A Critique of the Concepts of Community Organization and Community Development

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WHATEVER we feel to the contrary, definitions are a GOOD THING. A man of action who is only a man of action is a candidate for one or other of the various forms of psychological and physical incarceration which our society has developed over the years. It seems to be essential for people to feel that the world around them should make some sort of logical sense. Because of this we must 'know' why we do a particular action and how its results fit into what is going on in the world. Neither of these need to be objectively true or accurate provided that we think they are. That is, provided that the definitions which the individual holds of his actions and their consequences make sense to him. But man is also committed to rationality. Regardless of the fact that irrationality plays a part in stirring him to action, he is likely to recognise the need for rationality in matching up his aims and the consequences of his action.

If we make the entirely reasonable assumption that community organisers are human, we are also led to expect that they too will want to apply the canons of rationality to their perceptions of external reality. This means that they will be willing to subject their definitions of what they are doing to the test of rationality in the light of knowledge about its consequences.

The important thing to remember about definitions is that they are simply tools in the furtherance of values. If a particular definition of the community organiser's role, and its implicit perception of the social process, causes him to bring about social change of a kind which he would not condone, it is a bad definition. Similarly, if it discourages him from actions which would achieve his aims within his values, it is a bad one. For all these reasons an ongoing and permanently open discussion of major definitions in the field is a basic prerequisite of any area of research and practice. The term 'community organisation' has received a great deal of attention in the last decade and usage has clarified its meaning. However, from a sociological point of view, current definitions leave much to be desired in that they involve unsound analysis of the social process and misuse of sociological concepts.

1 All this, of course, carries the proviso that in most societies the individual's perceptions of the world around him must be fairly similar to those of his neighbours, otherwise they are likely to fall upon him and do him extreme physical or mental damage. They must also, of course, come reasonably close to concrete actuality.
Some Possible Approaches to the Term

What, then, is community organisation? We intend to deal with three ways in which this question might be answered. There are many other ways of doing so: for example, we could attempt to define it in terms of its effects upon the emotions of other people, or in terms of its value to society and so on. We wish to suggest that three approaches are likely to be the most fruitful for the time being – a sociological approach, a purely descriptive one and one which emphasises involvement in the life of the community.

A Sociological-Analytical Definition

Firstly, we wish to define community organisation as an aspect of the functioning of society. This means that we will have to describe the ways in which the activities of agencies for community organisation contribute to the functioning of society; and in using the word functioning, we must also include change, since change is a principal component of social life.

For our purposes, the most useful way of describing the structure of society involves the concept of 'social organisation'. This term relates to the level of agreement between the members of a society as to what their respective roles should be, what it is reasonable for each to expect from them and what each should contribute to them. In this light, the strength of social organisation in a society is a social fact which can be discovered by studying how far the members of the society are in agreement about the 'job specifications' of each other's roles and their expectations of the rewards and sacrifices which they entail. The community worker in advanced societies usually assumes that a basic aim of his work is to increase this level of social organisation, or, to put the same idea in terms of the feelings of individual members of society, to decrease the frictions, frustrations, resentments and deprivations in it.

With these two points in mind we can approach the job of defining the term 'community organisation' by attempting to construct a definition which describes it in terms of the social process involved. This kind of definition has two advantages. Firstly, it can provide a general umbrella under which specific sets of value-judgements may be made clear. This seems preferable to the inclusion of unexamined value-judgements. (The intention here is not to denigrate the holding of values as guides to action. On the contrary, the point is that they are too important to be left hidden behind a screen of objective-sounding phrases.) Secondly, it presents a definition in terms of the processes which the community organiser is specifically hoping to influence. If he is to be successful in working towards his goals, he must view the workings of the society from a broad, societal perspective even though the day to day requirements of his job may demand skills at the individual level. If, at the same time, he defines his job in terms of these societal perspectives, he is in the best position to evaluate the results of his actions.