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A Heuristic Framework for Understanding the Role of Participatory Decision Making in Community-Based Non-Profits

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Abstract This paper explores the role of member participation in decision-making (PDM) from an organizational learning (OL) perspective. Community-based organizations (CBOs) serve as mediators between the individual and the local community, often providing the means for community member participation and benefiting organizationally from members' input. Community psychologists have recognized these benefits; however, the field has paid less attention to the role participation plays in increasing CBOs' capacity to meet community needs. We present a framework for exploring how CBO contextual factors influence the use of participatory decision-making structures and practices, and how these affect OL. We then use the framework to examine PDM in qualitative case study analysis of four CBOs: a youth development organization, a faith-based social action coalition, a low-income neighborhood organization, and a large human service agency. We found that organizational form, energy, and culture each had a differential impact on participation in decision making within CBOs. We highlight how OL is constrained in CBOs and document how civic aims and voluntary membership enhanced participation and learning.

Keywords Learning organization · Community-based organizations · Non-profit organizations · Empowerment · Participation · Decision making · Organizational culture

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Introduction

Community-based non-profit and grassroots organizations (CBOs) are key actors in individual and community change efforts and serve as mediators between the individual and the local community. In this way they often provide the means for community member participation and in return can benefit organizationally from members' input. Although recognizing the benefits that individuals and communities receive when members participate in the activities, planning, and decision-making inherent in community life, community psychologists have paid less attention to the role of participation in the health and well-being of CBOs. Historically, community psychologists have had an interest in organizations as community contexts (Boyd and Angelique 2002; Keys and Frank 1987; Shinn and Perkins 2000) and have more recently renewed their interest in organizational processes in community organizational settings (e.g., Boyd and Angelique 2007) and more specifically in the role of learning (e.g., Bryan et al. 2007; Perkins et al. 2007). Core organizational learning (OL) principles (e.g., increased participation, collaborative teamwork, information sharing) align with values of community psychology and potentially provide a foundation for building practices in CBOs that will enhance their effectiveness as community change agents. Organizational learning theorists argue that participation among members is key to OL and suggest that organizations that actively seek participation of members in decision making increase the potential for individual and organizational level learning, ultimately building capacity and leading to greater organizational effectiveness (e.g., Argyris and Schön 1996; Gephart et al. 1996; Shrivastava 1983).

Although OL has been well studied in for-profit contexts (see Friedman et al. 2005; Huber 1991; Pawlowsky 2001;

Shrivastava 1983 for reviews), it has received less attention in non-profit and community-based settings (e.g., Ebrahim 2005; Ebrahim and Ortolano 2001; McHargue 2003). This research begins to address this gap by proposing a theoretical framework for understanding how CBO contextual factors influence the development or use of participatory structures and practices related to decision making and how these in turn affect organizational learning and capacity. We subsequently use the framework to explore the impact of participation in decision-making on OL and capacity building in four community-based organizations (CBOs). For this case study, we define CBOs broadly as non-profit or grassroots organizations that provide programs, education, training or services to, or otherwise represent a local geographic area. This potentially includes human service organizations, faith-based organizations, neighborhood associations or groups, union-related or organizing groups. We distinguish between large non-profits such as the United Way and non-profits that are community-based. We do, however, include multi-site organizations that have a specific community or neighborhood focus. The case organizations in this paper focus on serving and empowering disadvantaged communities.

Theoretical Framework for Participatory Decision Making in CBOs

The three-part theoretical framework we propose explores the relationship between participation, decision-making, and learning in community-based non-profit organizations (see Fig. 1). The proposed framework is grounded in a systems perspective and suggests that contextual factors[1] (i.e., in this analysis, internal influences on decision-making), differentially affect a CBOs capacity to adopt aspects of organizational learning practices and structures related to decision making, and this in turn has an impact on individual and organizational learning outcomes related to individual and community change goals, and on members' satisfaction. Working backwards, we will describe the three parts of the proposed framework beginning with the right side of the model. We start with a discussion about the ways in which member participation in decision making potentially affects (1) internal organizational outcomes at the individual (e.g., learning, satisfaction, motivation etc.) and organizational (learning and performance) levels and (2) on the organization's ability to achieve its external change goals and fulfill its mission. Within this discussion we discuss more broadly our approach to OL and make a

case for how OL is foundational for community change work. We then move to the central part of the framework and examine how organizational structures and practices that foster participation—and in particular member participation in decision making (PDM)—enhance the potential for OL. In the final section we explore how contextual factors specific to CBOs may influence the extent to which PDM is practiced in these settings.

Impact of Participatory Decision Making on Community and Organization

In the proposed framework we suggest that PDM can be linked to both to positive internal organizational outcomes and to the fulfillment of the organization's external change goals. There is mounting evidence that PDM, defined as "the level of influence (that) employees have in decision-making" (Scott-Ladd and Chan 2004, p. 98), has an impact at both the individual and organizational levels. At the individual level, PDM has been shown to benefit members in multiple ways including (1) performance (Cotton et al. 1988), (2) sense of ownership of decisions (Black and Gregersen 1997; Denton and Zeytinoglu 1993), (3) increased motivation (Daniels and Bailey 1999; Ebrahim and Ortolano 2001; Latham et al. 1994) and (4) increased sense of empowerment (Ebrahim and Ortolano 2001). Lopez et al. (2006) argue that ownership, motivation, and empowerment fuel learning at the individual level and that this in turn sets the stage for OL (Dixon 1994).

Organizations that have the capacity to learn, particularly those in complex and uncertain environments organizations, increase their likelihood of survival (Duncan 1972; Lopez et al. 2006). Theorists who take a constructivist approach to OL point to member participation as central to successful OL and contend that PDM enhances OL capacity. Our approach aligns with the constructivist OL tradition, and we adopt Friedman et al. (2001), definition of OL "as a process of inquiry (in response to errors or anomalies) through which members of an organization develop shared values and knowledge based on past experiences of themselves and of others" (p. 757). In keeping with this definition and tradition, we view individual and organizational learning as existing in dynamic relation to one another and understand that individual learning only becomes organizational when embedded in organizational memory through shared beliefs, values, and practices. We further recognize that OL is sustained through (1) organizational practices such as PDM that support learning at the individual level, (2) structural mechanisms that create the conditions within the organization to promote collective reflection and meaning making, and (3) structures (roles, functions, processes) in which new knowledge or mental models can be embedded.

