

Building Alliances Across Differences

Center for Gender in Organizations

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Promises and Dilemmas of Coalitions from Varied Perspectives: Latina/Latino Political Organizing in Boston and the Role of White Men in Multicultural Coalitions

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Presenters:

Mark Chesler, *Professor of Sociology, University of Michigan*

Carol Hardy-Fanta, *Director of Research for the Center for Women in Politics and Public Policy, John W. McCormack Institute of Public Affairs, University of Massachusetts*

Mark Chesler began by talking about white male privilege and how white men can engage in and benefit from multicultural coalitions. He discussed the “Rules of Engagement” for white men both inside and out of coalitions. Throughout, Chesler explored the dilemmas facing white males in multicultural coalitions and suggested possible guidelines for forming successful coalitions.

Carol Hardy-Fanta discussed her view that Latino community empowerment may depend to a great extent on the political leadership of Latina women. She illustrated this by showing how, when the definition of political leadership is expanded to include community-based—not solely position-derived—forms of leadership, a more nuanced understanding of political leadership emerges. Hardy-Fanta also discussed the ways in which the Latinas/Latinos in Boston have formed alliances among themselves (e.g., Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans, Cubans, Central and South Americans, Dominicans), how alliances have worked between Latinos and other minority cultures, and potential alliances between Latinas and white western feminists.

***The Role of White Men in Multicultural Coalitions* by Mark Chesler**

Mark Chesler began by explaining how organizations can learn from the work done in and on social movements working through issues of difference concerning race, class, and gender. Organizational work tends to depict change efforts as being built around consensus and harmony. A conflict-oriented/interest group approach is very rarely

discussed and coalitions are often not considered part of organizational work. Chesler is interested in using lessons from social movement work around conflict and coalitions to work through issues on the micro (interpersonal) and mezzo (organizational) level. He distinguished this from work in the macro level (e.g., large communities, political arenas). In particular, Chesler focused on practical issues that white men face when working in multicultural coalitions. Chesler does this work to move away from characterizing white men as the “prime victims” of social change in order to move into exploring the roles that white men have and can play in social justice movements. Chesler shared some rules of engagement for white men in multicultural coalitions.

Rules of Engagement for White Men Working in Multicultural Coalitions

1. White men need to understand and be aware of their role as representatives of the social category “white males.” In order to do this, white men must overcome a focus on individualism, or their desire to be understood as an individual. Rather, in multicultural coalitions, it is important to understand the ways in which one carries the baggage of accumulated privilege. At the same time, it is important to confront instances of one’s own unmerited privileges. White men need, therefore, to share the “secrets of the white male club” and discuss with coalition partners how best to negotiate and/or tactically use privileges that are accorded to them.
2. White men must play an active role, be aware, and be assertive, but they must also be responsive and subordinate to the needs of coalition partners. It is important to let others lead and to publicly acknowledge their leadership. Chesler gave the example of a black man and a white man who worked together on civil rights issues. The white man always referred to the black man as “boss” when they were in public forums. He did this in order to encourage others to see the black man as the leader, rather than falling into the traditional pattern of deferring to the white man.
3. White men must be attentive to the need for re-education, but should not expect others to do the work of re-education. This involves being committed to re-educating other white men, and being willing to be questioned, challenged, even attacked for one’s positions without resorting to privilege in order to negotiate the challenges.
4. A safe space is needed in order to be able to work out issues, but safety does not need to be built from love and affection (though it does not preclude them). Rather, the important components for building a safe space are respect, sharing power, and doing productive work together.

5. White men need to learn when to let minority groups separate and caucus. They must also work to establish new ways of decision-making, new rituals, and new celebrations that are representative of the entire group rather than built around norms of traditionally white male groups.
6. White men must not seek the victim status. As well, they must alter the style of “hanging tight” when challenged, and instead engage in the process of working out issues with others.

Rules of Engagement with Other White Men Who Are Not Coalition Members

1. White men must develop new ways of working with other white men, as well as acknowledge the status privilege differences among white men.
2. White men need to figure out how to deal with white male opponents by working in caucuses of white men. Yet it is important to not revert to traditional tactics—internalizing, attempting to overcome, or attempting to grab the high ground of moral righteousness—as these tactics do not lead to lasting change. They need to be prepared for being viewed suspiciously as changing tactics involves challenging norms.
3. White men must reconcile the dominant positions they enjoy with the social justice they are working for. In other words, how can one in a position of privilege acknowledge this and continue to struggle for social change?

