

Communicative Tensions of Community Organizing: The Case of a Local Neighborhood Association

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This study investigates the communicative tensions of community organizing within the context of a local neighborhood association. Results of our qualitative analysis revealed two themes of organizational tension shaping this community organization: dispositional disagreements and positional paradoxes. These tensions were illustrated within the issues of prayer, diversity, gentrification, and neighborhood quality. Analysis also showed that communication practices of balance, diversion, deflection, sense-making, reframing, and qualifying served to manage tensions and sustain the participation and involvement of voluntary collective action.

Keywords: Community Organizing; Neighborhood Associations; Organizational Communication; Organizational Tension; Paradox

Neighborhood associations are important community organizations that play a vital role in the development of civil society. They help to protect economic and social interests (Mesch & Schwirian, 1996), they strengthen links between residents and policy makers (Logan & Rabrenovic, 1990), increase participation in the political process (Berry, Portney, & Thompson, 1993), and help improve the quality of life for the citizens of countless communities through collective action (King, 2004). Since Alexis DeTocqueville's 19th-century observations about the importance of

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voluntary associations in American culture, scholars and practitioners alike have focused on the societal value of community organizations, such as neighborhood associations. Politicians, funding groups, human service professionals, community leaders, and government agencies are all looking to neighborhood associations to address local social issues, and cooperation at the local level is seen as an essential component of community building (Knickmeyer, Hopkins, & Meyer, 2003).

Although neighborhood associations are a significant part of the organizational landscape and play a critical role in society, they are difficult to manage and full of complications. Neighborhood associations rely overwhelmingly on volunteer labor, rarely have means of generating substantial revenue or resources, and are comprised of people with competing or contradictory interests and motivations. Yet much of the literature on neighborhood associations is noticeably silent about these difficulties. Knickmeyer et al.'s (2003) review of the neighborhood association literature reveals that most scholarship is focused on the structures neighborhood associations create (Austin, 1991; Davies & Townshend, 1994), their adherence to principles of democracy (Bolduc, 1980; Cnaan, 1991; Swindell, 2000), organizational structures that affect membership levels (Checkoway & Zimmerman, 1992), and strategies for membership mobilization (Olsen, Perlstadt, Fonseca, & Hogan, 1989). Studies that focus on the overall effectiveness of neighborhood associations still concentrate on the population composition and political structures of neighborhoods (Oropesa, 1989) or their socioeconomic status and ethnic makeup (Mesch & Schwirian, 1996).

What we are missing is attention to the *processes* of organizing in neighborhood associations and how citizens interact to develop and sustain collective action. Communication scholars are in good position to add this important perspective to our understanding of neighborhood associations. More specifically, organizational communication scholars understand that any organizational system is constituted through various processes of social interaction and built through multiple communicative acts (e.g., Cooren, 2000; McPhee & Zaug, 2000; Putnam & Nicotera, 2008; Taylor & Van Every, 2000). A communication perspective also recognizes the tensions and dualities that are inherent to human organizing (Barge, Lee, Maddux, Nabring, & Townsend, 2008; Trethewey & Ashcraft, 2004) and the complications that result from human efforts to organize towards some form of collective action.

Therefore, the purpose of this research is to bring a communication perspective to the study of neighborhood associations in order to better understand how certain communication processes support the development of these organizations and enable collective action. We pay particular attention to the tensions that result from interaction in neighborhood associations and the communicative responses that enable neighborhood associations to manage these tensions and sustain collective action. Following the call of Trethewey and Ashcraft (2004), we foreground organizational tensions in order to aide theory development and develop fuller understandings of organizational practices. We begin with a more in-depth look at the literature on neighborhood associations, communication, and tensions of human organizing. Next we present the results of a qualitative investigation of a local neighborhood association and the insights gained about communication from this community

organization. We conclude with a discussion about the theoretical and practical implications of this research.

Literature Review and Research Questions

Neighborhood Associations

Neighborhood associations are usually classified as grassroots organizations (Smith, 2000) that focus primarily on serving their members, not necessarily the broader public (King, 2004). They tend to have nonhierarchical organizational structures and support participatory democracy (Oropesa, 1995). Florin and Wandersman (1990) list several characteristics displayed by most neighborhood associations: they are geographically based, volunteer driven, locally initiated, focused on problem solving, and involved in work that is mostly in person and face-to-face. Mesch and Schwirian (1996) identify factors that prompt neighborhood associations, including gentrification, urban development, efforts initiated by local governments, and crime. Issues of land use, zoning, maintenance, and safety also play important roles in the purpose of neighborhood associations (King, 2004). The value of neighborhood associations is that they provide forums for relationship building and serve a mediating function between citizens and government institutions (Meyer & Hyde, 2004). Neighborhood associations are viewed as a sign of civic health and a source of social capital (Figueira-McDonough, 2001; Putnam, 2000) and tend to increase the amount of political participation in a given area (Smith, 1997).

