Poverty, Partnerships, and Privilege: Elite Institutions and Community Empowerment

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During the 1990s, universities and foundations separately entered into community partnerships with the intent of revitalizing poor urban neighborhoods. We describe the historical context that preceded their involvement in these partnerships, outline the evolution in ideas about "community empowerment" integral to such partnerships, and explain the partnership model's attractiveness. We then analyze how and why these partnerships embraced the rhetoric of community empowerment and discuss the paradox of elites attempting to empower poor people. Our analysis suggests that these partnerships allowed for the appearance of an inclusive solution to community problems, while maintaining the legitimacy and privilege of their elite sponsors.

Since the 1960s "community empowerment" has been an enduring refrain in the rhetoric surrounding U.S. anti-poverty initiatives. Policymakers have often pursued this goal without explicitly defining what it means, which has enabled them to occupy the moral high ground ("we support empowering the poor and revitalizing communities") while being ambiguous about the feasibility of their actually producing meaningful changes. During the war on poverty, community empowerment, also referred to as community action, entailed offering opportunities for poor residents to exercise their own political voice in defining the array of reforms—job creation, housing, education, and the like—aimed at improving their neighborhoods. Due to the specific manner in which the war on poverty was carried out, these community action programs gradually came under attack. During the ensuing decades, this attack became part of a broader neoconservative assault on the welfare state, culminating in a series of sweeping changes during the 1980s that shifted responsibility for social policy from the federal government to private and local organizations. Since then, anti-poverty work has for the most part been privatized (Lenkowsky, 1999; Osborne and Gaebler, 1993). The idea of community empowerment has persevered, however, with new institutional sponsors and renewed hopes for social change.

We examine two types of institutions that stepped into the social policy vacuum left by the federal government: universities and foundations. We focus on their partnerships with

community-based organizations and the empowerment rhetoric that these collaborations are built upon. Comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs) are foundation-funded anti-poverty partnerships, while university-community partnerships (UCPs) are collaborative endeavors between colleges and their neighborhoods. Though they differ in important ways, both CCIs and UCPs developed during the 1990s, both espouse community empowerment, and both advocate community partnership as an explicit anti-poverty strategy.

Researchers and practitioners typically use the term "community empowerment" rather loosely, rarely defining it. Even a straightforward attempt to characterize this term reveals imprecision: Does "community" connote neighborhood people, or the organized voluntary sector in a particular locale? Can we assume a shared set of values or distinct identity among community members/groups (Shirlow and Murtagh, 2004)? Does "empowerment" mean all voices being heard, or does it imply something as concrete as teaching grant writing to a neighborhood crime watch group? Moreover, both the form and substance of community empowerment can change over time: from community action to capacity building, from leadership to partnership. The vague nature of the term has allowed it to evolve without being overtly contested. Edwards offers a trenchant critique: "More rhetorical fluff attaches to 'community' than most other words in the social science lexicon (with the possible exception of 'empowerment')" (Edwards, 1997, p. 831).

This article focuses on how and why CCIs and UCPs have appropriated the idea of community empowerment. We assert that the idea itself oversimplifies the difficulties inherent in poverty amelioration, while keeping success deliberately elusive. Our aims are to explore the extent to which CCIs and UCPs represent a continuation of, as opposed to an innovation in, social policy; to understand why foundations and universities have gotten involved in such collaborations; and to assess the emergence of these partnerships in the context of a reconfigured allocation of social responsibility for the poor—from the federal government to private and local organizations. We analyze the partnership approach to community empowerment by assessing changes and continuities over time and discussing the benefits that such partnerships bring to their sponsors. We focus here not on the policy consequences of community partnerships *per se* but on the political and institutional significance of the partnership model as a vehicle for revitalizing the idea of community empowerment, which became thoroughly delegitimized as a consequence of the war on poverty.

This study, therefore, offers a critical analysis of relatively unexamined social phenomena: the involvement of elite (i.e., established, privileged) institutions in community empowerment initiatives via partnerships. While the partnership model has received its share of approbation and criticism by scholars of social policy (Hebson, Grimshaw, and Marchington, 2003; Jones, 2003; Rosenau, 2000), sociologists have given this institutional form minimal attention (Linder, 1999). Policy analysts, higher education researchers, and urban planners have examined university-community partnerships largely from descriptive and evaluative perspectives (Silka, 1999; Dewar and Isaac, 1998; Wiewel and Lieber, 1998). A rigorous framework for evaluation is thought to be necessary (Rubin, 2000), even as The Urban Institute (2002) and urban scholars (LeGates and Robinson, 1998) argue for the institutionalization of UCPs. CCIs have similarly not received much scholarly attention; the few, largely descriptive accounts that exist have been done either by the Annie E. Casey Foundation or by policy evaluators brought together by the Aspen Institute (Brown, Butler, and Hamilton, 2001; Burns and Spilka, 1997; *Voices from the Field II*, 2002; Walsh, 1999).

Further scrutiny is warranted for two reasons: First, foundations and universities have goals that are not directly or explicitly poverty-related, even though in some cases their missions may be broadly to advance the public good. So why have these elites taken on a seemingly intractable problem like urban poverty, and why have they appropriated the community empowerment idea? Second, partnerships by their very design attempt to create greater equality, as opposed to the paternalism and *noblesse oblige* that characterized past relationships between poor communities and privileged institutions like foundations and universities. How, then, does participation in these partnerships affect the elite status of their foundation and university sponsors?

We begin with a historical overview of U.S. antipoverty policy, describing shifts in the responsibility for the poor since the 1980s and the consequences of these shifts. We pay particular attention to periodic efforts to involve the poor in decisions about reforms aimed at bettering their lives. We follow by describing the social forces that impelled foundations and universities separately to partner with community organizations. Once we lay this groundwork, we then discuss the community empowerment rhetoric of CCIs and UCPs. We argue that the partnership model has become prevalent—and will likely endure—not because it necessarily mitigates poverty (it is empirically uncertain that it does) but because it rejuvenates the time-tested yet ill-defined American ideal of community empowerment, and offers unanticipated benefits to the elite institutions involved.

