Working collectively in competitive times: case studies from New Zealand and Australia

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Abstract   Collectives offer an alternative organisational structure to service delivery organisations that seek to embody critical social change. This model is challenging to implement as its assumptions and values are contrary to the dominant socio-political climate of economic rationalism. This paper explores experiences of two workers employed as coordinators in collective-based organisations in Australia and New Zealand. They share the joys and challenges of these experiences, and conclude with five key reflections about implementing this model: keeping reflective and honest about philosophical assumptions, keeping process central, having robust conflict resolution processes, reflect about the external factors influencing organisational structure, and finding ways to value workers.

Introduction

In 2007, there remain a small, but significant, number of organisations in Australasia which continue to work as collectives. In this article, we explore the challenges to implement this model within the transformed socioeconomic landscape of early twenty-first century capitalism, where notions of individualism are dominant and efficiency and accountability are seen as core criteria for judging organisations. This paper is an exploration of themes raised in two Australasian practice experiences of working in service delivery/advocacy organisations that are structured as collectives: the Wellington People's Centre (WPC) in New Zealand and the Council of Single Mothers and their Children (CSMC) in Australia. It is important to note that both authors have undertaken 'coordinating' roles within these collectives, so this has critically informed our perspectives.

There will be many different perspectives from others in these collectives that can add to, and enrich those that we offer here.

Service-based collectives in Australasia emerged in the 1970s, spurred by feminist thinking. Feminist approaches are numerous, complex, and often divided along lines of class, race, and gender politics (see, for example, Freeman, 1973; Weeks, 1994; Branigan and Keebaugh, 2005). The most critical elements of the particular feminist approach we explore here are, firstly, recognition of the need for an examination of the deeply embedded structures of power and dominance that operate in both inter-personal and organisational relations and questioning the resultant inequality. Secondly, the feminist approach taken up by these collectives meant that attention to process and integration of the personal with the political relations were central to their functioning. The strengths of collectives rest in their ability to engage and work as a community towards common goals, rather than professionals making 'expert' decisions about them. However, complex challenges face those who continue to choose this alternative way of working.

Background to collective organising

'Collectives have emerged from a radical political framework and seek to model organisations that are deliberately structured to enhance behaviour based on co-operation, reciprocity, trust and equality' (Jones and May, 1992, p. 53). They can be distinguished from other organisations by their collaborative, empowering approach, which ideally should incorporate an absence of formal hierarchy and leadership, non-specialisation of roles, focus on the equal participation of all members in the collectives, conscientious sharing of knowledge and skills, and the use of consensus decision-making. As issues of process are central to collectives, their aim is to reflect the values in *how things are done,* not just what is done (Jones and May, 1992, p. 218; Onyx, 1995; Rosier, 2001, p. 137). For example, writers on collectives have attempted to tease out the dynamics of power, citing that while formal power may be equal in collectives, the dynamics of informal power must be acknowledged for a collective to function well (Freeman, 1973; Onyx, 1995; Rosier, 2001). We, the authors, believe in collective forms of organising and operating.

The contemporary structural context of economic rationalism

The changes over three decades in the socio-political landscapes of Australia and New Zealand have been significant during which economic rationalism has become the dominant ideology. The market is again the embedded

dominant societal force and the level of responsibility and support that governments are prepared to take for the welfare of their constituents has dramatically diminished. In both countries, the opportunity to improve the material conditions of life, as well as access to opportunities and services has decreased for many people including (but certainly not limited to) the unemployed and single mother headed families. Contemporary organisations are required to operate within the structures that give emphasis to accountability and 'risk minimisation'. Funding bodies often require modes of operating, legal, and regulatory requirements that challenge the collective ideal.

Wellington People's Centre (People's Centre)

The WPC was established in 1992 in the midst of macro-economic change led by the conservative National Government, which included large-scale benefit cuts.

The organisation was spawned by three groups: the 'Wellington Unemployed Workers Union' influenced by Marxist ideology, the 'DPB Action Group' with a strong foundation within feminism, and 'Inner City Ministries' (ICM), an inter-denominational church-based organisation. These groups came together with a vision of an organisation where people on benefits and low incomes could work together both in delivering services they required, and advocating for themselves. Membership to the organisation was by a small monthly amount and open to all the community. There were two aspects of the organisation: low-cost health services, where access required membership, and advocacy services, which could be accessed by members and non-members alike.