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[1] In this paper we have focused on internal influences but recognize and have included in our model external influences, which we are addressing in a separate paper.
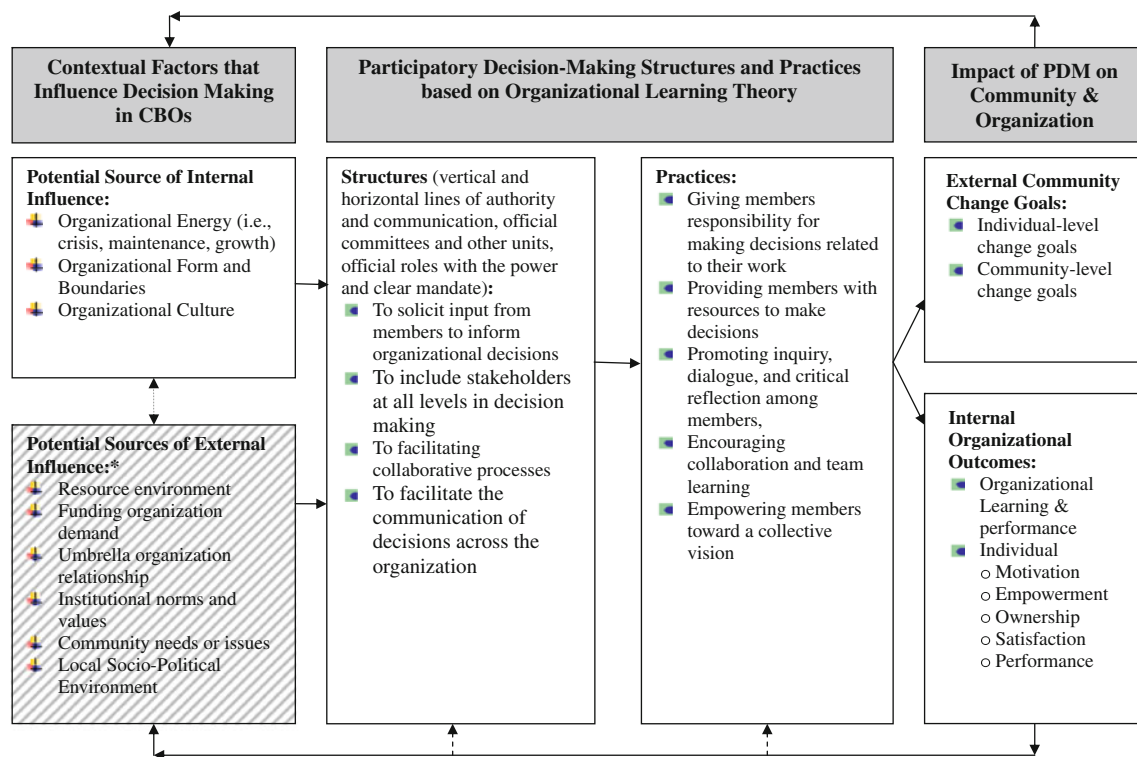
Fig. 1 Theoretical framework for understanding participation in decision making in CBOs

Although recognizing that OL is dependent on the organization's cultural and social systems (Easterby-Smith et al. 1998), OL theorists view OL essentially as a socially constructed process (e.g., Brown and Duguid 1991) in which members are seen as agents of OL (Argyris and Schön 1996). From this perspective PDM can be seen as inextricably linked to OL through the processes of single- and double-loop learning (Argyris and Schön). Through single-loop learning members achieve organizational goals within the established frame of existing assumptions, norms, and values. As such, single-loop learning aims at maximizing effectiveness through adaptation. When adaptive processes fail to achieve desired results, double-loop learning is (ideally) triggered. In double-loop learning members inquire into the assumptions upon which previous decisions have been based and examine those normative values and beliefs that inform practice and are at stake. Without the capacity to engage the process of double-loop learning in which assumptions of one's theories-in-use are examined and questioned, individuals and organizations are unable to resolve organizational dilemmas.

OL from this perspective facilitates change and capacity building in the organization by making explicit through a collective process values and beliefs that otherwise would remain implicit and untested (Argyris and Schön 1996). We argue that there is a clear link between OL, particularly double-loop learning, and the capacity for organization to

engage in second-order or systems change with individuals and communities. Here we concur with Senge's (1990) assessment that for organizations "…it is not enough merely to survive. *Survival learning* or … *adaptive learning* is important—indeed it is necessary. But… *adaptive* learning must be joined by *generative learning*, learning that enhances our capacity to create" (p. 14). For CBOs *the capacity to create* and think beyond the status quo is central to community change work, and for this reason, enhancing generative OL capacity in CBO settings should be a key aim of the field.

Participatory Decision Making Structures and Practices Based on OL Theory

The central part of the proposed framework concerns the role of staff participation in decision making (PDM) from an OL perspective. PDM represents a key organizational process that has been empirically linked with OL (Lines 2005; Scott-Ladd and Chan 2004). In developing this part of the framework we have drawn on OL theory that examines how organizational structures and practices enable PDM and promote learning (Shrivastava 1983). Although we differentiate structure from practice within the framework, we view them as interdependent and in keeping with the idea of a *participative learning sys*tem, which Shrivastava describes as "the organizational practice

of forming ad hoc committees, working groups or teams for resolving all strategic and management control problems" (p. 23).

Within the framework, structural elements are understood as providing an organizing framework for how people work, and in this way we believe structure, to a large extent, determines how members participate in organizational life. We propose that organizational structures enable PDM and foster learning when they (1) provide a means for soliciting input from members to inform organizational decisions, (2) provide a means for including stakeholders at all levels in decision making, (3) facilitate collaborative processes, and (4) facilitate the communication of decisions across the organization (Gephart et al. 1996; Marsick 2000). For example, structural mechanisms such as after-action reviews create an opportunity for participation through roles, functions, and procedures and can enhance OL (Lipshitz et al. 2002). At the organizational level, team-based and cross-organizational structures, promote PDM by bringing together members from different organizational levels and roles to work collaboratively toward a common goal. Such structures have the potential to increase the effectiveness of decision making and learning by bringing multiple perspectives to the table (Lines 2005) and creating redundancy[2] within the organizational system (Morgan 1997). Although OL theorists have pointed to the necessary role of structure mechanisms in fostering PDM, they also contend that these are not sufficient and must be joined by OL practices (Lipshitz et al. 2002).

In the proposed framework we identify five practices based on the OL literature. The first two practices—*giving members responsibility for making decisions related to their work* and p*roviding members with resources to make decisions*—speak specifically to PDM at the individual level. Marsick and colleagues (Gephart et al. 1996; Marsick and Watkins 2003) argue that participation and accountability is a precondition for generative learning and that level of participation in key organizational processes is linked to greater learning at the organizational level. In this way, participation connects learning at the individual and organizational levels. Greater participation also means that decision-making is decentralized when related to staff member's own work (Katz and Kahn 1978). In such contexts individuals are expected to take initiative and problem-solve, and have access to and control of the resources they need to carryout their work. This provides

both the support and challenge necessary to engage in adaptive or single-loop learning as well as generative or double-loop learning (Argyris and Schön 1996). As Ebrahim and Ortolano (2001) suggest both single- and double-loop learning can occur through *learning by doing*, *by exploring*, and *by imitating*. In each of these processes, active participation plays a central role in learning, and it is assumed that the resulting experience of greater control of decision making at the individual level encourages self-directed learning.

The last three practices—(1) *promoting inquiry, dialogue, and critical reflection among members*, (2) *encouraging collaboration and team learning* and (3) *empowering members toward a collective vision*—facilitate member participation (Marsick 2000; Watkins and Marsick 1993, 1996) and create a context for PDM at the organizational level. The consensus decision-making process common in Japanese organizations known as *ringi* provides a practical example of how these participatory practices can come together and promote PDM. In essence, the process begins with a written proposal by an organizational team about the decision to be made. This is then sent sequentially to other organizational members who have a stake in the decision. Each has the opportunity to challenge the decision and provide written feedback. This process of circulating the document continues until a consensus is reached (Morgan 1997). Practices, such as *ringi*, foster inquiry and critical reflection in which members identify, examine, and evaluate normative beliefs, values, and assumptions relating to the causes and consequences of actions (Williams 2001). As a collective practice it makes explicit values and beliefs that otherwise would remain implicit and untested (Argyris and Schön 1996). Through this type of consensus decision-making process the practice of seeking employee voice and fostering a collective vision or buy-in is institutionalized. Finally, the ongoing practice of *ringi* creates a context for reframing and double-loop learning and "serves the dual function of allowing people to challenge core operating principles and, in both the process and outcome, to affirm and reaffirm the values that are to guide action" (p. 97). In this way critical reflection, collaboration, and empowerment can be understood more broadly as values that are supported through organizational structures and processes and embedded in the daily practice of members.

