

Will Pasley
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Prof. Lutz
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Brown Social Justice Activist Group Sustainability: An Ethnographic Inquiry

Brown University's image has been dominated by social justice activists since the institution of the New Curriculum in 1969. Activists have been a nearly constant feature of campus for the past 40 years and have been consistently trying to achieve positive change. While issues come and go, some groups have managed to remain in existence, while others have dwindled away or abruptly ceased to exist. Group sustainability varies greatly between groups, for numerous reasons. These reasons include the group dynamics, the relevancy of the group's issues, the motivations of the members, as well as the sense of community in the group. Meetings play a crucial role in the group and give insight into the techniques activists employ to recruit and maintain membership. Other activities have the advantage of creating institutional momentum, sparking the public's interest, and fomenting group cohesion. All of these factors affect the motivation of a group's membership. Indeed, the primary factor determining group sustainability seems to be the motivation of the membership, for the simple reason that if no one wants to be in a group, it will cease to exist.

Methods

The primary method used in this study is participant observation. For the period between April, 2006 and May, 2007 I have made a conscious effort to observe the activities of activist groups. I attended most meetings, social functions, and actions associated with several groups, including the newly founded Brown chapter of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), and Operation Iraqi Freedom: Brown's Anti-war Group (OIF). Both groups conducted one to two

meetings a week, with an action or social function scheduled every week by one group or the other. I observed several factors and their effects on the group, including meeting structure, the content of the meeting, varying levels of participation between individuals, and group interaction. I employed both formal interviews and informal discussions to gain an understanding of the activist viewpoint. Interviews were one-on-one with open ended questions about the participant's views. Informal discussions occurred whenever this topic arose in normal conversation, or during group meetings. The most informative data sources were informal discussions. These often occurred in succession over the course of the year as individuals reasoned through issues relating to sustainability.

From this research, I have attempted to describe what strategies are perceived and experienced as effective at maintaining a group. The groups I observed have adopted participatory democracy as one of their core tenets, which may have produced some bias toward participatory models of group sustainability. This study is not representative of all the viewpoints in the wide variety of social justice groups at Brown. Groups which I have not studied, such as Amnesty International or Students for a Sensible Drug Policy, may have adopted different strategies to maintain group sustainability.

Meetings

Meetings are the primary activity of Brown social justice groups. While demonstrations, protests, and events dominate the general student population's perception of a group, meetings are the heart and soul of the group's activities. During meetings, activists discuss ideas, brainstorm actions and campaigns, plan for upcoming events, and socialize. Meetings are much more than an organizing tool, they constitute a regular social space which facilitates the creation

of social ties and a collective sense of community.

The style and structure of meetings tend to reflect the beliefs of the group and its members. For example, the Brown Democrats called a Progressive Network meeting in October, 2006, attended by a fair number of groups. To advertise the meeting, they asked all the leaders of progressive groups to attend. The room was arranged similarly to a classroom, with a dais in the front where one or two people could address the group sitting in rows facing the dais. The President of the Brown Democrats opened by explaining the agenda, which was simply to let everyone advertise what their group was doing. Each person went up to the dais to talk about their club's activities and then sat back down. There was very little discussion, although the audience had the chance to ask questions after each announcement. When the last group finished talking, the Democrat's President closed the meeting by thanking everyone for coming and giving a reminder that it would be beneficial for everyone if the Democrats were to win back Congress in 2006.

Members of SDS who attended this meeting commented that it seemed as though the only reason the Democrats called the meeting was to try to convince other organizers to put their energies toward the election, not its stated purpose of building intra-left unity. One SDS member even said that the whole event made him uncomfortable for several reasons. He complained about the format, saying it was too "top-down," and he felt as though the Democrats were attempting to co-opt other groups for their own purposes.

