

## **Intercultural Strategies for Racial Harmony: Case Study of COPS in San Antonio, Texas**

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A critical determinant of racial harmony in the American city is the sense of fairness by municipal government in representation of racial minorities. San Antonio, Texas, provides an excellent example of how a non-government community group can serve to achieve this fairness. Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS) originated in the early 1970's and diminished the role of the Good Government League (GGL) which represented primarily the ruling party and Anglo business perspective. Aligned with Catholic parishes, COPS began to represent the largely disenfranchised Hispanic population, to secure more equitable city council representation, and to restore some balance in the allocation of resources. The ultimate success of former Mayor Cisneros built on their initial work. This paper examines the role of COPS in the development of San Antonio with emphasis on the intercultural communication strategies and tactics employed in the social change process.

At a 1991 conference in Taiwan, the senior author presented a paper about interethnic conflict and harmony in San Antonio, Texas (Hill 1991). The paper concluded with a set of guidelines by which to determine the relative degree of interethnic harmony in a community. Among the guidelines were observations about community leadership and means for the constructive expression of discontent. A conclusion of the paper was that San Antonio met most of the guidelines and received a very positive score on

the index of interethnic harmony. Central to this success and reflective of the leadership and constructive expression of discontent is the Communities Organized for Public Service or COPS. The following paper extends the previous study with a more intensive examination of the role of COPS in the achievement of relative success with interethnic relations in San Antonio. More specifically this paper will explain COPS as an outgrowth of Saul Alinsky's community development program, examine its unique development before and after the mayoralty of Henry Cisneros, and provide a concluding assessment of the lessons COPS can extend to other communities with the potential of ethnic strife.

### **Alinsky and the COPS**

One of the most influential teachers and writers about community development in twentieth-century America is Saul Alinsky. Many would classify him as a "refugee" from the wild, American '60's who believed strongly in the politicalization of the "grass roots" in the redirection of their communities. Through his *Rules For Radicals* (1971) and training programs Alinsky taught his popular tactics for the rank and file to achieve maximum impact in our democratic processes. Ernesto Cortes, one of the founding fathers of COPS, was a graduate of Alinsky's Industrial Areas Foundation training program and used many of Alinsky's ideas to guide his efforts with COPS (Dribben 1982: 12A). Another later president of COPS, Beatrice Cortez, also attended an Alinsky training program and became a disciple of this popular approach (Dribben 1982: 16A). To understand the strategies and tactics used by COPS, therefore, requires an understanding of Alinsky's position and its unique adaptation to the San Antonio environment.

Philosophically Alinsky is strongly pragmatic. Although he considers himself a revolutionary, he believes the real radical works within the system to change it. To some of his critics, his tactics certainly appeared revolutionary and extreme, but the intensity of those strong techniques was designed to get opponents off balance and not to ruin the system. For example, the reason why the committed radical cut his hair is to be more widely accepted. This is why you must respect your opponents' values and not burn the American flag or call him foul names (Alinsky 1971: xix). Instead he recommends humor and other enjoyable tactics, because they provide a bigger response, greater participation, and are more memorable (1971:141).

Within this pragmatic framework, Alinsky provides several formal and

informal lists of rules, many of which are redundant and overlapping, and most of which are supported only anecdotally. Close examination of his innumerable rules suggests a re-organization of them into three clusters: principles underlying whatever one does, strategic choices, and tactical procedures. Below we illustrate each of these clusters with rules which seemed to fit well the operations of COPS.

Three general principles often governed any efforts of COPS. First, Alinsky believed as axiomatic that a single-issue organization will not last (p. 77). Accordingly, COPS kept a multiple-item menu constantly before them. On one occasion in the mid 1980's they seemed to forget this axiom, and the Alamodome question cost them dearly. Second, "an organization needs action like an individual needs oxygen" (Alinsky 1971: 78,120). COPS created an organizational structure, an agenda of activities, and regular meetings to insure action. They also relied heavily on homemakers with more time on their hands to act. Third, power is not static, it cannot be frozen and stored like food (Alinsky 1971: 106). A close corollary to this emphasis on the dynamics of power is the rule "Power is not what you have but what the enemy thinks you have" (p. 127). Throughout Alinsky's *Rules . . .* is a sensitive recognition of how power is created, used, and lost. COPS recognized its power base in the Hispanic, Catholic parishes, generated an illusion of much greater power than was ever really in its grasp, and through an active, continual engagement of the opposition managed to sustain its power.