Internal Contextual Factors that Influence Decision Making in CBOs

For this part of the framework, we begin with the assumption that the context in which CBOs operate differs in important ways from other types of organizations and that internal and external factors related to CBO context potentially influence decision making. We identify three

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[2] Here redundancy does not imply inefficiency but rather suggests that when organizations have a systemic practice of bringing differing perspectives to challenges and opportunities that arise, they are more likely to generate novel solutions.

internal sources of influence or factors—organizational form and boundaries, organizational energy, and organizational culture—that may differentiate CBOs from their public, for-profit, and larger non-profit counterparts and affect the extent to which a CBO engages members in organizational decision making processes.

The first concerns the relationship between *organizational form* and PDM. In the past four decades new organizational forms have emerged in response to the limitations of bureaucracy. Although this prototypic form continues to dominate, the trend has been toward the adoption of forms that can increase innovation and the organization's capacity to respond to environmental complexity and change (Daft and Steers 1986). These forms tend to emphasize horizontal structures, greater distribution of power among members, and increased PDM (Morgan 1997).

Organizational form within the non-profit sector has been shown both to reflect and shape underlying guiding ideologies and structures (Hasenfeld 2000). Community-based non-profits, although historically sharing some of the underlying values of bureaucracy, such as efficiency and role differentiation, have from their inception been driven by civic aims and have evolved different kinds of forms based on these values and on related resource constraints. Community-based grassroots organizations, for example, typically emerge in response to local need and rely on the participation of volunteer members. Other community-based non-profits, such as human service organizations, are typically more formalized with a larger number of paid staff and mimic more traditional bureaucratic forms with greater role and task differentiation among members and hierarchical distinctions between organizational levels. In addition to the form a CBO adopts, the way in which the organization defines the organizational boundaries and membership (e.g., paid staff, volunteers, community members and service recipients) may influence who is involved in decision-making and the level of their involvement.

The second contextual factor relates to the nature and direction of the *organization's energy*. Levine et al. (2005; p. 382) define organizational energy as the total amount of money, work time, effort, and other tangible resources expended or received by the organization or program or its members. They include energy along with worker/organizational power, culture, competence, relationships, legal and administrative considerations, and information and communication as the key social context interests or dimensions influencing change or resistance to change in a system or organization.

As compared to larger non-profits and for-profit organizations, community-based non-profits are often more fragile, relying on unstable and ever-more-limited funding sources, and often a limited number of paid staff. We hypothesize that the availability of resources determines the quality of the organization's energy and propose three potential organizational orientations that drive CBO decision making: crisis, maintenance, and growth. We recognize that all organizations, particularly non-profits, face crisis situations but argue that when crisis is pervasive it threatens the survival of the organization and becomes the dominant orientation. Similarly, we expect that organizations that have a maintenance or growth orientation will in the face of a crisis be more likely to respond rapidly without great cost to the organization or its members and in the case of an organization with a growth orientation, it is more likely that crisis will be taken as an opportunity for learning and improving the organization.

The final internal factor concerns the ways in which organizational culture (related to the value of participation) facilitates or constrains learning within these contexts and how this affects each organization's capacity to fulfill their individual and/or community change goals. CBOs exist in relation to the local ecology of for-profit and public organizations, and within this arena they may wield less power, may not have access to opportunities to participate in local decision-making processes, and may not have the resources to do so because they themselves are in "survival mode." Their position on participation thus has the potential to be paradoxical. That is, participation is likely to be a value that is embraced in the abstract; however, CBOs may view "learning" through participation as a luxury they cannot afford.

Research Questions

We use the framework to explore the following questions in each of the case study organizations: What are internal influences on organizational decision-making? How do they affect the decision-making process? Is there a culture that encourages staff and volunteer participation in decision-making related (1) to the vision, mission, and goals of the organization and (2) related to their own work? How are the organizational decision-making structures, processes, cultures, and practices related to organizations' ability to effect change at both the individual and community levels? Do the organization's decision making practices contribute to the organization's capacity through individual and OL, and increased employee morale, ownership, and accountability?

Project Background and Methods

The present case studies are part of an exploratory project using mixed-methods to study nonprofit and voluntary organizations as settings for individual, organizational, and community development and learning. The setting for this

study is a mid-sized, Southern US city. Faculty, graduate students, and three undergraduate service-learning classes participated in planning and data collection in three separate phases over a 2-year period (2002–2004). Phase One resulted in the compilation, using various local service directories and other sources, of a database of every community-based, nonprofit human service, volunteer, and member organization throughout the city ($n = 2,361$). The research team inductively analyzed the purpose and clientele of all the organizations and proceeded to categorize them into ten types: social/family/senior services, youth/recreational, faith-based, school-based, neighborhood, immigrant/international, environmental protection/community development, political/advocacy, labor, and philanthropic/arts/cultural. In Phase Two of the project, 270 of those organizations were selected and surveyed to measure basic organizational parameters, activities, use of volunteers, and individual and OL goals, if any. Five categories of learning goals emerged: goals related to (1) skills, task, or attitudes; (2) the organization's content area or mission; (3) the organization's operation or functioning; (4) civic or political learning; and (5) lifelong learning.

In Phase Three of the study, the results of the survey and recommendations from the project's Community Advisory Board, made up of leaders and middle managers representing each of the various organizational types plus several at-large members from local government and the university, were used to select 16 organizations, stratified by organizational type, for in-depth, qualitative case studies. Case study organization selection criteria included: (1) selection of at least one organization from all but one of the 10 identified types of non-profit organizations (arts/cultural/philanthropic organizations were excluded as less oriented toward community change, a main focus of the larger project); (2) inclusion of at least one exemplar organization from each category which showed potential characteristics of organizational learning; (3) contrasting organizations within types (e.g., a Conservative as well as Progressive church). Exemplars were recognized as those who noted in the survey having learning goals for volunteers or were known by Community Advisory Board members as being high functioning and as valuing volunteer learning.

The 16 existing case studies are based primarily on content analysis of in-depth, semi-structured interviews of 38 leaders and participants, and secondarily on field notes and reflections of brief, student service-learning participant observations. Student volunteer experiences in each organization varied but typically two or more students spent at least 20 h in direct service activities, planning meetings, and/or data collection for the organization. For each organization, up to four participants (no more than two in any given role of leader, staff, volunteer, or board member) were interviewed. The interview protocol (available on request) included a series of open-ended questions which were identical across all interviews and organizations and were used to structure the following case studies. Each one began with the professional background of the respondent, the organization and its goals. We then tried to assess the structure, decision-making processes, and opportunities for learning in each organization through a series of questions on who participated in decision-making and how focusing on organizational goal-setting, efforts to inform or influence a government official or local business about an issue, organizational crises or critical needs, and new programs or activities. Each of these root questions was followed by a series of probes inquiring about specific examples, problem solving, and decision-making processes, action steps and methods, and volunteer involvement. Each case study will follow this general structure although the salience of each question and response varied across organizations.