A Social Justice Network (SJM) meeting, which drew from the same groups as the Democrat's Progressive Network meeting was called by SDS in February, 2007. SDS determined that the words "social justice" were more inclusive and therefore more useful than

"progressive." The meeting itself was very different, although it involved many of the same people. Advertising for the meeting was accomplished through contacting the leaders of other groups and asking them to send out the meeting announcement to general body listservs, in the hope of attracting more than just the leaders. The location of the meeting was a room with an open space in the center and chairs stacked in the corner. Everyone sat on the floor in a large circle, with two facilitators next to a white board at one side of the circle. The meeting focused on discussion instead of announcements, and everyone spoke from their seat. In the beginning, a speakers list (commonly known as a "stack") was taken. According to one activist, this was to ensure that everyone would be afforded time to speak. The discussion centered around what groups needed or wanted from the SJN, and, based on these needs, what the structure of the SJN should be. It was decided that working groups should form around the needs outlined in the meeting. For example, the topics of membership recruitment and diversification, communication network establishment, and preparation for the next meeting each had their own working group. This meeting also decided to call another meeting, this time with food.

These two meetings, whose stated purposes were very similar, are examples of how a group's beliefs are manifested in the way meetings are run. The Democrats ran their meeting as a governmental legislature, with one person, representing a certain group of people, addressing the meeting from a central position. SDS ran their meeting in a way they felt would maximize participation from all those attending, by having people sit in a circle facing each other, allowing anyone to address the entire group. The agendas were also markedly different. The Democrats focused on what each individual group was doing, while SDS focused on what this network of groups wanted to create. SDS's approach reflected its belief in participatory democracy and

community. The SJN meeting attempted to increase inter-group communication and develop social bonds. The discussion focused on organizing as a social justice community and getting to know each other. The Democrat's approach, on the other hand, was individualistic, being primarily concerned with publicizing individual groups and with a focus on their own agenda.

As a group, SDS believes instituting policies of participatory democracy will increase group sustainability, involvement and recruitment. This belief has led SDS members to design a system of meetings and decision-making which attempts to ensure that everyone has a say in what the group does. Before the Social Justice Network meeting, SDS organized a series of “social justice socials” between November, 2006 and February, 2007 to bring the social justice community closer together. The group discourse at these events always focused on the community discussing itself and its potential. People continued to attend these large gatherings, which culminated in the first Social Justice Network Meeting, described above. After this meeting, the SJN began to call its own meetings independent of SDS. While SDS was instrumental in the creation of this network, they have intentionally stepped back as other members of the social justice community began to participate. According to several individuals, SDS succeeded in trying to build a democratic structure that would allow the Social Justice community to organize itself. They pointed out that this endeavor succeeded because it encouraged people other than SDS members to participate and take the lead.

Eric Shragge notes the power of democracy in his book, Activism and Social Change. He declares that democracy is both a means to change and an end of change. The initiation of democracy on a local level will increase participation of people who previously did not have the means or motivation to be active. Shragge goes on to explain that building alliances with other

community organizations increases every group's base of social power and involves more people in any given issue. My observations concerning the participation, democracy, and increased communication between social justice groups supports Shragge's claims. There was a general consensus at the SJN meeting that activism is increasing, that more people are getting involved and doing more. This is especially true among activists whose groups have taken up the style of SDS's meetings, such as OIF and Student Labor Alliance (SLA). They have seen their numbers almost double over the course of 2006, as well as experiencing a significant increase in the number of people who participate in protests and demonstrations. This is, in part, due to the attraction of organizers from other groups.¹

The typical “SDS-style” meeting which these groups have adopted, starts with a few people arriving on time and setting up chairs in a circle. People will trickle in for about ten minutes, at which time someone will ask for volunteers to facilitate and take minutes. The facilitator's job is to keep the conversation moving and ensure that the group does not linger too long on one topic, or get off topic. At the beginning of a meeting, the facilitator will ask for agenda items from the group and proceed to start the meeting with the first item. The person who put an item on the agenda will usually talk about it first, giving the group an update, and then ask for feedback or offer a few questions for the group to decide upon. Decisions are made by consensus, which is conferred by each member of the group showing a thumbs-up (agreement), thumbs-down (blocking) or wavering-thumb (consent). When all the items on the agenda have been addressed, the facilitator will ask if anyone has anything else to bring to the group, and then adjourn the meeting. After this official ending, people mingle and talk for another 15-30 minutes. This period of time has been referred to as the “after-party” and varies greatly depending on how

1 Shragge, Eric. Activism and Social Change. Ontario, Canada: Broadview Press. 2003. pp. 133-134, 136-137

much academic work is causing individuals stress. It is an essential time when people can informally get to know one another.