Although there is an extensive amount of previous literature on neighborhood associations across a wide variety of disciplines, most of this research focuses on the structural and sociological characteristics of neighborhood associations, or the extent of their political involvement (Knickmeyer et al., 2003). We have a good understanding of *what* these community organizations are and *why* they are important to society, but we know less about *how* they function and the ongoing processes that sustain (or impede) their collective action. Thus more attention is needed on the social processes that create and maintain neighborhood associations and the communication practices involved in these organizations.

Communication and Neighborhood Associations

To date the neighborhood association literature has addressed communication only as a simplistic variable relating to channels (Mesch, 1996; Oropesa, 1995), rates (Taub, Surgeon, Lindholm, Otti, & Bridges, 1977), local newspaper readership (Jeffres & Dobos, 1984), or interpersonal connections with neighbors (Jeffres & Dobos, 1984). Scholars from the communication literature have investigated a variety of issues in neighborhood associations, such as the role of storytelling in civic engagement (Kim & Ball-Rokeach, 2006) and developing a sense of belonging (Ball-Rokeach, Kim, & Matei, 2001); the role of newspapers (Hindman, 1998) and other media (Jeffres, Atkin, & Neuendorf, 2002) in political involvement;

communication variables that relate to civic participation (Kang & Kwak, 2003); the use of Internet technology in the formation of networks (Hampton, 2007); and the role of communication in the development of geo-ethnicity (Kim, Jung, & Ball-Rokeach, 2006).

Yet these studies by and large see neighborhood associations as a general site or context for understanding some other communicative phenomena; they do not investigate neighborhood associations as organizational structures per se, or seek to provide distinctively communicative explanations for organizational experiences. One exception is Britt's (2005) work that explored the use of dialogue to negotiate dialectical tensions within a neighborhood homeowner association. Although this a single case study, it does suggest an important point of departure for future research of communication in neighborhood associations, showing how the organizing and participation of multiple stakeholders results in a variety of tensions that in turn need to be managed communicatively, and how these processes serve to further constitute neighborhood associations and sustain collective action. For this we look at how organizational tensions have been explored in previous communication scholarship.

Tensions of Organizational Communication

A common-sense assumption in many organizational contexts is that organizations act as rational entities, and that effective communication is open and clear.¹ This traditional view emphasizes rationality, and that organizational communication should be clear, calm, professional, and unemotional (Mumby & Putnam, 1992). These ideas are rooted in representational and functional models of organizational communication that assume organizations operate in objective information environments (Contractor & Ehrlich, 1993), and that communication involves the transmission and exchange of information throughout the organization.

These ideas are also prevalent in much of the neighborhood association literature, which usually assumes a political economy perspective that emphasizes the importance of material interests for rational decision-makers (Oropesa, 1995). Yet organizational scholars have challenged notions of rationality in organizations for many years. Simon (1984, 1991) demonstrated that organizational rationality is bounded because of incomplete information and limited alternatives. Brunsson (1985) argued that irrationality is a basic feature of organizations, and that rationality can actually be harmful to an organization, especially in decision-making where rational decision processes heighten perceptions of risk and may decrease the motivation to act. Thus, recent efforts in organizational scholarship focus on the potential value of irrationalities like irony and paradox in organizations and the responses that organizational members take in a given context.

This is especially true for organizational communication scholarship. Communication scholars recognize that human interaction is fraught with inconsistencies that are intrinsic to the discourse that shapes the social processes of organizing. For example, Trethewey and Ashcraft (2004) confronted the "enduring myths of

rationality” (pp. 81–82) with the inherent pressures of organizational activities such as ambiguity, paradox, contradiction, and irony. They refer to this as “tension-centered scholarship” and cite numerous studies that support this perspective.² We follow their lead and use the term “organizational tensions” in referring to the paradoxes, ironies, and contradictions that are inherent to human organizing.

Organizational communication scholars now recognize that in many ways tension is actually the “stuff of organizing,” and analyzing these tensions can lead to a better “understanding of organizational processes, particularly those processes that structure . . . organizations” (Trethewey, 1999, p. 142). The distinctive contribution of organizational communication scholarship is showing how many of these tensions are communicative in nature and that communication serves as an important response to make sense of these tensions. Communication thus becomes a site where members of an organization continually struggle for various meanings of truth and identity (Trethewey & Ashcraft, 2004).

Not only do tensions appear to be common in human organizing, but they also have the potential to be productive (Tracy, 2004). Benefits may include promoting unified diversity (Eisenberg, 1984), holding together necessary incompatibilities (Ferguson, 1993), maintaining mutually exclusive structures (Hatch, 1997), opportunities to challenge prevailing practices (Putnam, 1986), commitment to coordinated action (Eisenberg, 1995), and facilitating change while preserving social order (Putnam, 1986). Other studies investigating the benefits of organizational tension include Barge’s (1996) examination of group leadership, Kramer’s (2004) study of dialectics in a community theater group, and Seo, Putnam, and Bartunek’s (2004) analysis of dualities and tensions in planned organizational change. The issue is not organizational tension per se, but how the tensions function within the organization and the options available for members to react to these tensions. To date most organizational communication scholarship focuses on identifying specific tensions in various organizational contexts and exploring the communicative responses to these tensions by organizational members. Communicative responses demonstrate a recursive relationship between communication and organizational tensions: tension emerges from human interaction, and in response people communicate to manage these tensions. Table 1 provides a summary of this research.