At the strategic level, Alinsky and COPS used continual pressure: ". . . maintain a constant pressure on the opposition" (p. 128), Alinsky wrote, and project an overwhelming impression of relentlessness. Within this pressure, he added, "Pick a target, personalize it, polarize it, and freeze it" (p. 130). In other words, do not permit politicians to pass the buck, make certain they are represented as devils by comparison, make it personal so that they can be forced into polar extremes which makes it easier to manipulate them into subsequent action. Consistent with this idea, but from another angle, acknowledge that the "real action is the enemy's reaction" (Alinsky 1971: 136), and that the "enemy properly goaded and guided in his reaction will be your major strength" (p. 136). Accordingly, COPS personalized issues, pushed their opponents to the limits by goading them, and then used their reactions to polarize positions for easier manipulation. This led finally into "the skillful playing off of one part of the haves against the others" (p. 157), a central feature, Alinsky argued, of good strategy.

A key to the tactics chosen by COPS is Alinsky's humorous line "In a

fight, almost everything goes, and you should apologize for the occasional blow which lands above the belt" (p. 130). To Alinsky there is no real limit to the tactics available; be creative and relentless, but not totally unrestrained. Concerning tactical choice, Alinsky believed that "the threat is usually more terrifying than the thing itself" (p. 146), that a "good tactic is one that your people enjoy" (p. 128), and that a "tactic that drags on too long becomes a drag" (p. 128). On more specific actions, he strongly recommended ridicule as one's most potent weapon. "It should be remembered," he wrote, "that you can threaten the enemy and get away with it. You can insult and annoy him, but the one thing that is unforgivable and that is certain to get him to react is to laugh at him" (p. 138). Further rules COPS followed well included never going outside the experience of its people and whenever possible forcing the enemy to go outside of their experience (Alinsky 1971: 127). Alinsky seemed to have COPS in mind when he said, "Make the enemy live up to their own book of rules" (p. 128), a situation often difficult for politicians to manage. A final key was to be prepared for success: Do not become confounded by a sudden concession, do not permit your efforts to be co-opted, and recognize the importance of sharing your success (Alinsky 1971:130).

These principles, strategic guidelines, and tactical options form a pragmatic approach which COPS largely drew from Alinsky's book and training program. On some occasions COPS would exceed the guidelines of Alinsky and on other occasions they created very consistent extensions and adaptations. Overall COPS became an outstanding representative of successful community development. To examine their activities further gives additional meaning to these abstract rules and draws us closer to their successful management of intercultural relations in a multiethnic community.

### **The Evolution of COPS**

Joseph Sekul (1983) provides an excellent overview of the organization and development of COPS through 1981. In his article he identifies several of their strategies and tactics as they were adapted to meet varied topics and contingencies, but more thorough examination of the strategies and updating of the consideration are useful. In the following two subsections COPS is examined from a different perspective than Sekul's, and his work is extended to the present.

#### **COPS Before the Cisneros Mayoralty**

COPS developed within the general framework of Alinsky and from the initiative of Ernie Cortes sometime during 1973. From the outset the organization was dedicated to the improvement of family and neighborhood among the inner-city, less affluent, and primarily Hispanic districts (Dribben 1982: 12A). With reciprocal benefits, COPS received financial assistance, leadership, and facilities from the Catholic church (Davidson 1989). Although the organization has tried to include protestant groups, other ethnic minorities, and the Anglo majority, and has variously succeeded on selected issues for short times, it has been and continues to be primarily Hispanic, Catholic, and geographically fixed.

From 1973 to 1980 when Beatrice Cortez (1980-1982) became its president, COPS struggled to establish its position in the power structure of San Antonio. By 1980 they became a major source of influence which resulted in millions of dollars flowing into their neighborhoods. How did they strategically and tactically become so successful? Simply stated, they recognized the importance of numbers, boisterous tactics which excite media attention, "up-in-your-face" personal attacks on government officials, and refusals to be co-opted by deceptive practices of power brokers. Through the schools, Catholic parishes, and reliance on home-makers they could on short notice produce an impressive number of people to attend meetings. Such a mobilization of voters quickly commands media coverage and receives respect. Boisterous tactics included shouting down speakers, collective walkouts at meetings, emotionally charged presentations at meetings, and other "obstructionist" techniques. Along the same line of approach, COPS members badgered public, especially political, figures with confrontational tactics. As Sekul (1983) observed, "Its power base was tailored to put pressure on politicians and their appointees" (p. 187). Collectively these tactics compelled reactions which could, in turn, be used to further support COPS efforts. But, as Alinsky had taught, they were prepared for success. As they achieved certain goals they were ready with new ones and were not inclined to join new organizations which might divert their attention or compromise their choice of tactics.