The structure of these meetings has often changed as individuals have brought up concerns about the way they are run. This is especially true of SDS. Group dynamics has been a consistent topic of conversation over the year, with discussions surrounding who dominates the conversation, who takes the lead, membership recruitment, and how well different groups are represented in the dialogue. For example, there is a general consensus in SDS that men are dominating the floor and that serious effort needs to be made to combat this. One of the primary methods that is being applied is the idea of a safe space. This is an agreement among everyone at the meeting that anyone is allowed to point out something they consider to be overtly or passively sexist, whether it is something an individual does, or the way the group is acting. Anyone who brings this up will be listened to, and the person or people asked to act differently will not take offense. The purpose of this safe space is to help people feel comfortable bringing up what would otherwise be a very touchy, even taboo, subject.

Michael Moffatt addresses the lack of a safe space in his book, Coming of Age in New Jersey. He observes that the majority of students operate in a dialect and attitude of “Undergraduate Cynical” which prevents a student from saying how they actually feel. This phenomenon is a means of defense, according to Moffatt, because it allows students to hide their intellectual selves from the ridicule of their peers. While this is a very common phenomenon in normal college life, during meetings activists tend to shed this outlook. They discuss ideas they have encountered, beliefs they hold, and concerns about the direction the world is going. In meetings, many activists have exposed their intellectual hearts and have been affirmed and

supported by the group for doing so.²

While creating a safe space was seen as a key method to encourage participation, members of SDS, SLA, OIF, the Feminist Majority Leadership Alliance (FMLA), Amnesty International (AI), and Common Ground have all noted a different trend in participation. The tendency of only a few experienced people to dominate the discussion, while new-comers and inexperienced members remain silent, is seen as a serious problem that has produced significant quantities of discussion. Seniority in the club appears to play an important role in who speaks and plans. Members of OIF have even brainstormed a few ways to induce new-comers to participate. Giving people rotating jobs, is one such strategy. One of the more popular ideas, although it never came to fruition, was the suggestion that new members sit at a table in the post office to talk to students about the war. There has been significant discussion around the implementation of a “stack” (a speakers list) during meetings as a way to encourage more people to participate. Without a stack the most assertive people tend to speak the most, and it can be difficult for less assertive people to interject. A weighted stack has also been suggested, which would privilege individuals who have not spoken much, or at all, over those who have taken up significant space in the discussion. The major concern with stack is that it can be alienating to new people who are not accustomed to this structure. While SDS has not yet implemented this, they plan to do so in the fall semester of 2007. The first few meetings will be held without stack, to attempt to make the meetings as accessible as possible. A few weeks into the semester stack will begin to be implemented and explained to all new-comers.

Interestingly enough, the participation of the less experienced members began to pick up

2 Moffatt, Michael. Coming of Age in New Jersey College and American Life. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press. 1989. pp. 90-91

toward the middle and end of the 2007 spring semester. This may be due, in part, to the unofficial leaders becoming preoccupied with academic midterms. However, this relative power-vacuum cannot fully explain why many of the less experienced members began to take more initiative. They spoke more in meetings, and took on many of the responsibilities of more experienced members. They started to voice their ideas more often and take point on projects. Many of the more experienced members felt very glad that this was happening, as it is perceived as one signal of sustainability. SDS has made a point of trying to build a “culture of participation,” where everyone feels encouraged to speak their mind and to partake in the group's activities. Group members have expressed satisfaction with the apparent effectiveness of these strategies.

Following in the same vein of participation, membership recruitment is a central concern of these activist groups. There have been several discussions about how to encourage more people to join the group, and several changes to the meeting etiquette were adopted. For example, whenever there is a new person at a meeting of SDS or OIF, the facilitator will begin with name introductions. Everyone will go around the circle and say their name, their year, and sometimes another piece of information such as “favorite dish at the Ratty (dining hall)” or “why I am here.” In addition to this, when any member realizes that a new-comer would not understand what the group was talking about, they are supposed to break into the conversation to further explain what is being said. Two prominent examples of this include defining acronyms and explaining events the group is organizing. Remembering the names of returning new-comers is also believed to be effective. Such simple strategies are meant to make the group more accessible and friendly.