THE EMERGENCE OF COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Three factors contributed to the support given to community partnerships during the 1990s by foundations and universities. These included a transformed political climate concerning social policy, changes taking place within foundations and universities themselves, and newly defined community organizing tactics embraced by neighborhood-based groups that made them readily willing to partner with elites to ameliorate poverty.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF RESPONSIBILITY FOR AMELIORATING POVERTY

Beginning in the 1980s and continuing steadily through the 1990s, the federal government divested itself of responsibility for anti-poverty policy and placed a mandate on private and local organizations to play leading roles in mitigating poverty and other social problems (Lenkowsky, 1999; Osborne and Gaebler, 1993). This move had roots that extended back to the 1960s war on poverty and the embattled legacy it carried, which is why understanding the significance of this move requires a brief sketch of both the war on poverty and the policymaking culture that emerged in its aftermath.

The war on poverty had two components. The first was "equal opportunity" programs, which expanded social services for the poor in the areas of education and job training so that they could become more competitive in the labor market (Katz, 1989; Waddan, 1997). The second component, and the one that was to have a direct bearing on the anti-poverty partnerships initiated by foundations and universities several decades later, was "community action," which empowered poor residents to define the scope of equal opportunity programs and how best to deliver them (Patterson, 2000).

The idea of the federal government's empowering poor people to exercise a greater voice in addressing their own problems seemed, at the time, to be a politically sound,

uncontroversial poverty reform strategy. After all, citizen participation lies at the core of our democratic culture. However, the Johnson Administration proved to be naïve about the level of controversy that community action would fuel. Many mayors criticized the policy because it allowed community agencies to use the money freely, without having to be accountable to the controls that city governments had traditionally exercised over local purse strings (Waddan, 1997; Zarefsky, 1986). Some mayors saw community action as "fostering class struggle" since the agencies allowed poor people to use federal funds to openly defy the local political structure (Lemann, 1981; Zarefsky, 1986).

As the civil rights movement radicalized and many cities started experiencing riots, the neoconservative movement began echoing these mayoral criticisms by blaming the community action program for, on the one hand, contributing to black radicalism, while at the same time not doing much to help the poor escape poverty (Adler, 1994). These criticisms gradually became intertwined with a broader negative assessment of the war on poverty: that the federal government had spent billions of dollars on social programs during the 1960s and yet by decade's end millions of people still remained poor (Berman, 1994). The notion that the liberal welfare state could not provide an adequate solution to social problems but was *itself* a problem in need of fixing became a rallying cry in the neoconservative movements' rise to prominence during the 1970s, and consequently in Ronald Reagan's 1980 electoral victory (Himmelstein, 1990).

Reagan situated his administrative agenda in large part around the view that the work undertaken through the war on poverty was testimony that the federal government was incapable of addressing large-scale problems, and that therefore what was needed was an alternative policymaking paradigm. Reagan advocated a fundamental transformation of responsibility for social policy from the federal government to the private sector (Boris, 1999; Lenkowsky, 1999). President George H.W. Bush followed suit with his "Thousand Points of Light" initiative, which called for a greater share of responsibility for social welfare to be shouldered by nonprofit organizations and for individuals to become more involved in helping those less fortunate than themselves (Cloud, 1991). In this so-called "empowerment era," needy individuals were expected to take care of themselves, as "active and informed consumers of public goods" (Klinenberg, 2002, p. 163). Individuals were empowered, not necessarily communities.

The privatization rhetoric of Presidents Reagan and Bush became instrumental in shaping the welfare reform legislation that was passed in 1996. Given that so much of the neoconservative spin on anti-poverty policy had become conventional political wisdom during the Reagan and Bush years, no Democrat could mount a credible presidential campaign in 1992 without embracing this approach (Weaver, 2000). Moreover, the passage of welfare reform reflected the extent to which President Clinton had to reckon with the dramatic outcome of the 1994 congressional elections, in which Republicans gained the majority in both the House and Senate for the first time since the 1946 midterm election and proceeded to call for continued devolution of policy responsibilities to state and local governments (Alexander, 1999; Schram, 2000; Wolpert, 1997).

By the time George W. Bush came to office in 2001, the policymaking climate in Washington had undergone two decades of sustained transformation. With this shift, it was inevitable that if renewed elite support for the idea of community empowerment were to arise, it would have to come about in a decidedly different manner than it had when the federal government supported the war on poverty.

Foundations' and universities' interests in supporting community partnerships can be understood by examining their respective institutional histories, and particularly the changes within each institution that were taking place concurrently with the increasing privatization of social policy.

From Seed Money to Partnership: Foundations and the Urban Poor

Private foundations were an organizational form created by prominent businessmen from the fortunes they had amassed during the years of massive industrial growth that followed the Civil War. These foundations—most notably the Rockefeller, Carnegie, and Sage Foundations—became incorporated as not-for-profit, nongovernmental organizations chartered to advance broadly defined goals in support of the public good. Early on, foundations funded social science research into the causes and potential remedies for various social problems. This funding also aimed, in the words of historians Barry and Alice Karl, to keep "the public abreast of problems and issues that the U.S. Congress would not have considered touching with the proverbial ten-foot pole" (Quoted in Karl and Karl, 1999, p. 58; Karl and Katz, 1981; Nielsen, 1985; Smith, 1999).