Interviews were tape recorded and transcribed for coding. Interview coding occurred in three stages. In step one, the seven collaborators on the project used an open coding process to establish emergent themes and categories. We organized categories based on a multi-level framework developed by Peterson and Zimmerman (2004) of intra-, inter-, and extra-organizational themes. Within these themes we established micro-categories. Our qualitative analytical approach is eclectic, drawing on elements of phenomenology (by providing direct quotations), as well as critical, post-positivist and constructivist, or interpretive, epistemologies (Guba and Lincoln 1994). To establish inter-coder agreement, we engaged in a process in which coders rated interviews independently, then together as a group, challenging each other's interpretations and coming to a shared understanding of terms. Once the coding scheme was established, each of the remaining interviews was assigned to two coders.

We have selected four of the 16 organizations to present as contrasting illustrative case studies: a local affiliate of a national youth development organization, a grassroots faith-based social action coalition, a neighborhood association which at the time of data collection was growing into a funded social service organization, and a large faith-based human service agency. The first organization operates city-wide. The other three operate in low-to-moderate-income neighborhoods. All names are pseudonymous.

Four Organizational Case Studies

Youth Central

Youth Central, a local affiliate of a national youth development organization, has focused on promoting individual change as a means of building stronger healthier

communities throughout its 100 year history. It offers at-risk youth educational, life skills, and recreational programs throughout the city at six neighborhood sites. At the time of our data collection, the CEO had served in the position for almost 3 years, following the 20 year tenure of the previous leader. The organization has since undergone another leadership change. The picture that emerges from the data is of an organization that retains a largely hierarchical structure and top-down management style, has limited learning capacity, and is struggling to survive in era of increased competition for funding.

In the interview data, the organization's ongoing financial crisis emerged as a recurring focus of decision-making behavior. The top-down internal organizational structure reflects its own relationship with its umbrella organization, which controls many decisions related to the organization's mission, goals, and programming. This type of structure removes the opportunity, particularly for frontline staff members and volunteers of Youth Central, to participate in decision making and creates a culture of one-way communication. The result is that very little exchange of ideas and information happens between levels of the organization. Staff members reported being informed about changes made during staff meetings, but indicated they had not been asked for input or involved in decisions being made.

The relationship between Youth Central's decision-making culture, structures, and process and opportunities for learning are exemplified in interview accounts of its approach to managing ongoing financial problems. The fiscal crisis Youth Central was experiencing at the time of our interviews was precipitated by the unexpectedly high enrollments in the organization's summer programs. The evidence suggests that the strategies and processes related to participation in decision making (PDM) led to short-term solutions but did little to build organizational capacity to address the problem of long-term financial stability. The decision-making cycle ultimately reinforced the crisis.

The leadership adopted a strategy of cutting back on staff and programming as a way of managing the immediate crisis. According to a frontline staff member, the CEO implemented a freeze on all non-essential spending.

> … Our big problem is fundraising because you know we're non-profit so we just get whatever people give us. And staffing is really hard too because we basically have to work on volunteers… We were told not to spend money until you have to, unless you absolutely have to. They cut back…just told us to make sure the kids are gone by a certain (time)… that way we can turn (everything) off…lights and stuff like that. But…usually we're told you can't spend money… like (a) hiring freeze.

The CEO and a board member who were interviewed confirmed the staff member's account but portrayed the current situation as a short-term flare-up of a more chronic funding problem common not only to Youth Central but to human service organizations generally. The CEO's short-term decision-making strategy, however, appears directly at odds with Youth Central's philosophy and goals.

> And the financial issue is mostly around being sure that we are able to attract the quality staff members that we need to make things happen. The…program model is very staff intensive. The real success comes from the kids being influenced and developed by their relationships with our staff members. So we've got to find the right kind of people who have the energy and the drive…to make this happen (Youth Central CEO).

Moreover, the leadership seemed unaware of the impact of the short-term strategy on current program goals, staff, or the long-term agenda of building program and financial capacity. According to the CEO the short-term crisis was partially resolved by a generous gift from a board member; however, this reprieve did little to address to longer-term issue of securing greater financial stability for Youth Central. Here, the leadership identified three interrelated strategies: (1) focusing on board development as a way to increase the endowment, (2) improving program outcome evaluation, and (3) investing resources into a development position. Each of these strategies has been followed by the development of new organizational structures and processes at the leadership and board levels but not at the staff level. For example, according to the board member, Youth Central's relatively small endowment can be attributed to organization's historically low visibility with potential donors in the community. To address the problem, the board and leadership team made the decision to form a marketing sub-committee. The CEO also identified increasing the endowment as a strategy for creating greater financial stability but linked the issue more directly with board membership.

Board development is also linked to the second identified strategy of improving the process of collecting and reporting program outcomes. According to the staff member, the way the CEO has pursued this strategy has influenced the nature of programming.

> … The administration always wants stuff to show…like they're…constantly going out and getting money, and they want to show work that the kids have done. Like they feel the board members are more likely to get money if they saw what they did. So… they sometimes tell us what to do.

The main audience of such program outcomes, according to the CEO, is the board and other potential donors.

A final strategy articulated was the decision to invest organizational resources into a development position. The CEO indicated that this move reflected the leadership's recognition of the need to pursue alternative forms of funding (e.g., government grants). However, this strategy appeared secondary to the organization's dependence on board initiatives to secure funds. In approaching the short-term crisis and long-term problem of financial security, leadership did not view staff or volunteers as resources for decision-making and did not seek input from staff or program volunteers or include them in any way in the decision-making process. According to the CEO, "The line staff that are in there every day working with the kids, they are so busy with day to day things that it is hard for them to think about any long-term situations." The result is that staff members remain largely uninformed about the how decisions are made in the organization. The leader's narrow framing of staff roles, although from one perspective protective of the high job demands, has undermined staff engagement in reflection, collaborations, and ongoing cross level communication and limited the opportunity for both adaptive or *single-loop* learning and generative or *double-loop* learning. This has led to low morale, little ownership of decisions, and high turnover among frontline staff. This has diminished organization's capacity and its ability to provide programming grounded in the type of personal relationships that are at the core of Youth Central's program theory.

The apparent conundrum that Youth Central finds itself in is that financial imperatives rather than program goals drive decision making. The organizational culture in which leadership perceives the board as the main vehicle for decision-making has contributed to low levels of PDM among staff and created a disconnect between the leadership and the staff. The CEO sees the board as representing the community; however, analysis suggests that the largely white male board does not reflect the demographic served. Finally, no evidence emerged from the data to suggest that the new structures developed to address the long-term financial problems were being supported by new processes to capture, communicate or embed learning in organizational memory.

Community Faith Network

Community Faith Network (CFN) draws participants from nearly seventy churches and other community groups across the city. Since 1993 CFN's mission has been to work on behalf of local interests in order to "come together to improve the community." In recent years the organization has focused on a number of community issues, including pressuring local school boards to repair sub-standard facilities, working to improve opportunities and access to low income housing, and expanding a health care safety net. In these and other ways, CFN works for sustainable systemic change in the community. As one CFN leader put it

> The overall goal is to be an advocate for justice, to be an organization that brings faith-based groups together to have a collective voice in the public arena, to encourage citizens to be engaged in the life of the community, the decision-making of the community, to ensure that people that have not previously been at the places where decisions are being made in the city are there and their voices are heard. And we teach them principles of organization so that the voices that are heard can have power.