In The Search For Political Community, Lichterman claims that, too often, organizations will become bogged down in talks about procedure and are torn apart by these discussions. This contradicts my observations of groups at Brown. While discussions about group behavior, dynamics, and changes to meeting protocol do bring out differences of opinion between members, the groups I have observed have tended to benefit from such dialogues. This may be due to the consensus decision-making structure, which eases tensions that might arise from differences of opinion by solving disagreements through the use of consensus. After several of these discussions, most people felt significantly reaffirmed and even exhilarated by the experience of discussing how to combat problems in themselves and the group. Indeed, many highly effective policies have developed from these introspective conversations, such as the creation of a safe space, the adoption of a horizontal decision-making process, and attempts to be more inclusive of new members. These strategies have been informally reviewed by members, resulting in positive feedback.³

Members of SDS have even started self-reflective discussions about socialization during meetings. While it can be disruptive and tangential, the benefits of socializing were deemed more important than the negative side-effects. Some outlined benefits included mental health, membership retainment, and defense against burn-out. As a result of these deliberations, several groups began to allow, and even encourage, a certain degree of socializing during meetings. Facilitators often turn a blind eye to tangents and jokes. SDS and OIF members regularly break out into laughter during meetings. Several members have commented that this results in a far more enjoyable meeting than other activist meetings that do not integrate as much socializing.

³ Lichterman, Paul. The Search for Political Community American Activists Reinventing Commitment. New York: Cambridge University Press. 1996. pp. 130-150, 213-230

People are more willing to devote their time to activist causes if these activities are social, enjoyable, and involve their friends. During stressful periods of the semester, someone will occasionally suggest that the next meeting be half party, half meeting. This tactic has even seen application beyond meetings. When more needs to be done than can be done at a meeting, a separate “working party” is called. For example, parties or socials are scheduled to make banners, installations, signs, or literature. Indeed, even protests and direct actions are described as social occasions and characterized as “fun.”

Actions and Activities

Meetings may be the mainstay of the activist community, but actions and other activities also play a critical role. Even though groups primarily use actions to connect with, and try to sway, the larger public, these activities can also have important internal implications. They can help recruit new membership, enhance social bonds between members, and provide a sense of institutional momentum which one meeting a week cannot. Retreats, protests, street theater, and marches all have significant effects on group sustainability.

Retreats are one activity which both OIF and SDS have utilized. A retreat provides a forum for the group to discuss the issues that they do not have the time to address during regular meetings. Retreats often last most of the day, and allow for very drawn out and complicated discourses. Important theoretical concerns, the future orientation of the group, changes to meeting structure and group policy are all discussed at retreats. These discussions usually occur over food, or sitting in a circle in someone's living room. Like meetings, there is a significant amount of joking and socializing. While these discussions can also be difficult and slow, they provide a sense of organizational direction and a shared sense of excitement and community.

Protests and street theater also create a sense of excitement, both among members and sympathetic members of the general public. Before an action, individuals often comment how “fun” they will be. The word “fun” is used here to represent several sources of enjoyment. Members enjoy actions which make a spectacle and attract attention. To do this, an amusing premise or a parody is often employed. For example, OIF designed and acted a piece of street theater where the “Youth Republicans League” gave “George W. Bush Medals of Freedom” to the Rhode Island State Senate leaders, congratulating them for not allowing a bill condemning a surge of troops in the Iraq War to come to the Senate floor. This attracted questioning looks from passers-by, as well as media attention. Additionally, most people found the absurdity of the whole affair quite amusing.

Another source of enjoyment is the act of challenging and disobeying authority. For example, the University brought disciplinary charges against members of SDS for protesting. SDS members took this as an opportunity to show the administration that they would “not back down because of an inkling of political persecution.” Indeed, after Brown's lengthy judicial process, it was determined that the charges were unfounded, and that SDS had not acted outside of the standards of student conduct. Several members commented how the whole process illustrated the absurdity of Brown's judicial system, as well as how the administration truly did not know how to deal with protesters in a constructive way. One member commented how he enjoyed watching the drama as it unfolded, and found it rather comic.

SDS held a piece of street theater in front of the International Headquarters of Textron, an arms manufacturer conveniently located in downtown Providence. The action was billed as a “Die-In,” where a large group of people would pretend to die horribly as three people dressed in

suits, representing the executives of Textron, threw imaginary cluster bombs and yelled about profits. Initially, this occurred in the street, until the police arrived and ordered the protesters out of the street and onto the sidewalk. After a few more rounds of “dying,” the protesters put jelly on their hands and rushed the building to place “bloody” hand-prints on the wall. Amazingly enough, to get to the building they had to maneuver through a line of police. After the event, many individuals were astonished and ecstatic that SDS's membership had the courage to rush a line of police to make a political statement. Many also felt a sense of accomplishment.