By World War I, foundation-funded research was galvanizing the federal government to focus for the first time on a set of social issues that it had previously seen as strictly the responsibility of private charity. For example, the passage of federal child labor legislation was the direct result of several studies sponsored by the Russell Sage Foundation that documented the costs and consequences of low wages, poor health, and dilapidated housing within a number of industrial cities. More broadly, foundation funding of research into the structural causes of various social problems was creating a political climate in which it seemed appropriate for the federal government to become centrally involved in social reform. In this sense, private philanthropy was laying the groundwork for the creation of a federal welfare state, which President Roosevelt's "New Deal" put into place in response to the Great Depression of the 1930s (Trattner, 1984).

From the New Deal through the war on poverty, foundations' primary social policy role was to provide seed money for work that, if successful, the federal government might continue to support. Because of their abundant resources and their independence from the vested political and financial interests of government and business, respectively, foundations were particularly well suited to play this role. The antipoverty programs funded by the Ford Foundation during the early 1960s are a case in point. As these programs accrued evidence of success, they planted the seeds for the war on poverty (O'Connor, 1999). Presidents Kennedy and Johnson came to see these programs as models for comprehensive federal anti-poverty policy (Katz, 1986; Patterson, 2000; Trattner, 1984; Waddan, 1997).

Yet with the gradual discrediting of the war on poverty and the broader assault on the federal welfare state carried out since the Reagan years, foundations interested in poverty reform have seen a change in their relationship with the federal government. No longer just seeding research and providing demonstration projects, foundations are now expected to take greater responsibility for actual anti-poverty programs. However, as the logic of devolution and privatization dictates, they have to figure out how to accomplish this with relatively few dollars compared to the federal government. Community

partnerships have offered a compelling way to achieve this aim, because costs are shared along with responsibility. By their very design, partnerships pool the efforts of multiple actors, an approach that is ostensibly more cost-effective than funding individual community organizations doing antipoverty work. As fiscal concerns of their own have propelled foundations to become more deeply involved in the partnership model of philanthropy, foundations have tended to downplay their financial motives and instead publicly tout these partnerships as necessary for community empowerment. Hence, foundations' expressed interest in promoting greater community participation in poverty reform has not been the primary basis for their support of community partnerships but rather a celebratory afterthought that has appeared frequently in their rhetorical justifications for giving this support.

From Ivory Tower to Community Partner: Universities and their Neighborhoods

Over the past century and a half, the university sector has experimented with different social roles. Originally, following the European ideal, U.S. universities fulfilled social obligations through the generation of new ideas from afar and the transmission of knowledge to a select few. This ivory tower model was challenged in the late 19th century by two developments: First, a group of established urban universities hired presidents who viewed the city as their arena for study and action, and who actively worked for "less misery among the poor" (Harkavy, 1999, p. 10). Second, the Morrill Act of 1864 created the land-grant colleges that were mandated to offer affordable education to the children of the non-elite, emphasizing agricultural, scientific, and industrial studies that would be of use to the growing nation. The type of community involvement encouraged by land grant and early urban assistance programs can be characterized as expert-driven (Harkavy, 1999), with the university assisting, but not necessarily engaging or empowering, its community.

The 20th century saw universities become dedicated to the advancement of scientific knowledge in service to society. Large research projects, many with a military focus, became the priority for federal university expenditures, which increased twenty-five fold in twenty-five years (Rosenzweig, 1998). Urban issues were a lesser concern, though the government offered student support through the GI Bill and need-based financial aid. In the post-war decades, the university's social role grew contentious, as U.S. society itself became fragmented. The technical assistance model and the emphasis on science were called into question as town-gown conflicts escalated, especially in cities. While many universities put up walls, contributing to the perception that they were intellectually aloof (Carr, 2002), others made nonacademic contributions through community outreach programs and some even provided "payments in lieu of taxes." Such efforts were highly contested, especially during the turbulent 1960s, when universities became the lightning rods for social controversies. This was the era of community action—experts, especially the sort produced by universities, were *not* considered the solution. University outreach efforts were rebuffed, even as students committed themselves to social action. Ultimately, though, the campus violence of the time "genuinely frightened most people," and resulted in a turning inward, with students and faculty focusing on their own futures (Zemsky, 2003).

Privatization grew throughout the 1980s and 1990s. As the economy became knowledge-driven and technology-based, universities no longer had a monopoly on research or

education. Competition was supplied by private think tanks, corporate R&D endeavors, employer universities, and for-profit education firms. Thus the university's claimed distinctiveness in teaching and research was under pressure, and public support diminished. Universities looked to the private sector for funding, with concomitant controversies and conflicts of interest (Press and Washburn, 2000; Bok, 2003). The university's social role had come to be much like that of any private firm, too much so, according to critics: allegations of commercialization, corporatization, marketization, and cooptation flourished (Aronowitz, 2000; Slaughter and Leslie, 1999).

These tensions cut deeply at the very purpose of the university, and resulted in a re-examination of responsibilities and, in some cases, a reconnection with neighborhoods and communities. Ernest Boyer is credited with legitimizing the "scholarship of engagement" (Glassick, 1999), yet multiple forces influenced this civic turn: the belief that universities should do more than serve the market, a faculty disheartened by loss of public meaning, a wider national movement for civic engagement and renewal, a sharper understanding of criticality of social problems at home and abroad, and ongoing town/gown issues (Ostrander, 2004, p. 78). Universities have thus redefined their social roles as being citizens and community partners (Bringle, Games, and Malloy, 1999; Maurasse, 2001). They have done this by collaborating with local agencies, which have undergone their own transformations in recent decades.

FROM CONFRONTATION TO COOPERATION: COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS
AND STRATEGIES FOR URBAN DEVELOPMENT

An additional reason why community partnerships were attractive to foundations and universities during the 1990s was because the tactics of community organizations had decidedly changed in the years since the war on poverty. On the whole, the organizations funded through the 1960s community action program were schooled, at least informally, in the Saul Alinsky model of organizing, which involved antagonistic, often violent confrontations with policy elites who were seen as representing the "power structure" (Grogan and Proscio, 2000). This radical posture, we have seen, is what brought community action under fire, delegitimized the idea of community empowerment as a poverty reform strategy, and at least partially contributed to the federal government's massive divestment from antipoverty policy during the 1980s and 1990s.