Reliance on a small budget strengthens the value of volunteers within the organization and ensures, in some ways, that the priorities of the community are reflected in the work of CFN. "Oh if there wasn't volunteers", one member remarked "we wouldn't be able to operate." But the relationship between CFN and its volunteers is not a one way street, its reciprocal in that the network benefits from volunteer involvement and, in turn, volunteers have opportunities to learn and participate in the organization across a wide array of meeting venues, including research, leadership, and strategy meetings, and consultation with public officials or agencies.

One member described CFN as a supportive learning environment for several reasons. "We have a lot of face-to-face stuff. Meet regularly, talk a lot. So when something's hard or something looks problematic for us, we don't try to leave somebody out there facing it by themselves or trying to solve it by themselves. We do try to do a lot of good stuff… We force people to get feedback and talk." In addition to ongoing one to one conversations, a 10 day training offered by the National Network of which CFN is a member is available for more involved members. This provides an important opportunity for volunteers to learn about the principles of organizing. Many who serve on leadership committees have attended the training. "I think we had a dozen or so local people into that training," one member remarked, "and so that really boosted our learning as a group." This participation translates into individual learning in two of the three ways outlined by Katz and Kahn (1978), by encouraging responsibility and ownership and leading to a greater sense of empowerment. Self-directed learning is, in contrast, often discouraged.

The capacity for self-directed learning is limited in part by the structure of the national network's organizing model which follows the tradition of Saul Alinsky's work (Alinsky 1971). As such, the organizing structure is in

some ways hierarchical and at certain crucial decision making junctures, undemocratic. Indeed, while the organization itself is quite diverse and may draw on a pool of up to two to three thousand volunteers from across the city, the group's process is tightly scripted and organized according to the principles of the National Network. Many of the basic beliefs participants espouse mirror the principles espoused by the originator of the organization, Saul Alinsky. Ultimately, the issues addressed are scrutinized closely by the leadership team, the strategy team, the clergy caucus, a CFN-paid organizer, and leaders from the National network. One CFN leader describes the importance of the seven member leadership team as they sift through issues raised by members at house meeting held every couple of years.

> Inevitably, the leadership team has fairly strong input …they'll take ideas (from house meetings) and bat them around with the organizer ….. And the organizer, who supposedly is the more experienced and has had more extensive training, (will) say "the national network will never go with this……. they would ordinarily recommend you do it this way." So there will be tension in the process like that. It will eventually come back to the large group for an affirmation, a literal vote.

Another describes the influential role played by the national organization representative:

> Our organizer comes over and meets with us from time to time… he doesn't vote in our meetings but has pretty substantial influence. So it's the National's influence just filtered through the one guy that affects our decision. No question. He gets up in the meetings and (may tell us) "you all are way off. You need to shift this way." …it doesn't mean we'll just [follow him], exactly, but he's a pretty powerful presence.

Some experience tensions between the hierarchical leadership structure and local participants' desire to participate in decision making, "… one subterranean thing going on is… that people think…. that we're not quite democratic enough …that some leaders seem a little too autonomous or that they're (input is) a little too strong" (CFN leader). Another explains "the more interesting dynamic of the group how that process works, the decision process. The thing we don't have… is mass input at mass meetings." Some have complained these low levels of PDM limit the types of issues that CFN addresses. Others have suggested that the process itself tends to indirectly discourage participation from members of less affluent congregations.

In short, while volunteers are the backbone of the organization and in many ways have a wide array of

opportunity to provide input and reflection, that input may or may not be aired publicly or lead to action or work on issues. In a sense, CFN effectively links its membership and trains its participants toward a positive variation of "survival learning" that is necessary for effective participation in the public political sphere. As one member remarked in a restatement of a National Network principle, CFN doesn't "take on any issues we can't win". The pursuit of issues, however, depends to an important degree on the decisions of other volunteer run leadership committees and the guidance and direction provided by the National network representative.

The control of public dialogue and debate characteristic of this form of organizing, allows the group to be highly effective in achieving their aims, albeit with limitations on their capacity for adaptive and generative learning as an organization. This intensive focus on effective strategy aimed at taking on important, though winnable, issues can and does limit the group's capacity to appear accessible to all learners and to engage collectively in organizational learning. These tensions have received some degree of dialogue and reflection from the leaders and participants alike. The recent hire of a new organizer will likely lead to a continuation of these discussions and, to a limited degree, mediation of some of the memberships concerns. On the whole, however, CFN's adherence to its national model limits its capacity for structural organizational change. It demonstrates high potential for individual role and issue-related learning; but has lower potential for individual managerial and organizational learning.

United Neighbors

Formed in the 1960s as a grassroots response to urban renewal, United Neighbors today focuses on organizing residents of a historically black neighborhood to take action on important issues facing the community. In the 1970s the organization died out until its re-emergence in the early 1990s when business interests again looked to expand further into the neighborhood. Under new leadership, United Neighbors began organizing residents to work on this and other issues such as crime, education, and affordable housing. With the limited federal and local grant funding available to them as a grass-roots neighborhood organization, United Neighbors' structure and function is largely influenced by this struggle to secure funding. United Neighbors' culture exemplifies PDM—in terms of organizational focus and structure—but not in relation to key strategic decisions and actions. The lack of involvement of volunteers in key decisions and actions may limit the capacity for individual empowerment and OL, which in turn may limit the potential for transformative change at the individual and community level.

There are three main influences on the decision making of United Neighbors: (1) funding, including current level of funding and the types of projects that are funded; (2) organizational history, including values and culture; and (3) the expressed needs of community members. Like Youth Central and St. Daniel's, the biggest external threat facing United Neighbors at the time of data collection was a lack of funding. These limit the organization's capacity to retain staff, organize residents, and execute programs. They also shape the organization's approach to PDM. The ongoing threat of funding loss forces the organization to spend more energy focusing on fundraising rather than organizing or initiating actions to promote community development. The constant struggle with funding places the organization in a state of maintenance.

United Neighbors' organizational history has played an important role in its decision-making culture and processes. Among the founding members was a prominent neighborhood pastor who played a pivotal role in both organizing efforts and organizational actions. Currently, this pastor is a key member and one of its most recognizable voices. His legacy of leading the charge against development forces continues to exert a strong influence on positions the organization takes on certain issues. With his charisma and long standing record of fighting for the community, he has become a spokesperson of sorts and as a result the organization's decisions that are largely shaped by his expressed position. The current president, also a prominent neighborhood pastor, wields a significant influence and has a close relationship with the organization's original leader. Together these two pastors represent a unified front. Their collective voice strongly influences how decisions are made and perhaps unintentionally limits more broad-based PDM.

However, the organization does have a history of soliciting the input of its volunteer members. The organization's current structure and culture reflect the value members place on PDM. For example, members identify and vote on which issues the organization will address and then volunteer for working groups that research specific community issues. The findings and recommendations of working groups are reported back to the rest of the organization. Board members are also elected by the general membership body on an annual basis. Most decisions regarding strategy and action, however, are made in a top-down fashion by board members or other key leaders and do not involve widespread PDM. After being informed of an important issue by volunteer members, leadership will often devise a strategy and advocate on behalf of the organization. In some cases, positions taken and decisions made by board members do not entirely reflect the input and sentiment of the organization's members.