The history of The People's Centre is characterized by heady moments of political activism, perpetual funding crises, and ongoing internal conflict – often between staff and the core group/management committee. When one of the authors was employed in 2003 as the coordinator of an advocacy service, the Benefit Rights Service, she experienced one cycle of all of these aspects. The early years of the WPC were characterized by a 'make do' approach where the collective model was central, including flat wage structures and everyone being part of 'core group' meetings.

Over time, the core group met less often, delegating responsibility for day-to-day management to staff. Coordinators were given the responsibility for other staff, clearly introducing a hybrid model, as staff did not report to one another, but to a coordinator. Funding changes meant that the crèche was no longer viable, and was closed, making it more difficult for parents to participate in the life of the WPC. A philosophical tension emerged between the need to deliver quality services (particularly health services) and the centrality of collective participation. Services delivered by health

professionals were seen as specialist services, and these staff were paid accordingly (although significantly below industry norms). More recently, the requirements of funding bodies have become more stringent and complex, leading to coordinators being employed with specialist know-ledge. Thus, while the model has shifted from that of a pure collective, the ideology of collectivity remains central as the vision being implemented was about challenging the way that power operates throughout society.

The People's Centre has emerged from three organisations with comp-lementary, but differing philosophical approaches, and conflict arose when differences were not explicitly acknowledged and addressed. This pattern has continued through the life of The People's Centre. When there is clarity about the implications of change, these can be integrated into a shared story. When unclear, the subsequent ambiguity leaves people without a shared foundation from which to work. Some health service employees see themselves as underpaid compared with their col-leagues elsewhere, whereas other staff see their pay as part of their commit-ment to social justice. As a new employee in the organisation, it took one of the authors there was an assumption she would 'manage' the staff team, rather dealing with difficulties with individuals through a shared process.

Problems with process concerns flow from a lack of clarity of philosophical approach. When there is not clarity about the philosophical approach, people will not be clear about the foundation for certain processes, and why they are central. For example while 'consensus' was valued as a decision-making process, people were not given information or training about how to under-take these. Therefore, people were expected to facilitate when they lacked the skills for this role, and the unchecked dynamics of informal power led to a very powerful informal hierarchy. Long discussions were held over the details of decisions, when perhaps it was the strategic direction or principles that should have been the priority. Often conflicts would ensue over many meetings without clear decisions being made. People also developed ways to get around collective processes, such as waiting until someone was not at the meeting to bring a decision, or seeing the decision as outside the scope of the group and acting independently.

Practical considerations were also vital, e.g. when one of the authors began working, the administration and information systems were unclear and the office layout did not 'make space' for volunteers. Those who held the institutional knowledge became required reference points on a daily basis, and there was a significant turnover in volunteers. To strengthen the collective processes, we cleaned and sorted our office space, ensuring all had workspaces. Training was offered in computer use and sub-groups developed for people to work to their interests, such as external training or political work.

One of the turning points came when a longstanding member realized the power she held within the group derived from her role, experience, and personality. She made a deliberate decision not to be competitive or focused on self in collective meetings, but to use this power to better shape the group. She brought training to the group about group-processes. Another person suggested we begin our meetings by 'touching base' with each person's experience, which provided a stronger foundation for ensuring process or maintenance functions, not just task ones, were being validated. The role of coordinator was also clarified, and those decisions that needed to be brought to the collective and what functions (such as staff discipline) could not be dealt with by the collective were made explicit.

In moving from a laissez-faire mode of operating, systems were made more explicit and accessible, and people were clearer about how they could participate constructively. Both formal and informal power dynamics continued to operate. Those with more experience or those in the coordinator role did have more power, but this was more likely to be explicitly acknowledged. There also remained a tension between doing things in the 'professional' way, and being a 'participatory self-determined' service. The unstated question was how do we provide a service that affirms dignity, privacy, and quality of information, all professional service aims, while still remaining a 'by members for members' service. Added to this was that many of the people who accessed the services of the Benefit Rights Service were not members of the broader WPC, so it is unclear whether they experienced our service as obviously different from other organisation providers.