A new kind of community organization—exemplified by community development corporations (CDCs)—emerged in the wake of the war on poverty. Piggy-backing on the validation that the community action program had given to the political viability and assertiveness of the poor, while mindful of that program's pitfalls, CDCs over the past few decades have focused not on overthrowing the power structure but on community building—chiefly through housing and economic development. Numbering just a handful during the 1960s, by the turn of the century there were more than 3,600 CDCs, and they had gained visibility in nearly every major U.S. city (Grogan and Proscio, 2000).

CDCs aim to represent the residents of a particular neighborhood and empower them by building assets and leveraging local knowledge and resources, which CDCs see as essential given the fact that community agencies alone are inadequate to the task of mitigating the array of complex problems associated with urban poverty. For these reasons, CDCs have become interested in forging partnerships with municipal governments, businesses,

churches, and other mainstream institutions (Grogan and Proscio, 2000; Smith, 2001; Stoecker, 1997).

Although CDCs may at times embrace confrontational tactics resembling the organizing posture of their more radical 1960s' predecessors (Winkelman, 1997), the institutionalization of CDCs reflects a dramatic shift in the overall strategies undertaken by community organizations in their efforts to improve poor neighborhoods. This shift from organizing that is militant to organizing that is cooperation-oriented is significant in explaining foundations' and universities' interest in community partnerships. CDCs have become much more viable organizations with which to partner than were their predecessors. To be sure, among some elites the legacy of the community action program continues to carry with it skepticism about the possibility of collaborating with poor constituencies. However, this feeling has greatly receded over time, in large part because of the significant antipoverty work that CDCs have undertaken (Grogan and Proscio, 2000).

Therefore, even though the war on poverty had delegitimized community empowerment as an antipoverty strategy, the transformed organizing posture within poor communities has contributed toward the resuscitation of this idea. Community empowerment provides an attractive rationale for foundations as they try to maximize their impact as well as to universities that have abandoned their ivory towers. Moreover, these institutions now have organizational entities such as CDCs with which to work, a fact that has made community partnerships both possible and desirable.

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS AND THE IDEA OF EMPOWERMENT

The core similarity between CCIs and UCPs is that they are both partnerships between elite institutions and poor constituencies whereby community empowerment is the stated goal. These partnerships aim to give poor people a political voice in formulating poverty reforms, ideally ensuring that the poor will benefit from these reforms. It is noteworthy that foundations and universities embraced the community partnership ideal during the 1990s, a time in which the policymaking culture concerning poverty reform was undergoing massive transformation caused in part by a political reaction to how the idea of an empowered community had been put into practice in the past, via the war on poverty.

The Johnson administration had viewed community empowerment as a core piece of antipoverty policy because of the strong value Americans place on citizens directly participating in finding solutions to their own problems. The administration touted its community action program as reflecting "the traditional and time-tested American methods of organized local community action to help individuals, families, and whole communities to help themselves," and consequently "a merger of our past town meetings and citizen assemblies with the latest thinking of social scientists" (quoted in Zarefsky, 1986, pp. 44, 122). However, the administration was soon to learn that its community empowerment efforts would become the war on poverty's Achilles heel. The federal government set up what many mayors and neoconservative critics saw as a win-lose situation: poor constituencies became empowered by stripping away the control that municipal elites traditionally exercised over policies affecting urban neighborhoods (Halpern, 1995).

Coming about in the wake of a social policy transformation fueled by this and other neoconservative criticisms of the liberal welfare state, CCIs and UCPs have framed community empowerment as producing, this time around, a win-win situation. Community

partnerships aim to be "inclusive" and promote "equal participation" among all stakeholders. What is noteworthy in the re-conceptualization of community empowerment is that the community is not working alone, nor is the government a dominant actor: elite institutions, including but not limited to foundations and universities, retain control over the process and the funding. Since our focus is on the idea of community empowerment itself, we do not provide a detailed description of how the community partnerships actually function. For discussions of the day-to-day operation of CCIs, see Silver (2004) and *Voices from the Field* (2002). For UCPs, see Maurrasse (2001) and Ostrander (2004).

COMPREHENSIVE COMMUNITY INITIATIVES

The major response that foundations have made amidst the privatization of social policy has been to support an array of comprehensive community initiatives (CCIs) across the United States. During the 1990s, there were over 50 such initiatives targeting either a particular poor neighborhood or all of the poor neighborhoods within a given city. Many of these CCIs continue to exist. In some instances corporations and city governments have partnered with foundations in sponsoring CCIs; however, in no cases has the federal government been involved—a reflection of the transformed policy context in which these initiatives came on the scene (Brown and Garg, 1997; Walsh, 1997).

CCIs are premised on the notion that poverty stems from a lack of opportunity due to low income, joblessness, bad schools, ill health, crime-ridden neighborhoods, family dysfunction, dilapidated housing, and racism. Consequently, CCIs seek to enable the poor to foster relationships with powerful institutions that might provide the poor with greater access to opportunities. Since the sponsors of CCIs are themselves one of these institutions, a central goal has been to forge partnerships with poor constituencies (Fishman and Phillips, 1993; Walsh, 1997).