Members enjoy challenging authority, not only because they see it as fighting injustice, but because it is thrilling and provoking a response indicates that they are accomplishing something. It is also an act of questioning that, historically, has helped cause shifts in America's cultural consciousness. The fact that members of SDS were charged by Brown means that someone in the administration believed SDS to be enough of a threat to the status quo that action against the group was warranted. Since SDS members are generally critical of the status quo, this was an affirmation of their effectiveness at challenging it. One member of SDS quoted Gandhi, saying “It is the function of a civil resistor to provoke response.” The excitement of being in this sort of competition of wills is enticing. Many sympathetic non-members commented to SDS members that these actions were inspiring, amusing, and “cool.”

Socializing is probably the most important source of enjoyment. Actions organized by SDS and OIF always contain significant amounts of socializing and group activity which will bring the group together. Marches are a prime example of this. Many members of both groups have come to view marches as a form of festival, where people come out to be together and express their common concerns. There is plenty of entertainment and interesting goods to

purchase, spread out over a long stretch of land ideal for walking. Groups tend to walk around together, eat together, and spend their time together. All of this provides needed time for people to get to know each other, reaffirm friendships, and generally bond. Without this component in marches, meetings, and actions, many felt that these activities would lose appeal. They would become serious affairs that would slowly make individuals apathetic and “burned-out.” Having friends around to share the work, the risk, the excitement, and the “fun” is viewed as an essential component.

The term “solidarity” is used to refer to an essentially reciprocal relationship where when someone needs help, the others will spend energy and sacrifice for that person. One example of this is “jail solidarity.” When someone is arrested, they need the help of their support networks to make sure all of their affairs are in order and that they are being treated properly. Jail intentionally attempts to cut an individual off from their support network, and this break can be mentally painful. In Brown SDS's single experience with having a member arrested, the arrested individual recalled the importance of jail solidarity for his state of mind.

Actions also provide a sense of momentum, that the group is moving toward accomplishing a goal, and that everyone is willing to work hard to achieve it. Many people joined SDS because SDS was organizing actions, and “doing something.” When twenty to thirty people who all want to be active get together, the effect is exponential. They are far more willing to work hard if they are surrounded by others doing the same. Willingness to act, and actually acting create momentum in an organization and provide the impetus to do more.

Experiencing enjoyable and social events, being active, and having momentum all contribute to the recruiting of new membership. Historically, and within SDS's contemporary

discussions, there are two general strategies to expand a group's base and influence. In his book, SDS, Kirkpatrick Sale describes how in the late 1960s the adherents of these two strategies created factions within the original SDS. They called themselves the “Action Faction” and the “Praxis Axis.” The Action Faction believed that focusing purely on action was the way to create change and attract large swaths of membership. The more actions and ways for people to get involved, the better. The Praxis Axis sought to focus on what they referred to as “praxis,” the application of theory into practice and the process of changing and creating culture. Praxis techniques focus on changing peoples' minds and perceptions through media coverage, critical discussion, community engagement, and other less conflict-centric activities. Praxis strategy does not exclude actions, but neither does it focus on them.⁴

Brown's chapter of SDS has had several similar discussions. One reason why SDS had a surge in membership in the Spring of 2007 was because it became more active and held several well-publicized actions. This attracted many organizers from other groups who were looking to become part of a community that was “doing something.” So, for the short term, action oriented techniques did attract members. However, these were already established organizers who had similar world-views to the rest of SDS. It is unclear if this strategy would attract or engage people who do not share the same world-view as SDS. Praxis oriented activities, such as the publication of the “Disorientation Guide,” the organizing of the SJN, and the organizing of the first General Assembly of the Brown University Student Union have all been heralded as reasonably successful, and have provided the opportunity for literally hundreds of people to become involved. Publishing columns and letters to the editor in the Brown Daily Herald has also enhanced SDS's impact on the student body's thought patterns. Indeed, SDS's impact even

4 Sale, Kirkpatrick. SDS. USA:Vintage Books. 1973. pp. 300-360

reached into the platforms of several student government candidates who chose to address some of the student issues SDS has organized around. Providing a thoughtful, well-publicized critical viewpoint supplies a conceptual framework which many undecided individuals find appealing. Additionally, it challenges their prior conceptions of the world.