Process concerns were just as vital in deciding a political strategy. These decisions included discussions with other groups nationally. All groups had been used to a highly 'conflictual' process of political advocacy that understood our role as the oppressed victims and saw the Government as the enemy. However, when the context shifted to a Labor Government seeking a 'dialogue' of sorts with benefit rights groups, a different response was required. Our concerns were about whether dialogue would lead to co-option, and how to ensure our advocacy voice was most effective in this context. What was needed were thorough discussions, attention to processes of inclusion, and a commitment to work through the implications of this new context. However, the conversation was on the detail of policy rather than approach, and often dominated by people with a long history in the movement, which left little space for new ideas or approaches.

Group processes become central when dealing with conflict. During a funding crisis, caused by lower than expected income from grants and membership fees, and some unexpected costs, the dominant response was to blame the coordinator for 'not doing enough', and the result was

a massive pressure on this individual. Throughout the conflict, the WPC lacked a structural analysis, i.e. that funding was shrinking and consequently collective ways of operating were being marginalised.

There was also a highly conflictual and divisive Enterprise Bargaining Process. The Management Committee and staff felt deeply misunderstood by one another, and began to distrust one another's motives. The irony was that there was a significant cross-over between members of the staff and management committee, and in fact a number of people needed choose to identify with one or another group. Appearing to underline the conflict was conceptual issues, such as what workers should be willing to do 'for the cause', and also what the organisation's responsibility was in finding sufficient funds to pay reasonable wages. Philosophical issues seemed to be at the core of the conflict.

The Council of Single Mothers and their Children

The CSMC was established in 1969 in inner city Melbourne, Australia, with the objective of eradicating legal and social discrimination against single mothers. CSMC has now advocated and lobbied on behalf of single mothers and their children for more than 35 years. It was established, and continues to define itself as, a feminist self-help collective.[1]

As with the WPC, CSMC was formed in a heady moment of political activism and the organisation has taken many different forms in the intervening three decades. However, it has always been run 'by and for' single mothers. For the past decade, it has operated on a service delivery model; running a telephone support, information and referral line alongside undertaking policy and social change work. It now receives core funding from the Victorian State Government Department of Human Services (DHS).

In line with its philosophical base of 'self-help', only single mothers or the daughters of single mothers are employed at CSMC. They currently employ six part-time paid workers: a co-coordinator, finance worker, two project workers, and two telephone contact staff. Half a dozen unpaid volunteers contribute in various ways to the organisation's daily operations, and a voluntary 'management collective' directs its operations. The contradictory term 'management collective' in and of itself embodies the complexities and challenges embedded in this organisational model. One of the authors was a voluntary member of the management collective from 1998 to 2002 and later took up a paid position as the co-coordinator from 2004 to 2005.

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1 One of CSMC's first activist campaigns was to fight for the introduction of social security benefits for single mothers. These efforts were rewarded when the Victorian state Government extended family assistance to single mothers in 1969 and later, when the newly elected Whitlam Federal Labor Government introduced the Supporting Mothers Benefit in July 1973. See West (1991) for an engaging account of CSMC's origins and early campaigns.

The common identity of 'single mothers' acted as a coherent means around which solidarity was established and continually re-affirmed. Organisational decisions were determined on a 'by and for approach', whereby single mothers, a social grouping far more commonly spoken 'about' and 'on behalf of', were centrally involved in determining their own goals and priorities. This process was an extremely empowering and positive one for the majority of the women involved in it.

The challenge inherent in this collective identity, however, was when women's individual needs became conflated with the organisation's purposes. For example, it was quite common for collective members who were experiencing crises common to single motherhood, such as post-relationship conflict, poverty, or court proceedings, to attempt to pursue these issues as organisational priorities. As Rosier acknowledges, these kinds of difficulties can lead to a group's purpose becoming lost (Rosier, 2001, p. 27).

This conflation of the needs of the individual and the organisation sometimes put women in the invidious position of, as one of the collective aptly described it, being a 'virtual boss' as a member of the management collective, who was seeking services and support from their 'employees' (S. Keebaugh, personal communication). This could create difficulties for both the management collective members and the paid workers, as it considerably blurred the boundaries of the relationships.