Consider how the explicitly stated goals of these partnerships reflect efforts by their foundation patrons to re-legitimize the idea of community empowerment, which had become discredited in the aftermath of the war on poverty. The italicized emphasis is ours:

- **Rebuilding Communities Initiative: funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, focuses on one neighborhood in each of the following cities—Boston, Philadelphia, Washington, Denver, and Detroit.** *Each neighborhood's vision of the future is best created by those who have the biggest stake in it—community residents, and representatives from other important local organizations, agencies, and businesses.* Such a bottom-up plan is more likely to represent real needs and interests and therefore has a better chance of being implemented. Further, *the Foundation's approach [seeks] to empower people through participation in the planning processes,* and then through involvement in the local governance structures that would continue to monitor and guide plan implementation. *Such participation [will] in time create the new leadership and local power needed to continue championing community interests* (Burns and Spilka, 1997, p. 17).
- **Neighborhood Transformation Initiative: funded by the Enterprise and Annie E. Casey Foundations, focus on the Sandtown-Winchester neighborhood of Baltimore.** *The goal of [Neighborhood Transformation] is to build a viable, working neighborhood in which residents are empowered to direct and sustain their community's physical, social, and economic development.* All public and private support systems—including housing, education,

employment, health care, and public safety—are directed to help residents achieve self-sufficiency and maximize their potential. The renewal effort ultimately will create a quality of life in Sandtown-Winchester that is desirable and provides for economic self-determination, which will fulfill current residents and potentially attract new community members (Brown, Butler, and Hamilton, 2001, p. 17).

- **Chicago Initiative: funded by multiple foundations, focus on Chicago.** To reconnect disenfranchised families and individuals with economic opportunity, the communities they live in must serve a useful purpose in the larger economy and offer a living environment that is hospitable and nurturing. *Community organizations, religious institutions, CDCs, service providers, businesses, schools, and colleges must come together to form the community's "inner circle." These local organizations and institutions must collaborate to create a common vision for the future of these communities* (Chicago Initiative, 1992).

UNIVERSITY-COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

Like CCIs, university-community partnerships (UCPs) were designed to assist poor neighborhoods and give residents a stake in addressing social problems at the local level. While informal interactions of many types occur between colleges and their neighborhoods, the partnerships alluded to here have been named and formalized at some level, and have received support (financial and/or in kind) from the universities and often another external source—usually the government or a foundation. "University-community partnership" is a large umbrella, and the partnerships are most alike in their diversity (Rubin, 2000, p. 224). UCPs can take a number of forms, have a range of goals, and be justified and funded in various ways. Some universities have an office dedicated to the partnership, to civic engagement, or to community outreach; others have a part-time staff person; and in other places the responsibility might be dispersed throughout academic departments or across schools. Partnership projects range from housing rehabilitation to tutoring for neighborhood children; from researching grant opportunities to underwriting a minority business incubator. UCPs approach the problem of urban poverty directly, by trying to provide tangible assistance (painting walls, hiring local contractors) and indirectly, by building capacity (educating neighborhood activists, providing incubator space for neighborhood entrepreneurs). Appealing to the new norm of university citizenship, while assuring that educational and research benefits are not compromised, UCPs offer a seemingly win-win policy approach for elite institutions and their neighborhoods.

Universities have entered into partnerships for other purposes, such as technology transfer and research and development, so cross-sector alliances are not new. What is unparalleled is the scope of their involvement in the problems of poverty and community revitalization, as well as the attempt to solve problems jointly rather than from the heights of the ivory tower. Here, the federal government has played a significant role, especially in encouraging universities to move beyond technical assistance. Federal funding took on its current form in 1994, when the Office of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) encouraged university-community involvement through a division devoted to partnerships, and a funding stream for Community Outreach Partnership Centers (COPC). This office defines UCPs as "institutions of higher education (that) are collaborating with community groups to apply research, scholarship, and service to real-life problems" (http://www.oup.org/about/about.html). The emphasis is on collaboration *with*, rather than service *to*, and these partnerships ideally result in a "working relationship" (Maurasse,

2001, p. 197). Empowerment is a specific goal, empowerment conceptualized as capacity building rather than activism. As stated by Andrew Cuomo, then Secretary of Housing and Urban Development (emphasis added):

> Grassroots organizations and residents are not passive recipients of this assistance. Program rules ensure that targeted communities are not merely laboratories for urban research, but partners in identifying the priority issues that grantee activities will address. *COPC empowers communities in an even more lasting way as well, by focusing university efforts on types of assistance that build community capacity.* By transferring to their local partners the knowledge, the skills, and the information that they need to shape their own destinies, COPC grantees help bring about fundamental changes that will continue to strengthen communities and families long after the COPC grant ends (http://www.oup.org/pubs/annrpt.html).

Since 1994, HUD has invested approximately $45 million in more than 100 colleges, universities, and community colleges to support community engagement; a portion of the funding has gone to historically black colleges and universities, to Alaskan and Hawaiian native institutions, and to Hispanic institutions (Urban Institute, 2002). The number of universities involved in the partnerships that do not receive federal assistance is difficult to determine, but since the federal funding is competitive, there is clearly interest and commitment beyond the dollars distributed.

COPC embodies the principles of empowerment and community involvement familiar to the current generation of community development organizations yet less common to universities. UCPs are not supposed to be one-sided in design or implementation, a type of engagement especially difficult for universities, given their legacy of expert-driven assistance and building walls, rather than fences. Universities are the recipients of the funding, so they retain financial control, but they are not simply to offer assistance or expertise: money is awarded to those who have a track record in working collaboratively, on projects deemed important by the community. The recent request for proposals makes the expectations quite explicit:

> Outreach, technical assistance, and applied research should be provided to neighborhoods and neighborhood-based organizations based on what the residents decide is needed, rather than what the institution concludes is appropriate for that neighborhood. Community-based organizations and residents should be empowered by the project and be your partners throughout the life of the project and beyond, from planning to implementation to activities beyond the grant. (http://www.oup.org/techassist/copc/copcpp.html)

Universities have responded to these expectations, and their project descriptions contain both explicit and implicit use of the revitalized and federally sanctioned community empowerment ideal (italics added):