Explicitly, COPS does not formally endorse candidates, but they will temporarily support anyone who supports their causes (Staff 1983a). In fact, COPS members are forbidden to run for public office (Dribben 1982: 12A). During their early years San Antonio city council members were elected at large, thus inviting systemic prejudice against the less powerful, non-voting ethnic minorities (L. Fox 1993). COPS perceived accurately this systemic weakness and sought to create a system of elections by district. In 1976 the

district system provided a new arena. Despite their unwillingness to support a candidate, they made clear the mandate for candidates from their primary districts. At public discussions sponsored by COPS during election campaigns, candidates would be screened before participation (Staff 1991). If they did not answer correctly, they would be excluded from the formal presentations, but they were invited to sit in the audience (Staff 1991). Such "indirect" pressures resulted in a strong influence on council member behavior and stances. Among these politicians was Henry Cisneros who can readily attest that he needed COPS' assistance and support to be elected, but that they were constantly pressuring him, as well as others on the council. COPS' attitude was that even good guys change; so, continued pressure was necessary to insure compliance with COPS' objectives (Santos 1991).

With its augmenting success, by the end of the 1970's COPS had realized several major lessons from Alinsky: First, the perceived threat is often greater than reality, as the numbers, noise, and notoriety created an ominous threat to politicians and business people as well. Second, keep your goals concrete and attainable, as they refused to be swept into new organizations built on lofty, but vague, promises. Third, persistence pays, as their relentlessness forced either easily manipulable reactions or acquiescent compliance. Finally, as Sekul discovered, while examining their position on various issues, COPS realized their potential role as a "spoiler to the city's economic growth" (1983: 188). Despite their "obstructionist" image COPS never really opposed growth; they merely wanted to direct the growth to their neighborhoods and not become deceived into supporting broader city growth that their districts might ultimately have to underwrite (Sekul 1983).

### **COPS From The Cisneros Mayoralty**

During the early 1980's a shift in approach occurs with the change of COPS administration and Cisneros' new position (Hendricks 1982). Within COPS the new president Beatrice Cortez (1980-82) led the organization away from confrontational tactics to a more consultative, cooperative mode (Dribben 1982: 16A). About this shift, former president Adres Sarabia is reported to have said, "The confrontational tactics will be reserved as a threatened fallback position if the COPS agenda is not taken seriously by city 'powerbrokers' (Murillo 1982). This shift of strategy occurs simultaneous with the ascent to mayor of Henry Cisneros, a charismatic Hispanic leader with COPS' informal support. With the first Hispanic mayor of San Antonio in over a century, perhaps COPS realized their broader role of ethnic support,

but if and only if Cisneros could deliver. The next decade would chronicle this topsyturvy relationship.

By 1982 the shift was widely recognized, and the local press noted "COPS and MAUC [Mexican American Unity Council] have distinguished themselves from the other marchers and shouters by their abilities in institutional building" (Murillo 1982). With this shift came an expanding vision. By the end of 1982, the new COPS president Sonia Hernandez explicitly noted the wider horizon "It's not a pie in the sky dream. We got the Governor here. Why not the presidential candidates?" (Staff 1983b). Throughout her two-year term in office Hernandez (1982-84) continued to project this expanded vision of COPS' role at the state and national level. By 1983, COPS had become the nation's largest community organization with a firm grip on affairs throughout San Antonio and the broader Hispanic community (Martinez 1983: I-D). Father William Davis, pastor of St. Alphonsus Catholic Church, noted in 1983, "You can't make a move in San Antonio without COPS knowing about it" (Martinez 1983). President Ayala (1984-86) tried to sustain this national visibility (Herrera-Wieters 1985).