For example, an important issue at the time of data collection was the conversion of an industrial property for commercial use, which exposed a divide in both the community at large and within United Neighbors. Some residents opposed commercial usage while others, including the board of United Neighbors, publicly advocated for bringing some commercial uses into the community. The following quote is from the former leader, pastor, and current influential member:

> I think one issue that has surfaced recently is disunity in the community. There are honest disagreements and there's grandstanding both that goes on about what to do with that (industrial) property, which is being sold. What use to make of it has aroused a bit of controversy and disagreement within the community. (United Neighbors) takes the position that we need some kind of diversified development there since urban renewal way back took so much of the retail away from the community… four or five individuals [who are opposed to commercial re-use]…– some of them have relatives who live close to the property and are understandably very sensitive about the prospect of blasting or something like that…(On how the decision was made regarding what position to take) Well I just…we (the board) reached a position and we've publicized our position.

The decision was made exclusively by the board of directors without any direct input from organizational members even though some did not agree with the position. In this case, there was no direct input from volunteers or even staff as to what position the organization would take on this issue. This example may not be indicative of how every strategic decision is made but it is clear that United Neighbors does not have the capacity for inclusiveness at some levels. There are many opportunities for PDM for volunteer members; however, these are limited to short-term decisions that focus on single issues as opposed to strategies to produce outcomes.

United Neighbors has an organizational culture that creates and encourages PDM yet does not possess the structure to integrate members' voices at all decision-making levels. This results in moderate potential for individual and organizational learning. The current organizational practice may lead to a high level of effectiveness in meeting some goals, but the somewhat exclusive nature of strategic decisions and actions translates to a loss of potential to fully engage members in OL. In other words, United Neighbors may be successful in some of its community level goals–preserving home ownership for neighborhood residents or distributing scholarships for youth–but it is currently not tapping the full learning potential, of deeper member involvement. Including members in strategic actions and governmental

processes could add another level of power to influence change at the community level. The strategies and actions that United Neighbors use in order to meet its goals involve advocating a position to elected officials. Sometimes volunteer members are involved in this process—as in testifying at public hearings—but oftentimes it is only leadership that is involved in discussions with government officials. Therefore, volunteer members are not empowered to learn about and participate in the city government process, and the organization misses out on the power of a large number of voices advocating the desired position. By establishing structures and processes that dictate greater participation and communication on all organizational levels, including strategic interactions with government, United Neighbors could potentially be more effective in empowering its members to transform the way the government interacts with the community.

St. Daniel's Community Organization

Founded over ninety years ago as a faith-based charitable mission, St. Daniel's Community Organization provides services and programs to the working poor of an old industrial neighborhood. Its mission of serving this geographic neighborhood has remained constant throughout its history; however, how this is done has changed based on community needs. St. Daniel's provides an example of an organization in which there is (1) a culture of PDM, and (2) well-developed structures and processes to maximize the likelihood of effective decision making and to build individual and organizational capacity through learning.

Like Youth Central, maintaining long-term financial viability while providing for the community's short term needs is an ever-present theme in interviews with St. Daniel's members. Yet, in contrast to Youth Central, the primary focus is on maintenance and growth of programs rather than crisis. In addition, community needs rather than financial imperatives dominate decision-making. This theme of PDM being tied directly to the mission emerged as key in the interview data. This aspect of St. Daniel's history has led to a culture in which an ongoing relationship and dialogue with the community is vital to meeting the organization's mission.

> This agency has always been of the mindset that we are of the community, (not) a separate entity… Being a partner with the community, assisting and empowering them to meet their needs themselves has been a valuable asset for us. (It's) helped us sustain and build stronger relationships with residents.

This "mindset" of partnering provides an alternative to the traditional expert-client relationship. Here community members and other volunteers are seen as resources bringing experience, knowledge of the community, and other expertise to the common project of meeting the needs of the community. This value is foundational to the culture of participation and learning.

The relationship between St. Daniel's decision-making culture, structures and process, and opportunities for learning is further exemplified in interview accounts of its approach to addressing community needs while struggling to garner the financial resources necessary to pay for programs. Although very few examples of short-term crises surfaced from the data, St. Daniel's staff members describe one in which they faced a financial shortfall to support a gift program during Christmas. How they handled this situation is telling.

> We brainstormed as a staff… and with our volunteers… (We told them) here are the things the staff is discussing… here are the things we've thought of… please send us back your suggestions ideas thoughts… Anything you might be able to do… And folks emailed us back saying, "well I am a member of a book club and I can perhaps approach them…" They came back to us with a lot of ideas and suggestions and ultimately we were able to serve all of the families… it was a true partnership.

Like Youth Central's short-term financial crisis, St. Daniel's was ultimately resolved by a large donation from a board member. However, the process at St. Daniel's involved wide participation of others, led to the identification of potential resources, and contributed to a sense of collective efficacy and empowerment among leadership, staff, and volunteers. In this way St. Daniel's illustrates Senge's (1990) definition of a learning organization in that the process was integral to "expanding its capacity to create its future" (p. 14) thereby going beyond mere survival and adaptation. The crisis thus became an opportunity for generative learning.

St. Daniel's long-term strategy of creating financial stability focuses on building a broad resource base of volunteers, partnerships, and funding. The practice of including volunteers in key decisions goes back as early as the 1960s according to a long-time volunteer.

> The Settlement Guild (was established as) an arm of the board to find out what the needs were and what we might do to help. So we did a survey of the neighborhood which indicated that daycare was the prime need… And so the way we met that need was with the St. Daniel's Second-Hand Store.

The store still runs as a volunteer-led concern and provides funding for St. Daniel's programs. More recently, the organization has become more strategic about creating explicit structures to support volunteers and expand this resource base. For example, the decision to hire a full-time

volunteer coordinator who matches volunteer interests and talents with community and organizational needs has made St. Daniel's a volunteer-wealthy agency. The volunteer coordinator plays a central role in training and integrating volunteers into the organizational network.

The data were also replete with stories illustrating the staff, volunteer, and community involvement in decision-making and highlighting numerous structures (e.g., task-forces, committees, email, surveys) that the organization used to solicit input and communicate with key stake-holders about decisions. The following process involving a decision to continue a program is typical:

> We started off with lots of conversations with a task force that made up of leaders in the community. And we also had family resource center advisory council that was involved made up of people that live in the neighborhood and our council person and different people. So we had a lot of bodies that were really studying it to see what the viability is to make sure (St. Daniel's staff member).

The language suggests the value placed on learning and buy-in of both staff and community members and illustrates the strategy of seeking input at all organizational levels.

The culture of viewing volunteers, community members, and partners as organizational resources also impacts decisions on how to most effectively deploy these resources to further the organization's mission. Often volunteers or community members are strategically recruited for their expertise, experience or connections. The way board members are selected demonstrates this strategic approach.

> (The organization) was starting to develop tools and techniques that allowed leadership and others instrumental in the agency to look at the capabilities we needed for board members. You know, whether we needed somebody with an accounting background or a service background or a program background or whatever it was…

The organization also recruits volunteers to fill specific roles.