- **The University of Illinois Community Outreach Partnership Center:** This program works to develop a model for neighborhood revitalization that builds neighborhood solidarity, leadership, and *empowerment*. Currently, it focuses specifically on issues of education and *community empowerment*. The program operates in conjunction with various organizations in Springfield. (http://www.uis.edu/copc/generalinfo.htm)

- **The Center for Public Policy Urban Initiatives at Temple University** is building a partnership between a North Philadelphia community, the City of Philadelphia, and the university. *The central theme of Urban Initiatives is community empowerment*. Rehabilitation of the physical and social landscape is achieved by linking the analytic, problem solving, and educational resources of Temple University with a broad-based coalition of agencies seeking to improve the quality of life in the Cecil B. Moore area of North Philadelphia. (http://www.temple.edu/CPP/about/index.htm)
- **San Francisco Policy Center (SFPC**) is a nonprofit research and action project of San Francisco State University. While the SFPC may initiate projects on its own, in most cases, projects originate by direct interaction with community groups. *Ultimately, SFPC's goal is to involve, empower, and build the capacity of community-based organizations.* (http://www.sfsu.edu/~urbins/sub/SFpolicy.htm)
- **Brown University's Swearer Center's** community-based programs are diverse. Many projects are structured as a partnership with a community organization, school, or government agency. . . . While the Center's definition of service includes many perspectives and approaches, it is grounded in a community development model of respect, cooperation, and partnership. We believe that for service to be of value it must develop through enduring relationships *that strengthen a community's capacity to meet critical needs.* (http://www.brown.edu/Departments/Swearer_Center/programs/index.shtml)

Through CCIs and UCPs, we observe elite organizations acting to benefit non-elites via community partnership. Because power is purportedly shared with poor constituencies, rather than transferred to them, this collaborative approach to social policy is considered an improvement on community action yet not a complete departure from its participatory philosophy. In these elite-initiated partnerships we see a reconfigured responsibility for the poor, as well as a change in the character of the elite institutions themselves. A "lexicon of community" (Edelman, 2000) is evident in the self-descriptions of CCIs and UCPs, in RFPs, and in evaluation reports completed by external agencies. These documents include repeated references to "partnerships," "empowerment," and "devolution"; language that implies that community interests be given primacy. This new community empowerment rhetoric is supported by the federal government, and sanctioned by foundations and universities. We now turn to a discuss discussion of the implications of this shift.

THE INSTITUTIONAL BENEFITS OF COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

It is significant that institutions not known for sharing power have been the sponsors of community partnerships. Indeed, notwithstanding our previous explanations, it is not immediately obvious why foundations and universities would champion such ostensibly egalitarian arrangements. Although they have had traditions of public purpose and historical concern with social issues, foundations and universities have typically acted *on* rather than *with* communities. In the face of this apparent irrationality, we suggest that participation in antipoverty partnerships has largely had symbolic value for universities and foundations. More specifically, we mean that through their resurrection of the idea of community empowerment, UCPs and CCIs have enabled universities and foundations to sustain their identities as distinctive, elite institutions during a time in which these identities have undergone significant external challenges.

Universities have traditionally rooted their identities in research and teaching, finding through these activities the "central character" and "claimed distinctiveness" required for stable organizational identity (Albert and Whetten, 1985:265). The central character of the university seems impervious to change: teaching and learning make up the core. However, the distinctiveness of this identity faltered in the late 1980s and 1990s as the economy grew increasingly knowledge-based and competitors emerged in the higher education industry. Community partnerships have allowed universities to regain a modicum of distinctiveness, but not simply by offering them an active social role, since many other organizations exist in order to advance public welfare. Rather, universities' distinctiveness has come to lie in their ability to link research and teaching to civic engagement, that is, to "connect the rich resources of the university to . . . pressing social problems. . ." as Boyer stated (1994). It is this connection that is evident in the community partnership model and that has become a distinct characteristic of contemporary universities.

For foundations, sponsoring community partnerships has similarly been a way to reinforce an institutional identity undergoing external challenges. Foundations have traditionally situated their central character in a commitment to collaboratively ameliorating major social problems, and their claimed distinctiveness has been to seed federal reforms. Yet, amid the devolution of policymaking responsibility that has taken place over the past two decades, foundations have not been able to pursue this goal in the manner they historically had—by funding programs that, if successful, would grow into larger federal initiatives. Even though their claimed distinctiveness has become threatened, their central character has not—community partnerships allow them to continue to collaborate and to address poverty reform. Whereas previously the collaboration had been with the federal government, now foundations, through CCIs, have collaborated with the constituencies most directly affected, and potentially helped, by poverty reforms. While such alliances remain key to their character, foundations' central distinctiveness can now be found in their *lack* of involvement with the federal policy apparatus. Foundations have taken the privatization mandate to heart, as CCIs have been implemented without public monies and with no expectation that the government be involved in poverty reform.

The institutional identities of universities and foundations also have revolved around their high social standing. Both enjoy obvious privilege in comparison with other organizations, and they have a legacy of benefiting elites rather than the less advantaged. Universities create and transmit the knowledge that is deemed worthy by professors and benefactors, knowledge that was only made available to the masses with the expansion of higher education following the Second World War, yet still is not equitably distributed (Boyer, 1990; Brint, 2002). Foundations, funded by wealthy individuals, largely donate to issues that directly benefit elites such as higher education, classical music, and art museums. Comparatively little goes to disadvantaged groups of any kind, and an even smaller percentage goes to the poor (Bombardieri and Robinson, 2004; Odendahl, 1987; Ostrander, 1989).

