Pragmatics of Community Organization

by Bill Lee

(Mississauga: CommonAct Press, 1999)

Reviewed by Barbara Loevinger Rahder

Embedded in a clear conceptual framework, Pragmatics of Community Organization is a practical, down-to-earth guide for community-based practice. The first section, "Conceptualizing Community Organizing Practice," begins with a brief history of community organizing, from Moses to Paulo Freire. Lee's pragmatic approach has developed out of these earlier traditions and his own experience. He debunks Social Darwinist and liberal humanist approaches to understanding poverty, including the ideologies underlying passive acceptance of global capitalism and its negative repercussions. Lee's approach views people in disadvantaged communities within the context of current political and economic neo-liberalism, and characterizes them as both victims and citizens. In other words, while certain communities are systematically discriminated against and impoverished by oppressive systems, people have rights and abilities that can be organized to produce coherent, collective action for progressive social change.

Lee formulates a critique of social planning that is particularly relevant to the work of community-based planners, and is reminiscent of some earlier critiques of advocacy planning. He notes that social planning is most often practiced at some distance from communities, as if communities were merely objects of study, groups of people and places to be researched and then represented in a larger policy arena. Rather than contending that social planners should work on a community's behalf, Lee's pragmatic approach proposes working with the community, much like "empowerment planners" in the United States. Obviously, the roles played by the community-based practitioner will be quite different from those of the traditional planner. Yet the core skills described by Lee—listening, information gathering, analysis, facilitation, and negotiation—are skills increasingly cited as important for today's planners.

The book's second section, "Phases of Community Organization," provides detailed advice about working with communities from the "pre-entry" to the final phase. This is the section in which Lee's many years of practical experience working with communities in Canada and abroad comes to the fore. For example, Lee emphasizes the importance of doing some preliminary background work in the pre-entry phase, prior to actual contact with the community. In particular, he suggests that the community practitioner learn about the history of the community and about political relations both within the community and between the community and the project funders. He argues that while this kind of preparation cannot eliminate surprises, it can limit unexpected behaviours and provide the practitioner with a foundation for understanding and discussing contentious issues in the community.

Lee goes on to establish principles for the subsequent phase of "Contact and Engagement," in order to guide the practitioner's initial contacts with the community. He explores issues of trust, representation, and the need for sensitivity to local conditions. At the end of this chapter, Lee comments on how this phase might feel to a beginning practitioner:

"Entering and beginning to connect meaningfully with people is a crucial element in the organizing process. It can also be one of the most confusing times in the project.... This is a bad news/good news situation.... There is strength in seeing ourselves as being at the beginning of a journey, one in which we will learn, and in which we shall become more deeply involved. At this point we are looking for people who wish to travel with us, and for things that will assist us along the road." (p. 93)

In fact, each chapter of Pragmatics of Community Organization combines practical advice about difficult situations with Lee's own calm and reassuring reflections. The chapter on "Community Analysis" describes analysis as a process of reflection and social learning. Lee emphasizes the importance of consensus, and outlines the steps involved in participatory research as a means of community analysis. He concludes that "social learning should become a habit" (p. 110). The chapter on "Organization Development" covers everything from meetings to funding. And the chapter on "Popular Action" describes ways in which members of the community can take responsibility and put new skills and confidence into action. This chapter also has helpful sections on how to use the media, and on principles guiding negotiations. Concluding chapters establish principles for evaluations and discuss the ways in which community-based projects might conclude— including celebrations of success, however limited it might be.

This book is particularly valuable because it is a unique integration of (1) a practical "how-to" guide for community-based work; (2) a radical perspective on social justice; and (3) a gentle, non-judgmental plea to keep listening to, reflecting on, and learning from the diverse communities in which we work. For planning students and practitioners who are interested in working with grassroots communities, there is no more important book to read and keep on hand for frequent reference.

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REMEmBR SAUL ALINSKY'S CLASSIC GUIDE TO community rebel-rousing, Rules for Radicals? Bill Lee's Pragmatics of Community Organization is an updated—and much more Canadian—approach to the same issue: how to work with grassroots communities to achieve empowerment and social justice. The book is a primer for social work students as well as for those who are just beginning to do community development work. It is also a valuable tool for community-based planners and for other, more experienced community practitioners.