> so when we need new programs… and we know we really want to do it and we know we it's not in our budget… we'll just wait around… we're going to keep recruiting for a volunteer, and eventually we'll find the right person.

Partnerships with service providers, faith-based and volunteer organizations, funding agencies, and local neighborhood organizations are likewise pursued strategically in terms of whether these relationships will meet the specific needs of community residents.

St. Daniel's mission of meeting identified needs of this particular community provides a clear focus for organizational decision making. Clearly-defined organizational goals based on these needs have led to success in creating strategic partnerships to fulfill those goals, funding, and community participation. The culture of broad participation contributes to the sense of "we-ness" and has led expansive definition of organizational membership, which appears to go well beyond paid staff. This has created greater ownership of and responsibility for both the process and outcomes of decision making. Well-developed structures designed to enhance communication among organizational members and between the organization and the community promote effective decision making. Finally, both the PDM culture and the supportive structures have provided the foundation for individual learning and OL, both of which contribute to St. Daniel's long-term health.

Synthesis and Discussion

An organizational learning lens provides one way to understand broadly the role of participation in decision-making, and as demonstrated in the preceding cases studies, is a theoretical framework that community researchers and practitioners can use as a heuristic to guide inquiry into community organizational settings. For this paper we selected four case studies that illustrate some of the ways in which contextual factors can enhance or constrain learning and effectiveness in different types of CBOs operating in external contexts of varying similarity in the same city; the findings are not generalizable yet begin to suggest patterns that merit further systematic inquiry. Taken together they begin to create a complex and dynamic picture of the potential for individual and organizational learning in these settings and for the development of processes, practices, and structures that foster critical reflection, collaboration, and effective communication. They also highlight some key differences between for-profit and community-based non-profit organizations related to structural arrangements and mission that in some important ways both challenge and potentially facilitate learning in CBOs. In the following discussion we analyze the ways in which organizational form, energy, and culture in these community-based contexts influence decision making, learning and ultimately each organization's capacity to carry out its change mission.

Organizational Form

The four organizations studied represent a range of organizational forms. As human service organizations, Youth Central and St. Daniel's, sit at one end of the spectrum,

reflecting more traditional bureaucratic systems with individuals occupying clearly defined roles within departmental structures. Predictably, at Youth Central, where the machine metaphor captures the organization's hierarchical and top-down decision-making practices, little evidence surfaced of learning at either the individual or organizational level. Although similar at first glance in terms of age and type of organization, the data suggest that St. Daniel's had over time adopted a more horizontal team-based structure with well-developed mechanisms for cross-organizational collaboration and communication. In this way, the organizational form was more consistent with the learning organization ideal.

CFN and United Neighbors, as grassroots organizations with very few paid staff, represent an alternative organizational form. Within the spectrum of grassroots organizations, CFN has adopted an organizational form more typical of traditional community organizing that is made up of a hierarchical team-based structure in which roles are well-defined. This type of organizational form is based on a relatively inflexible structure through which ritualized organizational activity is carried out. In this way the organization's activity boundaries and mission are carefully prescribed, reducing ambiguity about roles and processes. United Neighbors operates more loosely. Although it has a board and executive structure, other members fulfill roles through committees as needs arise. It appears that organizational practices, processes, and structures are emergent and ideally based on consensus among members. As grassroots organizations with few paid staff, both CFN and United Neighbors face the challenge of developing the mechanisms for embedding learning into each organizations institutional memory. CFN's structure facilitates communication and collaboration but does not challenge members to reflect on the adequacy of the structure itself in promoting the organization's mission. In this way, it promotes individual but not OL. United Neighbors, while boasting of close to a 40 year history, has relied on particular individuals (i.e., founding leaders) to sustain its efforts and has not succeeded in building a sustainable infrastructure and continues to have limited organizational capacity. It is the absence of enduring structures for full member participation in decision-making that make it difficult for the organization to engage in generative learning at the organizational level and further puts it at risk because of its strong public identification with only a few key members.

Although organizational form poses unique challenges to learning, participation, and decision-making, our analysis finds that perceived membership boundaries in the organizations studied were equally important. Unlike in for-profit or public organizations where boundaries are relatively clear (i.e., who is a member and who is not),

community-based organizations are often much more loosely held together. At one end, some organizations rely solely on volunteers, whereas others have complex mix of paid, part-time, and volunteer, and community members. To complicate this, in some community-based organizations staff members are paid for by other organizations and are technically not a part of the organization where they physically carry out their work. How membership is construed within the context can set the tone for who is seen as a resource for decision-making and who is invited to participate.

We found that CBO boundaries are constructed locally and membership for the purpose of decision-making is not necessarily defined by whether an individual is a paid staff member or by the member's role in the organization. Daniel's and Youth Central, although most similar in form, provide starkly contrasting pictures of organizational boundaries. St. Daniel's inclusive definition of membership—ranging from staff to clients to volunteers—augmented its organizational capacity for learning. All members were viewed as potential resources for problem solving and learning, and numerous examples emerged from the data of how members at different levels participated in decision-making. The leadership at Youth Central, by contrast, saw even front line employees as temporary members, and as a result, did not view them as resources for problem solving or include them in decision-making. This practice constrained learning both for individuals and for the organization as a whole. Like St. Daniel's, Community Faith Networks (CFN) had an expansive definition of membership viewing members as resources for identifying problems and executing organizational actions and in this way is very participatory. However, its rigid top-down structure limited who could participate in decision-making. Finally, United Neighbors, although valuing participation and organizing itself as a democratic grassroots organization, often failed to be inclusive in practice. The core group of long-time leaders had a clear stake and influence in the organization, while the outer boundaries appear to be more fluid with less commitment from members not on the board. The two organizations—St. Daniel's and Community Faith Networks—that had more expansive definitions of membership both espoused participation as a core value and provided more opportunities for participation. They also were more effective in meeting their respective individual and community change goals and members reported higher levels of commitment and satisfaction with their experience in the organization.

Organizational Energy

In our analysis we found that availability of organizational energy (i.e., the level and nature of energy) had an impact

on how each organization engaged in decision making. We propose that during any given period organizations operate out of one of three orientations—crisis, maintenance, or growth—that reflect and drive an organization's short-term goals and actions. These orientations loosely align with the work of Bruch and Ghoshal (2003) who argue that organizations operate in four energy zones that encompasses the intensity and quality of organizational energy: (1) *passion* (high intensity, positive quality), (2) *comfort* (low intensity, positive quality), (3) *aggression* (high intensity, negative quality), and (4) resignation (low intensity, negative quality). Crisis then may be manifested as resignation of members or aggression, when survival is threatened. The comfort zone would be consistent with organization oriented toward maintenance. Finally, organizations with a growth orientation operate out of the passion zone. Among the organizations studied, St. Daniel's was the only one that had an active growth orientation and operated in the *passion zone* in which positive emotional energy is directed toward shared organizational goals (Bruch and Ghoshal 2003). The organization's growth orientation and positive energy provided conditions ripe for collaboration, effective communication, and shared reflection. In this way, St. Daniel's stands in contrast to the other three organizations which all appeared to be struggling to maintain or in perpetual crisis. This raises a fundamental question about the structural constraints to capacity building and learning in CBOs. At Youth Central reoccurring financial problems and changes in community needs made it difficult to focus on anything but the current crisis. Although the leader's energy was high, the organization overall appeared to be in the *resignation zone*, with frontline staff, in particular, reporting low morale and energy. CFN and United Neighbors, the two grassroots organizations, although appearing much more "organizationally fragile", both struggling at the time of data collection to maintain any paid staff, had more positive and higher levels of energy. This suggests that in organizations in which membership is completely voluntary and linked to a sense of civic responsibility, the value of participation embodied in membership may enhance the potential for learning. In the case of CFN, a strong, fairly rigid structure institutionalized participatory practices and involvement even in the face of financial instability and individual learning was fostered; whereas at United Neighbors, the relatively positive energy did not seem to have the same result. For the three organizations, ongoing crises in large part determined the nature of decisions that were on the table, the level of urgency attached to them, and members' energy in relation to decision-making events related to solving these crises. We found that when operating out of a crisis mode, these organizations engaged in "survival" behavior that at best allowed them to adapt to current circumstances but did