A critical organisational issue for CSMC in the contemporary, neo-Liberal political context was the feeling of constantly being 'under siege', as welfare benefits and child support entitlements contracted and the bureaucratic burden of accountability to receive them at all increased markedly. A long-term collective member evocatively described the collective's positioning as:

> 'being plagued with the foresight of the next odious act that will worsen single mothers situation, yet knowing like a twig in front of an avalanche the ability to prevent or significantly alter events is limited' (S. Keebaugh, personal communication).

One of the unfortunate outcomes of feeling the organisational weight of such a struggle was that it lead to practices such as collective members and paid workers alike were not taking lunch breaks, or doing hours of un-requested, unpaid overtime because of their intensely personalised desire to avert such crises. These practices were problematic: both because they were an effective means of the organisation exploiting the labour of its workers and also because they had the potential to lead, at the worst of times, to a collective solidarity of martyrdom. The next section will explore how these dynamics were reinforced by the increasing

bureaucratisation of the organisational environment under economic rationalism.

From a small activist group that ran out of a kitchen in the 1970s, CSMC grew to be a large, policy focused organisation that employed upwards of a dozen people in the 1980s, then contracted to being almost completely de-funded in the early 1990s. Since being re-funded by the Victorian State Government in the mid-1990s, CSMC has operated largely on a service delivery model. It is required to demonstrate detailed accountability for its limited funding to the Victorian State Government's DHS.

An integral component of this financial accountability was the requirement to keep the organisation's overheads as lean as possible. Thus, paid positions in the organisation were few (six part-time paid workers) and all staff were poorly paid, which sometimes left them feeling undervalued and overburdened. Nevertheless, counter-posed with this were unpaid collective members who, at times, were dedicating more time and labour to the organisation than paid staff and sometimes felt resentful of the entitlements of paid staff; however meager they may have been.

The CSMC collective has attempted to respond creatively to these challenges. While finances have been tightly constrained in relation to wages, the collective has imaginatively used its role as 'virtual bosses' to ensure that staff have been given well above award carer's leave entitlements to be with sick children. A child-friendly office environment has been set up for volunteers and paid workers alike with TV, video, and toys, where children are welcomed on curriculum days, when they are sick or when child care arrangements fall apart. Volunteers are also offered paid, quality child care options for the times they are working, and a meal and a convivial time are always included in management collective meetings. An ongoing challenge for the collective is how to maintain what Rosier describes as this 'spirit of generosity' (Rosier, 2001, p. 35) when there are so many financial pressures and so much at stake in the nature of the work.

There were many reasons why women became involved with CSMC. These ranged from wanting to earn a wage to pay their bills, improve the social and economic status of single mothers, gain skills, experience that could lead to paid employment, and 'help' women in crisis or to have some time away from the children. At the heart of these was differences in conceptualisation of the identity of 'single mother' between a proud, freely chosen, independent identity, and a positioning not wanted and seemingly inflicted by economic circumstance and society (e.g. divorced, unemployed, possibly homeless, mother with no child support).

It was common, however, for these differences not to be dealt with directly. As women, who were engaged in the work of 'helping' or 'empowering' other women (depending on individual perspectives), differences of

opinion were often viewed as an unforgivable breach of solidarity. When the dominant mode of group interaction was affirmation and solidarity, which was positive at its best yet, at its worst, it could manifest as conflict avoidance. Everyone was also very concerned to 'keep themselves nice' (Freeman, 1973), which also manifested as conflict avoidance. Rosier describes such sensitivities around conflict as:

> Many people go to extraordinary lengths to avoid 'confrontation' and when 'confronted' will respond as though their whole lives were being threatened – even when they are simply being asked to consider another way of doing something. (Rosier, 2001, p. 31)

Being a collective that prides itself on being open and inclusive, CSMC welcomed all women willing to give up their time and energy to contribute. It is, therefore, inevitable that not everyone will share precisely the same philosophical underpinnings. This section has demonstrated the need to support people who are working collectively to assuage their anxieties around such differences, so they may remain connected to the empowering elements of the feminist philosophy at the core of the organisation's practice.

Recommendations

Keep reflective and honest about philosophical assumption
Often organisations start with very clear politics, values, and approaches. However, over time, with external pressure and new people in the organisations, this becomes less clear. Often this means each individual is approaching the organisation from a differing perspective of an 'ideal form', while we all live in a society that values the competitive. If the conversations about what it means to be a collective are not open and transparent, then shared meanings can be lost.