That universities and foundations have gotten involved in poverty amelioration is not, however, a challenge to their elite status. The power of these institutions is not compromised to any significant extent by virtue of their partnership commitments, largely because the community organizations are so relatively weak and because the partnership is given only a small percentage of total institutional resources. Rather, we argue, UCPs and CCIs actually serve to reinforce the elite status of these institutions since one way that

elites can assert that they are indeed elite is by establishing their authority among the disenfranchised (Aksartova, 2003).

Although the elite status of universities and foundations may have originated in their wealth, this status also has roots in each organization's longstanding position as the provider of valuable public goods such as philanthropic monies, education, or research. Such goods have not only been important to institutional identity but also offer these institutions legitimacy, defined as a social judgment of acceptance, appropriateness, and desirability (Suchman, 1995). Nonprofit organizations are especially vulnerable to legitimacy challenges because their environments are complex and multifaceted, their outcomes are difficult to measure, and social approbation alone determines their success (Alexander, 1998; Smith, 2001). Thus, legitimacy must be continually reinforced, even for well-established institutions such as universities and foundations (Aksartova, 2003).

Simply by embracing the partnership model, universities and foundations obtain legitimacy. To begin with, partnerships are prevalent and can be considered an institutionalized form themselves, thereby sharing their legitimacy with participants (Linder and Rosenau, 2000). Moreover, because it is empirically difficult to ascertain whether community partnerships actually empower poor communities, these partnerships present an opportunity for universities and foundations to buttress their moral legitimacy. Community partnerships encourage "activity [that] effectively promotes societal welfare" and conforms to altruistic ideals, which allows these partnerships to contribute to the legitimacy of the partnering institutions (Suchman, 1995, p. 579). In other words, embracing the community empowerment model, given its historically loose and slippery conceptualization, has enabled its sponsors to euphemize the fact that community partnerships do not measurably re-arrange power relations between elite institutions and the poor. Such euphemization, indeed, is a common characteristic of elite policy rhetoric (Schram, 1995; Edelman, 2000).

UCPs provide legitimacy to universities because they offer the real possibility of a revitalized neighborhood, as well as the idealized benefit of poverty amelioration through the participatory model. With education and knowledge production thought to be increasingly for private rather than public gain, the university sector has come to rely upon their collaborative community role as a new source of moral authority. Similarly, sponsoring community partnerships has enabled foundations to bolster their claims to legitimacy during a time of transition. CCIs have diverged from the philanthropic norm by directing funding toward an area that traditionally receives very little support, and by engaging in collaborative grant making. Typically, priorities are set and grant decisions made exclusively *inside* the foundation. There is little or no input from prospective grantees about which programs should be funded, let alone the level of input that has been typical of CCIs (Colwell, 1993; Nielsen, 1985). Therefore, the collaborative grant-making approach of the CCIs offers additional legitimacy to foundations by assuring donors that social needs are being met in an innovative manner.

Community partnerships have not only offered legitimacy to their sponsors but also to community participants (Ferman and Hill, 2004). Indeed, community groups may be even more in need of such legitimacy. At a time when government has lost credibility, local nonprofits can point to the fact that they are in partnership with established universities and foundations as a means to add to their own status and moral authority. More often

than not, community-based nonprofits subsist rather tenuously, so the resources and the cachet provided by partnerships have allowed these organizations to survive as well as garner additional dollars to work toward community betterment. Indeed, as privatization and devolution have become the norm, funding entities have often required that grant seekers provide evidence of involvement in collaborative arrangements.

Thus as elites have rehabilitated the idea of community empowerment through the partnership model, this model has, in turn, legitimized foundations and universities, providing institutional benefits that have little to do with poverty reform. In a parallel manner, community groups have been legitimized through their association with UCPs and CCIs, which have allowed them to reenergize community empowerment and experiment with citizen participation. While legitimacy may not have been the intent of these partnership efforts, it is an unanticipated consequence that benefits both the established institutions and local community groups.

CONCLUSION

This study of the revitalization of the idea of community empowerment calls into question two implicit assumptions about community partnerships held bytheir foundation and university sponsors: first, that community empowerment is a crucial means toward comprehensively revitalizing low-income neighborhoods, and second, that community partnerships have been a better vehicle for promoting community empowerment than were the community action programs of the 1960s. Critically analyzing each of these assumptions will enable us to substantiate our contention that community partnerships have become an enduring antipoverty strategy for reasons *other than* how empirically effective they have been in revitalizing low-income neighborhoods and ameliorating poverty.

The first of these assumptions—that community empowerment is a crucial means toward neighborhood revitalization—is one that, we have seen, the Johnson administration hailed as a hallmark of the war on poverty. Though his antipoverty program received scathing criticism because of the manner in which it was implemented, the core belief that the people best suited to solve a problem are those most immediately affected by it was sedorn questioned. Indeed, in resurrecting community empowerment as an antipoverty strategy, much of the rhetoric of the CCIs and UCPs has heralded the virtues of citizen involvement in making decisions about poverty reform measures.

It may indeed be the case that poverty can most effectively be ameliorated if those most immediately affected by it participate in problem solving. We know of no systematic empirical study that has substantiated this claim but the prevalence of this belief in American policy discourse suggests to us, however critical we may be, that it probably holds at least some kernel of truth. The more relevant issues for us to consider, however, pertain not to how accurate this belief actually is but rather to why this belief goes unquestioned and to what truths lie masked beneath it. Social commentators and scholars who have written about American culture since the founding of the Republic have noted the overwhelming penchant that Americans have for citizens' involvement in addressing the problems that affect them (i.e., Bellah et al., 1985). Alexis de Toqueville (1969) perhaps best characterized this cultural attribute in his comprehensive portrait of antebellum America, in which he described the vital roles played by voluntary associations in American life. This

idea of citizen participation is still salient (Putnam, 2000), and not limited to the United States. To some it has become "the central issue of our time" (United Nations Development Programme, quoted in Jones, 2003, p. 581), and is "rapidly approaching near hegemonic proportions in both the developed and less developed worlds" (Jones, 2003, p. 581).