The last half of the 1980's involved some serious internal problems and struggles with Mayor Cisneros. Late in 1985 and early 1986 some sort of undisclosed internal problem emerged. Perhaps coincidental, this "problem" seemed to follow a major conflict with the mayor over a South Texas nuclear project lawsuit (Finley 1986). Whatever the nature of the problem, COPS' activities declined, and they cancelled their annual convention (Finley 1986). Rumor suggested the somewhat abrasive President Ayala may have experienced a personal feud with the mayor, and these problems confounded the work of COPS. Whatever was happening, in 1987 COPS moved further into state and national lobbying of legislators and made some structural changes by which some of their best talent was shifted to research and larger-scale agenda development (Castillo 1987). Issues surrounding the construction of the Alamodome became a life-threatening controversy for COPS. They invested all of their political clout into opposition of Cisneros' dome financing plan, and they lost (Price 1989). A flurry of articles subsequently appeared in the local press questioning the viability of COPS. Newly elected co-chair Patricia Ozuna had "to keep a stiff upper lip in public to make people believe her organization is not dead" (Price 1989).

Throughout the 1980's several major issues received COPS attention. Among them were continued concern for street repair, location of the southside community college, library replacement and upgrading, police station facilities and fire department equipment, several bond issues, zoning

to keep out bars and junk yards from residential areas, allocation of funds through Community Development Building Grants (CDBG), low-income housing, the Alamodome financing, the South Texas Nuclear Project, and attendance records of city council members. And for nearly all of these concerns they were successful. As President Ozuna (1989-1990) observed, "I think more and more people are starting to understand COPS. What we represent is not radical. As more and more people become aware of that, more and more people can see what we're working for" (K. Fox 1985).

The agenda for the nineties includes several continuing concerns, but has also been formulated into a broader plan of action. Emphasis is strong on job training as a long-term solution (Thomas 1990). In contrast COPS regards the emergent theme parks, Alamodome, and the South Texas Nuclear Project as "quick fixes" without significant long-term improvements (Thomas 1990). They are also involved in the school funding issues of Texas and pressured Governor Richards to make equitable school funding a part of her gubernatorial campaign (Thomas 1991). As always, flood control and street repair are mainstays of COPS activism. New commitments address problems with illegal drugs and health care (Thomas 1991). Their work is becoming even more coordinated in a detailed agenda to rebuild the city through a combination of education, housing, services, and job training initiatives; collectively this "plan" is referred to as the "Isaiah Proposal" (Staff 1990).

Beyond the moderation of confrontational tactics the key to COPS in this period is Mayor Henry Cisneros. Through Alinsky COPS learned to force a reaction and then use it. Cisneros managed to use this same strategy on COPS, as he compelled them to realize the need for the rest of San Antonio to achieve longer term resolution of their problems. His first successful demonstration came with bond issues. After a significant defeat of a bond issue supported by COPS, Mayor Cisneros convinced them about the political realities of collective power (L. Fox 1993). Subsequent bond issues succeeded when COPS demonstrated a willingness to cooperate with their former opposition to achieve goals beneficial to all parties involved (L. Fox 1993). This message apparently convinced COPS of the need to reassess how they might use their power within the system more productively. Even though this change did not eliminate their reliance on abrasive, confrontational techniques, it did serve to reduce the intensity and lead to more selective use of such tactics. With these shifts they actually became more in synchrony with what Alinsky proposed than they were in the early years.

### **COPS, Cisneros and Ethnic Harmony**

The most significant development of the latter period stems from the political genius of Cisneros (Hill 1991). The mayor seemed to recognize the value of COPS as a counter balance to the powerful business interests and other powerbrokers. Had COPS not existed he might well have needed to create some group or groups like them to lead the city as effectively as he did (L. Fox 1993). From COPS' behavior and Cisneros' use of their behavior emerge the intercultural lessons of this study.

Neither Alinsky nor COPS confronted interethnic issues directly. Therein resides the first intercultural lesson of this case study: Downplay ethnic identity and factors. Intuitively there seems to be an indirect correlation between accentuation of the ethnic dimension of social problems and collective success in the resolution of those problems. COPS seemed to realize the need for diverse alliances on different occasions, and ethnic assertiveness would have reduced the potential of such alliances. Also from the beginning their membership was open to anyone who lived in their neighborhoods, whether Hispanic or not, and anyone anywhere interested in helping achieve their goals. In so many communities around the world ethnicity is so accentuated as to preclude the potential of the ethnic groups to achieve their goals. A parallel and tragic example comes from the Native American communities where traditionalists will exclude even their own who venture outside to secure an education, thus robbing the tribe of strengths they need to address real social problems.