Disbanding Coalitions

Chesler concluded by asking the audience to think about how we can disband temporary coalitions when the work is accomplished, without it being perceived as cessation or failure. If we can think of coalitions as temporary and issues-driven, it might be more possible to accomplish coalition goals.

Latina/Latino Political Organizing in Boston by Carol Hardy-Fanta

While Chesler focused his discussion on micro and mezzo level work, Carol Hardy-Fanta focused her discussion on macro level work, or the work of Latina women in communities and political organizations. She began by explaining that Latino community organizing and community life is one of constant coalition-building, given the diversity of Latinos.

Hardy-Fanta made a distinction between two different ways to frame questions about Latino/a community organizing: Is the goal to bring Latinos/as to the table of already-framed discussion, or is it to explore and learn from the ways in which Latinos/as do organizing within their own communities for their own issues? She explained the importance of this question in the following three arenas:

1. Visibility

Within the Latino community, women are more represented as elected officials of their racial and ethnic group than are women in general. As well, Latinas win their campaigns at remarkable rates compared to women in general. Hardy-Fanta talked about the surprise being that we often do not see the powerful role that Latinas play in their communities. Latinas do a lot of the work of building coalitions among Latinos by building relationships with members of the community and raising awareness of issues important to all Latinos. And yet Latinas are stereotyped as welfare recipients who do not want to work; Latino culture is stereotyped as sexist and as overly masculine, thus painting Latinas as passive. Therefore, Latino politics is stereotyped as the province of men only. Hardy-Fanta discussed the ways in which knowledge of actual representation and of who is doing the work in the community challenge negative stereotypes about Latinas and Latino culture.

2. Agenda-setting

When trying to build multicultural coalitions, it is important to consult the people you want to set up services for or work with rather than coming to them with a set agenda.

3. Implications for coalitions and feminisms on the contradictions between the interests of those exercising power and the real interests of those excluded.

It is imperative to pay attention not only to who sets the agenda, but also to how we perceive what issues can be on the table. In the US, the challenge is to be able to see ourselves as not having all of the answers. There are lessons to be learned from work that is done in Latin/Central American communities. For example, Puerto Rico has an 80-90% voting rate. What lessons can we learn from them around getting individuals to participate in voting? For feminist coalitions, we need to examine the issues that we bring to the table. Western feminism is still linked with equality in the workplace and abortion rights. Yet, in terms of global coalitions, these issues may not resonate with women. Instead, uniting issues might be, for example, welfare reform, food, housing, and/or transportation. The point here is that inclusiveness is good, but it is not enough.

Conclusion

Hardy-Fanta and Chesler made the following final remarks about coalition building:

1. Coalitions are often fluid in that they may change in composition depending on the issues that are addressed and on the population mix. We can learn from coalitions' successes and failures.
2. Communities—both inside and outside the workplace—are built on needs and agendas, not on the notion of wanting to be together. Thus, communities are generally a result, rather than a starting point, for coalition-building. Having clear goals and tasks is vital to coalition formation. As well, it is important to bring stakeholders together in order to set an agenda.
3. Diversity taskforces in corporations are different than multicultural coalitions in social movements in that the very real drivers of effectiveness and profit mean that the work may be structured differently in a corporation. Depending on the corporation, it may be more (or less) possible to push a more progressive agenda and to talk about “justice work.”
4. The work that we do within coalitions is different than the work we must do when we are facing opponents or adversaries, which is also necessary work.
5. It is important to understand that power and privilege are relational, rather than starkly exercised or not exercised by groups. Depending on the circumstance, a group's relationship to power and privilege will shift. These dynamics are key to understanding how to effect change.

Readings

Chesler, M. 1996. White Men's Roles in Multicultural Coalitions. In *Impacts of Racism on White Americans*, 2nd Edition (B. Bowser and R. Hunt, Eds.), pp. 202-229. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

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