little to build learning capacity for the long run or a culture PDM, and in the process, particularly at Youth Central and United Neighbors fostered resentment or low morale.

Organizational Culture

In the case studies we observed two key tensions that characterize the relationship between participation and decision-making. The first relates to external versus internal empowerment. All four of the organizations espoused the goal of empowering community members through participation in programs or community actions, yet the data suggest that some leaders were less cognizant of the role staff or volunteer empowerment through PDM plays in building a healthy organization. The clearest case of this was manifested at Youth Central where the organization's leader promoted PDM only among the highest levels of managerial staff and seemed to have little understanding of the impact this had practice on frontline staff members, who reported that they knew little about how organizational decisions were made. A second related tension concerns the need for efficiency and streamlining of processes not viewed as essential on the one hand and the need to invest in the long-term future of the organization on the other. As previously noted, the case studies provide a window into each culture related to decision making and showed that some organizational leaders primarily viewed decision making in an instrumental way as a proximal event. Others, while treating it as a proximal event, also viewed it more systemically as contributing to the organization's learning and development. Both CFN and St. Daniel's recognized the benefits of investing in members and understood that member's PDM as essential to the survival and long term health of the organization and by extension the communities they served. These leaders were aware that by encouraging PDM within the organization, they were also potentially furthering the empowerment mission externally within the community by modeling participation in their own processes. However, members at both CFN and United Neighbors reported that when the espoused values of participation and empowerment were not enacted by the organization, they felt disempowered. This resulted in some members withdrawing, ultimately undermining each organization's mission.

A PDM culture may be associated with greater organizational capacity in terms of structures and processes that promote human resource development and learning as exemplified positively in the St. Daniel's case and negatively in the Youth Central case. The other two cases point to noteworthy exceptions, however. Democratic decision-making structures and processes may not result in a widespread culture of learning and effective participatory management if key personnel and strategy decisions are

made autocratically; i.e., it depends on PDM being applied consistently, especially including decisions that are meaningful and important to members (Community Faith Network). And a culture of PDM may foster individual learning but, without enough organizational capacity, may not lead to OL and development (United Neighbors). These two cases are the most grassroots-oriented organizations among all 16 we studied, which suggests that these issues of organizational culture, structures, and processes for decision-making and learning present particularly complex challenges for organizations with very horizontal structures and few paid staff. Further, it is in the context of grassroots organizations that attention to learning and development can have its greatest impact outside the organization. Member learning within the organization, especially civic learning, can potentially translate into outcomes at the community level, as informed and empowered participants may turn this knowledge into action and change in their communities. With this in mind, grassroots organizations can benefit from institutionalized roles, structures, and processes especially when they foster reflection and facilitate communication and collaboration. The particular mission and goals of the organization still influence whether the focus of change is at the individual or community level, however. Even an organization with strong organizational capacity and a climate of PDM and learning (e.g., St. Daniel's) is unlikely to address underlying community-level causes of problems if that is not their defined mission. That is why it is important that OL in the community and nonprofit organizational context leads staffs, boards, and leaders to expand their mission, goals, and strategies to address extra-individual root causes, at least where those causes apply but are being ignored. This can only happen, however, when and where funding sources and other institutional supports permit, if not facilitate, such shifts.

Conclusion and Future Directions

This study presents the development and initial application of a theoretical framework to help us understand the impact of organizational context, learning and PDM on community-based non-profits, both internally and externally. This topic is vitally relevant to community psychology, organizational studies, and especially to the intellectual and practical ties between the two fields (Boyd and Angelique 2002; Keys and Frank 1987; Shinn and Perkins 2000). Using a comparative case study approach allowed us to examine the complex system of relations that govern decision making in these specific contexts. Our analysis of these organizations found patterns suggesting that internal organizational decision-making norms and capacity influence not only the mission and goals of the organization, but also, importantly, learning,

morale, commitment, and accountability at both individual and organizational levels. Based on the evidence, we argued that broadly speaking these, in turn, were linked to the effectiveness of the organization in terms of individual and community change outcomes.

Limitations

Although the interview and observational data support the use of the proposed theoretical model in a broad sense, the study is not without limitations. First, although we have accurately presented selected organizational voices, this was neither a representative nor completely phenomenological study. Thus, our findings should be understood as reflecting both the application of an organizational-learning-based "expert model" to the case study data and the researchers' ongoing understanding of the context based on observations and work in this community. We do not claim that the findings are generalizable and recognize the potential danger in applying general theory without consideration of the specific organizational context and current environmental conditions.

What we are suggesting is that community-based non-profit organizations are complex systems and this proposed framework offers parameters that community organizational researchers and practitioners can use to examine their own unique contexts. Second, as an "expert model" the proposed theoretical framework possesses heuristic value, yet does not provide direct pathways to practice. In this way our analysis and the OL literature provide only very general support for a relationship that links organizations with more PDM structures and processes and workplace climates that encourage open communication, innovation, and learning to higher participant satisfaction and goal attainment. This leaves many specific questions as to how researchers and practitioners can apply these ideas their specific contexts. For example, how much PDM by individuals does it take to enhance OL capacity? How much critical reflection, dialogue, and inquiry are enough? Neither current OL theory nor the case study findings based on participants' experiences in these organizational contexts provides specific practical direction for intervention.

Although based on a limited number of cases, this study illustrates substantial variation among nonprofit community organizations in their structural capacity for individual and OL and in their culture of decision-making and points to the need for research focused on understanding the specific mechanisms for building learning capacity that takes into account organizational form, energy, and culture. Although our focus in this study was on the internal influences on participation in decision-making, we believe that the external influences on CBOs such as identified community needs, umbrella organization relationships,

institutional norms and values, the regulatory and funding environments, and the local socio-political landscape in which these organizations work are equally important and fertile ground for future research. Particularly as CBOs begin to adopt strategies and practices of the for-profit sector (Weisbrod 1998), it is imperative for researchers and practitioners to understand these changes and how organizations navigate the potentially conflicting values of achieving efficiency in the near-term and working toward the longer-term aims of building healthy communities for the common good. CBOs continue to play a pivotal role in the ecology of community life in our most impoverished communities, often providing life supporting services, serving as the connection to the larger world, and representing the best hope for community change efforts. For these reasons research that helps us better understand CBOs as settings from which community change efforts emanate is not only a worthy but an essential enterprise.

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