SDS's mixture of praxis and action seems more effective than either strategy would be on its own. The actions attract those who already agree with SDS's ideas and want to do something, thereby swelling their ranks. The praxis activities engage the rest of the community and have the ability to change the minds of the general public. This creates a base which will provide much needed support for activists' attempts to create change, and which can be potentially mobilized. Several SDS members expressed a belief that changing the minds of the public, and creating opportunities for them to participate, will go a long way in fighting apathy and motivating the general population.

Motivation

Motivation is the key element in the entire sustainability equation. Without motivated members, a group will wither and cease to function. Future dissolution is a constant threat to groups. Indeed, sustainability is one factor that Brown's student government considers before it incorporates a club as an officially sanctioned group. Some groups have ceased to have many motivated members, yet have still managed to survive. In fact, several groups now exist only to be used for their institutional status and access to resources. These clubs are used by other groups with motivated memberships to conduct business with the University, such as reserving room space, and receiving funds for hosting guest speakers. Groups which do not have this institutional status tend to dissolve completely instead of becoming puppets. Indeed, groups

survive because they are useful, either as a puppet, or for organizing purposes. Organizations come and go at the whim of the members of the social justice community, a community which has managed to maintain its strength at Brown for the past 40 years. What determines these motivations has the ultimate control over the sustainability of any given group.

Among the literature concerning activists, Lichterman specifically discusses how motivation affects group sustainability. He declares that because activists have a wide variety of motivations, groups often have trouble mediating between individuals. Organizations will often fall apart because of an intellectual and motivational split among members. This phenomenon actually comes up frequently in SDS, where discussion of local groups of older activists is a favorite topic. Members of SDS jest about the sectarian tendencies of old leftists and their willingness to split over the tiniest disagreement. Lichterman goes on to say that, even though organizations may be unstable due to these differing motivations, individuals will stay involved for the course of their lives, moving on from withering organizations to new organizations.⁵

According to Lichterman, since individuals remain committed for their lifespans, instability of activist organizations is not a real problem because new organizations will be founded to replace old ones.⁶ However, one issue SDS has been confronting does contradict this supposition. There is no one organization that is known to the entire student population as a good place for people to pursue interests in activism. This stands in contrast to other fields, such as sports, journalism, or politics. Individuals interested in sports know the school has a variety of sports teams. Journalists can join the student newspaper, and proto-politicians flock to student government. Several members of SDS commented how they became aware of activism

5 Lichterman (1996). pp.83-104, 129-148

6 Lichterman (1996). pp.129-148

accidentally, that they were interested but had no place to begin. To address this issue, SDS published a “Disorientation Guide” to give incoming students a guiding post to find the type of activism in which they are interested. If motivated individuals are not connected to an organization, they will not have any outlet for their aspirations.

Motivations do vary, however, there were several which were consistently mentioned by activists. These include a deep internal commitment to improving the world, the “fun” and social aspects of activism, the discovery of self-knowledge, and “empowerment.” Internal motivation is by far the most powerful. It can be intellectual, moral, emotional, or experiential in nature, and can stem from anything from witnessing an injustice firsthand to reading an amazing book. Some have a vision of a better world that they feel driven to try to achieve, while others feel that working for a more just world will enrich their own lives. However, one internal motivation was consistent among activists, the drive to put their principles into action. This may be why SDS attracted so many Brown students in the spring of 2007, because it provided a space and a community for individuals to be active.

According to David Meyers in The Politics of Protest, social groups are enablers. Whatever the motivation, if someone is alone they are unlikely to act. In this sense, when people get together they become able to express their interests and motivation. Sharing in the labor of action, individuals are both more effective and willing to go to greater lengths. This comes through community obligation, as Lichterman points out, and through activists feeling, as they would say, “empowered.”⁷ In Making History: The Radical Tradition in American Life, Flacks makes the point that a person's commitments to everyday life often take priority over political