This empowerment rhetoric, and the institutional benefits garnered by universities and foundations involved in community partnerships, have combined to mask the fact that these partnerships do not have the financial backing needed to fulfill their objectives. Nor are CCIs and UCPs prevalent enough to address the poverty problem nationwide. Pockets of improvement are possible, but the resources dedicated to this improvement cannot even come close to the $40 billion in federal aid to social services and community development cut by the Reagan administration, let alone the ongoing funding cuts made by successive administrations. Indeed, for every dollar of reduced federal social spending, private giving increases by just a few cents (Brown, 1999; Wolpert, 1997). Limited finances and scope are not the only shortcomings encountered by CCIs and UCP, but these two factors are significant enough in and of themselves to call into question the impact of the community partnership approach to poverty amelioration. Of course, foundations and universities have contributed millions of dollars to community partnerships, so the fact that their resources pale in comparison to the federal government's does not in itself mean that these partnerships have not produced meaningful results. The focus of our study solely on the rhetoric of community partnerships precludes us from drawing conclusions about outcomes, and certainly a more comprehensive investigation of these partnerships would be needed to determine what kinds of impacts they have made and the modifications that might improve their efficacy. This research is beginning to emerge, from both the practitioner and scholarly worlds, and clearly more is needed (*Voices,* 2002; Edelman, 2000; Silver, 2004; Urban Institute, 2002).

The second assumption about community partnerships that our study calls into question is that these partnerships are better mechanisms for promoting community empowerment than were the community action programs implemented under the war on poverty. The key difference between the two models, we have seen, is that the 1960s' version of community empowerment excluded policy elites—specifically municipal bureaucrats—from taking part, whereas the version in place since the 1990s has included elites—this time, foundation and university representatives. Yet, CCI and UCP rhetoric has not been about hailing the virtues of elite participation for its own sake but about the comparatively greater benefit to poor constituencies (in relation to community action) accrued when they work collaboratively with other entities interested in the revitalization of low-income neighborhoods.

As with the first basic assumption about community partnerships that we have critically analyzed, this one also masks what may well be an unmistakable truth about UCPs and CCIs: that whatever measure of "empowerment" these partnerships have promoted has gone hand in hand with, or worse yet, perhaps been subsumed by, poor constituencies seeing their interests coopted by their purported partners. While the structure of the war on poverty's community action program precluded any prospect of external cooptation— all decision-making power was in the hands of community action agencies—the more inclusive community partnership model, however sensitive it might be to avoiding undue elite influence, by design cannot ever circumvent the possibility of cooptation taking place

(Jones, 2003). While cooptation may be positive and can result in some shared power, over time independence can be lost, as famously noted by Selznick (1957). Contemporary observers point out that if partnerships are "successfully institutionalized, resistance to the negative effects of co-optation will become important" (LeGates and Robinson, 1998, p. 313). Cooptation, like resistance, is difficult to establish, and our data about CCI and UCP rhetoric cannot definitively make claims about whether and in what ways this scenario has occurred, but further scrutiny is warranted.

Our inclination to focus a critical eye on the possibility of cooptation is not merely based on our cynical reading of policy rhetoric about "inclusiveness" and "equal participation" between elites and poor; it is grounded, ratines, in prior studies that have called into question the partnership model. Two in particular have examined partnerships in Britain. Taylor (2001) claims that community organizations can at best become "peripheral insiders" to policy processes that continue to be steered by elites, especially elite institutions that often operate at regional, state, national, and global levels, while Atkinson (1999) argues that elites frame community empowerment rhetoric in ways that serve more to bolster their own power than to level the vast imbalances of power between partners. Atkinson goes on to write, "the mere existence of an official discourse advocating empowerment and partnership is no guarantee that it will actually be translated into practice in an unmediated fashion *or that the intention of such a discourse is genuinely to empower communities through participation in urban regeneration partnerships*" (p. 60, our emphasis). Indeed, concerning CCIs and UCPs we must question what their sponsors have espoused as their motives for backing these partnerships, and we should compare espoused motives with those that remain tacit. Our analysis in the last section suggests that interests in repairing institutional identity and solidifying institutional legitimacy tell us more about underlying motives than does rhetoric about "inclusiveness" and "equal participation."

It probably comes as little surprise that self-interested intentions lie behind an altruistic facade. But, what is significant about this point is that it exposes the paradox at the heart of elite-initiated community empowerment: If antipoverty policies are elite-initiated, can they ever truly empower in the ways they promise? This question, while clearly in need of its own empirical investigation, in the abstract suggests why community partnerships have become an institutionalized antipoverty strategy and may well remain predominant for the foreseeable future. These partnerships represent what we see as a middle-ground approach to poverty reform whose political palatability make them seemingly beyond criticism. By "middle ground," we mean that they are a marriage between traditional top-down, elite-driven policies and entirely bottom-up policies like the community action program. That program came about in large part out of a criticism of the prior top-down model that had been in vogue, and community action in turn underwent its own criticism for being too bottom-up and hence for producing a scenario in which poor constituencies won out at the expense of policy elites.

Community partnerships are, alternatively, a "win-win" scenario. They tap into deep-seated beliefs about the value of citizen participation *and* allow policy elites to maintain control. Moreover, the partners are ostensibly apolitical entities—universities and foundations. Government, with its inevitably partisan policies, is no longer prominent, even though its influence has not entirely disappeared. We believe these factors explain the durability of the community empowerment idea and the current popularity of the

partnership model. Community partnerships provide a forum for elites to cultivate a non-controversial strategy of elite-initiated community empowerment. Whether these partnerships are actually effective empowerment strategies or measurably revitalize low-income neighborhoods and ameliorate poverty remains much less certain.

Acknowledgments

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