A second lesson stems from their approach to problems: Objectify the problems and specify your goals realistically. Despite the personalized confrontational tactics COPS used, they always maintained a clear focus on specific goals which they were usually prepared to address with factual information. They recognized the importance of knowing the issues, the evidence, the opposition, and the implications of varied courses of action. In fact, many of their meetings were spent debriefing their membership about these details and much of their financial resources was committed to research. Their deceptive tactics were often geared to receiving attention. Once they had attention they were prepared to present their position as a clear priority. In stark contrast other community groups are poorly prepared and cannot separate the personal attacks to secure attention from what they actually want.

Closely aligned with objectifying the problem is the third lesson: Keep your proposals and their importance before the public. To achieve this

objective requires help from the media, and understanding how the media determine what is newsworthy and how to satiate the media's need for news is crucial for success. Early in their development COPS discovered that confrontational tactics are interesting even if they are distractions. And when large groups of people are involved the likelihood of coverage increases proportionately. Consumers of the San Antonio media at least found amusing the wrapped flounder incident (Ullman 1978), the pennies exchange at Frost Bank (Ullman 1978), or the all-day clothes changes (Ullman 1978). Where these events were accompanied by significant numbers, they became reportable pseudo-events. With coverage of their antics came an opportunity for them to press their position before the public.

Despite their ethnic origins and identity, they never permitted themselves to be swept into the broader civil rights controversies. Although criticized for their "aloofness," they followed well a fourth lesson: Do not get lost in vague, idealistic problems. In stark contrast other ethnic groups and community development organizations have been sucked into the abyss of vagueness only to see their organization wither and die while the overculture talks them into delays and acceptance of temporary palliatives. The streets of community development are littered with the broken lances of such Quixotic challenges.

Because COPS was composed of community groups, the success they experienced reinforced and strengthened their sense of groupness and solidarity. Out of this came another lesson: The organization must build confidence and self esteem among its membership. As any literature on ethnic groups will attest, minorities suffer from lower self-esteem and reduced self-confidence. When these "low-powered" people interact with "high-powered" people, they experience a distinct disadvantage. But when these "low-powered" people experience success in their numbers and see their techniques working, then they become inspired to speak their position more confidently and to expect more equitable treatment. Put another way, they came to see their family goals as equal to the goals of other families and worth the fight to achieve. After a while one councilman noted in reference to COPS, "San Antonio needs a few more arrogant people to come to city council meetings" (Ullman 1978). Thus, he recognized their expanded sense of confidence and its value to city government.

The final three lessons are closely interwoven. With organizational maturity they learned to recognize the value and role of supra-ordinate goals, to permit themselves to be used constructively without co-option, and to use their relative power constructively. These lessons are not easily acquired by

young organizations in community development, especially ones ethnically based. In some ways they acquired this maturity with the perceptive influence of Henry Cisneros. As the city's experience with bond issues demonstrated, all parts of the city are necessary for growth. Only insofar as we work together can we achieve many of our selfish goals and general goals as well. With this lesson also came the realization that a group does not always have to maintain an adversarial relationship with its detractor, and COPS then mellowed into a cooperative force. The pitfall here is always overcultural co-option, but COPS was able to avoid this manipulative prospect, even when a powerful businessman proposed an attractive organization to integrate community interests (Sekul 1983: 189). But perhaps most importantly, with an increase in power comes opportunity for achievement and abuse. COPS wisely used their increased power constructively and thus remain a major factor in the success and future of San Antonio.

These eight lessons provide a general plan for community development groups to help their families and neighborhoods, on the one hand, and through their success to achieve ethnic harmony. No matter what the group or situation, resolution of ethnic problems can not occur without addressing personal and social needs of the people and creating a stable situation within which discontent can be expressed. COPS has served well the Hispanic population and the city of San Antonio. As Mayor Cisneros observed, without them we would have lacked a counter balance (L. Fox 1993). San Antonio was fortunate to have COPS provide redress of inequities, resolution of extensive problems, and, because of their strategies and tactics, an ethnic harmony which many cities in our country sorely lack.

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