⁷ Meyer, David S. The Politics of Protest : Social Movements in America. New York : Oxford University Press, 2007. pp. 50-60

activities. This is also true of activists, creating a situation where individuals must reduce the number of their responsibilities in an activist group to concentrate on life issues. The cycle of school work causes this to happen to undergraduate groups on a regular and predictable basis. Midterms often see a drop in the group's activities and a drop in experienced members activities. While individuals are motivated to do this work, there is only so much time and passion they are able to put into it.⁸

Being “empowered” is a key element to motivation. This term refers to a feeling that one can have an impact on a given situation, and that they are not powerless to create change. Many activists view apathy as an epidemic among their fellow students. The SDS of the 1960s, following the logic of C. Wright Mills, suggested that apathy was a natural defense mechanism people employ to deal with situations where they feel powerlessness. Indeed, powerlessness and isolation breed apathy. It is only when someone works past this feeling and realizes that they do have power that they are able to break “out of apathy.” Once an individual feels empowered, they yearn to act and to improve the situation. Strategies SDS employed to try to facilitate the empowerment of others included several praxis activities, such as organizing community activities and attempting to create democratic structures, such as the Student Union.⁹

Personal empowerment also seems to take some time. Indeed, to feel comfortable taking on more responsibility in a group, people have to become acclimated to the new situation and the group of people. As they feel more comfortable, they are willing to express themselves more and invest their time and energy in the group and its activities. This manifested itself in both SDS and OIF. As people became more integrated into the group, they were able to act on their

8 Flacks, Richard. Making History: The Radical Tradition in American Life. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988. pp. 150-200

9 Sale (1973). pp. 100-130

principles to a higher degree, supporting David Meyers' supposition that groups are “enablers.”

While internal motivation and the ability to act on this drive are the foundation of what motivates activists, the social aspect of a groups' activities will keep members from becoming isolated and falling back into apathy. One of the major factors why members will spend one to seven hours a week with their activist group is because they enjoy each others company and genuinely find these activities socially and emotionally fulfilling. When someone has to miss a meeting, they always lament and ask what they missed. Groups which sustain themselves tend to be social and friendly, making their activities “fun” so people want to continue to attend.

These activist groups also provide unique self-exploratory experiences for their members. They expose new-comers to important ideological discussions and debates about principles. Individuals are challenged to define themselves and their beliefs, and then put those beliefs into action. One SDS members noted how the discussions and activities of SDS have provided one of the most meaningful educational experiences of their lives. Activists often complain that their school work is getting in the way of activism, which they consider to be a much more meaningful and relevant educational experience. The discovery of self-knowledge, or in other words, gaining an understanding of oneself, is a significant motivator among activists.

If the experiences a group offers allows an individual to fulfill what they are driven to do, then it is likely to remain vibrant with enough motivated individuals to sustain the group. When a group fails to be attractive enough for individuals to invest their precious time, then the group is doomed to fall apart. This has happened to several groups. For example, the Free Tibet issue has fallen out of fashion and consequently, the Brown chapter of Students for Free Tibet was disbanded in 2004. There are reports from some of the alumni members of SDS that in 2003 a

Brown chapter of the International Socialist Organization existed, but developed such a hostile environment that people stopped attending. SDS and OIF have both attempted to make their groups attractive, with environments that encourage and allow individuals to invest in activist work.

Conclusion

Group sustainability depends on several factors including membership motivation, group dynamics, and group activities. While groups tend to come and go, the greater social justice community has a permanent residency at Brown. It is from this community of like-minded people that these groups arise. Groups tend to be created when people pull themselves out of isolation and talk with each other. SDS and OIF have both adopted a self-reflective tone and a critical eye in an attempt to improve their organizations, community, and world. The strategies outlined in this paper have come from the the discussions of SDS and OIF. Indeed, these groups have experimented with these strategies and generally received positive feedback. Over the period of my research, both SDS and OIF greatly increased their numbers, their impact on campus, and their internal stability. However, if they disband, there is no doubt that other groups will be created to fulfill the need of many Brown students to put their ideas and ideals into action.

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Appendix

During my study I was asked to generate a proposal or a series of proposals for what can be done to enhance Brown's Social Justice Community, and ensure its continued growth. Here is a list of my thoughts.

