which we posed at the start of this paper.

Two preliminary points should be made here. One is that we are talking in this paper about CBOs so the implications for practice which follow are not necessarily relevant for practice in all kinds of voluntary, nonprofit or third sector groups. However, some recent studies (eg Dayson et al, 2018; McGovern, 2017) suggest that small third sector organizations operating at the local level face challenges which are similar to those faced by CBOs as we have defined them in this paper and our findings may therefore be applicable to them as well.

A second preliminary point is that nothing in the theoretical studies discussed in the previous sections leads us to deny that a range of concepts drawn from 'management knowledge' <u>might</u> have relevance for CBOs. The necessity for some division of labour within CBOs, means that many CBOs will find it helpful to engage with ideas such as financial accountability, resource acquisition, roles and decision-making. In that very broad sense, CBOs can and must be 'managed' to maintain their legitimacy.

Yet what emerges strongly from the theoretical explorations set out above are two further points. One is that CBOs often have distinctive (not necessarily unique) organizational features. A second, related, point is that those special features, which are often the ones that make them most attractive for participants and policy makers, can be threatened by the imposition of some widely-known management principles; such as formalization and rules about governance structures. So in this second section of the paper we focus on those special features which our analysis above suggests need special attention from those who run CBOs.

One such point that emerges strongly from our theoretical analysis is the crucial part played in CBOs by personal relationships, networking linkages and friendships. A second is the importance which participants (members and activists) attach to founding values. These may be the drivers which originally brought the group together or they may be political or religious values or they may simply be a commitment to involvement in certain kinds of leisure pursuits. Any organizational structure or governance rules which threaten these basic attachments to participation and common 'values' are potential threats to the organizational sustainability of a CBO. This suggests that the running of CBOS needs to take into account the preservation of opportunities for meaningful participation and values-expression. Formalization processes or the imposition of rules which squeeze out member participation and social interaction, are likely to run counter to the long-term success of a CBO if it destroys the participation opportunities which draw people to them in the first place (Wandersman, 1981).

A second point we take from our theoretical analysis is that CBOs are organizationally dynamic. They tend to evolve and change in response to internal

operations and external pressures. Yet at any one time they may have ceased evolving or they may even be in process of dissolution. Evolution of CBOs is not a constant, continuous or predictable process. It may happen rapidly or not at all. Each CBO will be at its own stage of development or evolution at any one time. It follows, then, that no one idea about how to run them is likely to have enduring salience. The implementation of 'management' ideas for CBOs would seem to require constant re-evaluation and updating.

A third characteristic of CBOs which seems relevant when considering whether they can be 'managed', is the way in which they can be seen as 'embedded' within their local communities. They emerge from within communities and, in turn, constitute a part of their communities. They can be the glue that binds local residents together and they can be key contributors to the store of local know-how and interlocking networks which has been termed 'social capital'. Yet, at the same time, their horizontal and vertical links mean that they are often in contact with other organizations – within their local community and outside of their local community. These linkages mean that there are often limits on the freedom of action which CBOs can enjoy and on their freedom to make decisions about how they run themselves. They are not self-contained, totally independent entities. Freedom to make decisions about organizational change – such as by implementing management ideas – may be restricted by the need to pay attention to other organizations with which a CBO is horizontally or vertically linked.

If, then, 'management' ideas do not necessarily work well given what is known about the organizational nature of CBOs, what routes are open to leaders of CBOs who wish to avoid the formalization and bureaucratization processes which is often implicit in the adoption of management ideas brought in by those who have studied in business schools? From the analysis in this paper, a few alternative approaches can be suggested.

CBOs might pay close attention to the values and work approaches of other community organizations with which they interact. They might also ask themselves about the likely organizational impacts on them of conditions attached to particular funding sources or about the impact on them of the values and procedures of

organizations with which they are vertically or horizontally embedded. Finally, CBOs may have to work to retain a sense of their own organizational agency; to know that no organizational change is inevitable, especially one which runs counter to the characteristics for which a CBO is most valued in its community.

In Conclusion

The diversity of organizational forms exhibited by CBOs and their propensity to unpredictable patterns of growth and development suggests that there is no 'iron law' which means they are destined to become formal bureaucratic structures eventually or inevitably (Rothschild-Whitt, 1979). This feature immediately raises questions about the applicability of management ideas to CBOs. They can choose to exercise organizational agency and determine their structure, processes, guiding values and governance in ways which reflect their roots and their community context (Acheson, 2014). For many CBOs, this choice may be to positively embrace fluid organizational forms, rather than principles of management which assume structure and predictable patterns of organizational behaviour.

So our argument, as we conclude the explorations in this paper, is not that CBOs are unique as organizations, but rather that they have distinctive features which suggest caution about uncritically applying management ideas from business experience to them. It is these distinctive features which require special attention from those who lead CBOs.

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