It is also vital to note and name when the organisation goes through a change in philosophical position clearly. When some staff are responsible for others, it is a clear marker that the purist collective model has shifted. If the organisation develops into a hybrid model, then be clear about which aspects of collectives remain, and which have been discarded. It is possible to have some collective ideals and processes within hierarchical structures or membership groups. Some of these choices may be about the way in which you want to present your ideas, both within the organisation and externally.

Process must remain central
Process aspects are central to collectives. Because responsibility for both decisions and the work being undertaken is shared, there is a greater

need to communicate in ways that have shared meanings, give space for the participation of all members, and for people to understand how their behaviour is affecting others. Within the current competitive and outcome-focused context, it is easy to loose this focus. This will inevitably break down the ability for the group to 'be a collective', and often will mean the structure of the collective is left as a shell with no true substance. Effective process must ensure group norms and member expectations are agreed upon, followed regularly, and communicated to new members. It also includes having opportunities for members to understand the perspectives of others outside a particular debate. This later point can be addressed through retreats and reflection days, warm-up or team building activities, and social events.

Conflict resolution

Collective processes give scope for other ways of resolving conflict that may be different from competitive norms. As organisations believe in the structural factors of our work, however, it is noticeable that we so often 'scapegoat'. There must be ongoing dialogue about structural causes of social problems to ensure we do not blame one another for structural problems, while training may be required to learn how to deal with conflict, which is inevitable, in a peaceful and people affirming manner.

Organisational culture

Organisational culture is influenced by both internal and external factors. Collectives in this current 'high-risk' environment have deliberately chosen an organisational culture that contradicts the mainstream external environment. However, the environment around us inevitably influences us. For example, funding bodies will seek to have a key 'senior' contact for the organisation who is responsible for meeting funding criteria, having quality assurance or equivalent procedures, policies, and the like. We must be clear about the factors of the environment that are seeking to shape our organisation and make clear choices about these.

Since collective organisations are unusual, external change exposes them to more risk of funding loss. This will often lead to organisational anxiety if they do not meet these criteria. In times of funding uncertainty, we need to be especially clear of the organisational philosophy, and process outcomes. If there is no solidarity, then these are the times we blame individuals within the organisation and we are at risk of imploding.

Value workers

Organisations that wish to be sustainable and have consistency of membership need to value workers. A work ethic that expects workers to contribute

'all for the cause', but does not provide life-giving support to them, is likely to burn out people and reinforce the oppression it is attempting to fight.

There is a significant tension within small voluntary collectives about the limited funding that is received by the organisation and the needs of workers. Workers are motivated by their depth of commitment to the values of the organisation and will therefore naturally contribute more than the expectations of their job descriptions. However, there is a distinction between workers contributing to the cause, and organisations exploiting this commitment. A similar tension exists in relation to wage structures. Collectives traditionally have a flat wage structure to reinforce the idea that each person's contribution is equally important. The tension is between this practice and the need to acknowledge differential skills and experience of those who coordinate or undertake specialist tasks. This is made even more complex by the reality that there are likely to be paid and unpaid workers conducting similar work. In a pure collective, all workers would receive the same remuneration. It is nevertheless ironic that often organisations that seek to fight poverty have their workers remain in financial poverty because of their inability to pay workers.

Amidst this tension, there are practical things organisations can do and aspects of these are strength of both CSMC and The People's Centre. This can be done by giving practical things such as extra leave entitlements, and in accommodating different life circumstances, such as workers also being parents or struggles with health/mental health issues.

Conclusion

The collective model was a utopian ideal for many, or quite possibly all, the people involved in both The People's Centre and CSMC. It is precisely because it is so idealised a model, however, that it is so hard to achieve. For a collective to function well requires that everyone involved is self-aware, prepared to take responsibility for both themselves and the group and is deeply attuned to the complexities of inter-personal dynamics. It asks *a lot* of those who are involved in it.

This paper has made clear that effective collective process will not just happen organically. One of the critical conundrums in the present socio-political environment is that the more bureaucratic an organisation becomes, the less those operating within it actually do have to be responsible for themselves. We believe, however, that there is great potential for collectives to work effectively as long as everyone engaged in them remembers to remain diligent, reflexive and, above all else, generous.

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