1. Have at least one GISP every semester that as many people who want can join, and have it on relevant issues. They would be advertised and be a way to engage people as well as a tool. These GISPs would produce theory and literature that would be used in the radical education project. We should try to adapt the work we do for the university to be useful for the movement.
 1. Examples
 1. participatory democracy and democratic structures (to deal with lack of a democracy on university level)
 2. Brown University's connections with corporate America and the military industrial complex
 3. Recruitment, political engagement, and apathy.
 4. Student Activism
 5. Institutional Racism
 6. American Imperialism
 7. The logic of policing. Understanding Police and the State. And alternatives to both.
 8. democratic Economics.
 2. Experimentation on different aspects of life.
 1. Democratic structures.... because we need a non-representative, direct democracy way to govern large bodies of people. We also need examples of where it works in America. The University is a good starting place for this experimentation. I also think it should be framed as experimentation, because this will make it easy for people to accept changes when problems arise, and it will encourage people to speak up and suggest change.
 2. A structure to provide mass, accessible, informed, community debate.
2. Develop a democratic system to run the University.
 1. This would allow for change if and when the brown community wishes it.
 2. Begin to implement it. Do not only demand things of the administration, begin to build its replacement
3. Intra-left Unity.
 1. Very essential. We need our own community space for people. A resource center as it were.
 2. Possibly create an endowment.
 3. Regular events that bind people together.
 4. Stress the interconnectedness of issues and help people understand that they should support everyone because it is all interconnected.
 5. One of the reasons there has been an explosion of activism in the past two years is because people got together and talked. We all wanted to do something, but we could not do it alone. With a large community of people,

we feel able to act, the bigger the community, the more we feel we can do (and the more we can actually do).

6. We need more places for people to sit around, talk about stuff, and feel in union with each other.
4. Recruitment.
 1. Continuous drive to be in conjunction with the education project
 2. Continuous recruitment into the left, create opportunities for people to do things, and opportunities to engage people who do not feel moved to act yet. This is hopefully something the SJN can do.
5. Self-reflectiveness and continuous tactic and strategy improvement. And the documentation of all that we do to build institutional memory.
6. Persistence but not pushiness. Give people time to change and accept our ideas... they often just need a little time and debate to come around. Say “join us” instead of “whose side are you on”
7. Language accessibility
8. Most of all, get people talking about and acting on ideals. We need a voracious propaganda machine that uses both mainstream language and radical language (connecting the two to make sure people understand) that gets people talking and interested. We need to give people a way to express their beliefs in democracy, equality, freedom, and all that jazz.
 1. SDS needs a catalog of the abuses SDSers have faced, and we need to publicize it. We need to publicize it alot. Frame it as what students face for standing up for their principles, or something like that.

Propaganda

The Port Huron Statement – a visionary statement that was more politics than prescriptive. It had ideals and theoretical. It attracted people who were looking for political analysis and a way of looking at the world... it was a tool for radicalizing people. It gave them politics and what they needed to hear to get excited about change. It articulated ideals that people already believed in but had not spent the time to develop.

1. We need something similar that will attract the majority of people and make our politics accessible. Might want to think about publicizing parts of the Port Huron Statement until we have something better.

Some effective strategies

1. participatory democratic meetings. Solicit people's opinions and give them weight. Make people feel like they have an impact on what is happening.
 1. For a group that wants as many people to participate as possible, hierarchy is off-putting because people begin to feel that they have no impact. A common response to decisions made without one's input is cynicism and apathy.
2. introductions, getting to know people
3. giving people opportunity to do things, and make them look simple. Do things together, one experienced, one not to skill share

4. Be active, this attracts people who already agree. Have a set of principles that you can expound and act on them in public.
5. Experienced members need to step back and not take up as much room in meetings and in group activities. But not so much that the group does not do anything... hard to balance this.
6. Concentrate on recruitment of membership. The more people the better.
7. Continue emphasizing the fun aspects of activism, like socializing.
8. My time in sds has been incredible. I took a critical and reflective eye to it and think:
 1. focus on the pleasantness and togetherness of meetings
 2. public demonstrations of dedication have significant impact on the community
 3. anger and hatred tend to turn people off... making sure that what we do is done in a happy way is essential to recruitment
 4. concentration on recruitment. Usually through social networks and by word of mouth.

Community Building, factors that make community important:

1. social ties/social relaxation and rejuvenation
2. being part of something/cohesive group
3. common thinking and goals
4. support of each other
5. people to work with / support for work
6. responsibility to the group
7. prevention of alienation
8. common activities and spaces