Yet none of this research has investigated tension and communication within the framework of neighborhood associations. Neighborhood associations represent an important organizational context to extend our knowledge about communication and tension, especially since most of the tensions and responses in the extant literature are developed in organizations with formal employer–employee relationships. Many of the tensions discussed in previous research emerge from the authority structures that organizational members are involved in and the conflicting demands in relation to authority. In contrast, neighborhood associations are voluntary organizations that organize under different pretenses than business or government organizations. Therefore, the present study represents a valuable extension of this research to the important organizational context of neighborhood associations and voluntary collective action.

Table 1 Previous Research on Organizational Tensions and Responses

Citation	Tensions*	Responses
Barge et al. (2008)	Dualities of an organizational change initiative: – Inclusion/exclusion – Preservation/change – Centrality/parity	Practices for context setting: – Commonplacing – Bounded mutuality – Reflexive positioning
Kramer (2004)	Dialectical tensions of group communication: – Commitment levels to the group – Ordered and emergent group activities – Inclusion and exclusion as part of group boundaries – Group norms for acceptable and unacceptable behaviors	Strategies for coping with dialectical tensions: – Communicating about them (venting or discussion) – Communicating implicitly – Choosing not to communicate about them (avoidance or minimization)
Putnam (1986)	Sources of organizational tension: – Contradictory messages – Paradox cycles – Double binds – System contradictions	Responding to organizational tensions: – Accepting one side of the tension and ignoring the other – Accept both sides at the same time – Merge the tensions into an innovative alternative – Metacommunicate in an attempt to transcend the tension
Seo et al. (2004)	Dualities of planned organizational change: – Positive/negative–Continuous/episodic – Proactive/reactive–Open/closed participation	Responding to dualities: – Selection–Transcendence – Separation–Connectedness – Integration
Smith & Berg (1997)	Group paradoxes: – Belonging – Engaging – Speaking	Responding to group paradoxes: – Compromise–Separation – Elimination–Splitting

(Continued)

Table 1 Continued

Citation	Tensions*	Responses
Stohl & Cheney (2001)	Paradoxes of organizational participation: <ul style="list-style-type: none">– Structure–Identity– Agency–Power	Responding to paradoxes: <ul style="list-style-type: none">– Exiting–Voicing opposition– Adaptation–Reframing– Neglect–Synthesis
Tracy (2004)	Frames of organizational tensions: <ul style="list-style-type: none">– Complimentary dialectics– Pragmatic paradoxes– Simple contradictions	Responding to tensions: <ul style="list-style-type: none">– Fluctuating between two extremes– Trying to concentrate on multiple expectations simultaneously– Simply withdrawing

*Includes concepts such as paradox, irony, dualities, contradictions, etc.

Our work was guided by the following research questions: What organizational tensions emerge in neighborhood associations? What effect do these tensions have on a neighborhood association? What is the role of communication in response to these organizational tensions?

Research Method

Research Site

The Hazelnut Neighborhood Association (HANA) is a community organization in a midsize city in the American southwest.³ The Hazelnut neighborhood is minutes away from downtown and the city's major university, consisting of 60 square blocks and approximately 1,500 residents. Roughly 75% of the residents are African American, 20% are Hispanic, and 5% are Anglo. Known for its crime and run-down housing, the east side of the city offers a challenging context for the Hazelnut neighborhood. HANA has a current membership of 25 residents and holds monthly meetings at a local church. By most accounts, HANA is a successful neighborhood association: The association has existed for over 30 years, it has consistent participation by many residents, has a great relationship with the city, and has achieved goals of crime reduction and neighborhood development.

Data Sources and Analysis

Data came from two primary sources: in-depth interviews with HANA members and field observations of HANA meetings.⁴ We conducted 18 (N = 18) total interviews with HANA members and other stakeholders associated with the neighborhood association. Fifteen interviews were with actual HANA members. Interviewees were identified through snowball sampling, beginning with a contact we had in HANA

and continuing as we met other members at meetings.⁵ Interviews ranged between 45 and 60 minutes and took place at the interviewee's home or a neutral location, such as a coffee shop. Sixty percent of the respondents were female ($n=9$). All respondents were either Caucasian ($n=7$) or African American ($n=8$), and one third of the respondents were retired while the remaining two thirds were working professionals.

We also interviewed three external constituents: a local police officer who patrolled the Hazelnut neighborhood, the Parks and Recreation supervisor who oversaw the Hazelnut neighborhood projects, and a city project director involved in developing the Hazelnut area. These external constituents helped provide additional context and background for our understanding of HANA. All three of these external constituents attended HANA meetings in the past and were familiar with the workings of the neighborhood association.

The interview protocol included open-ended questions that enabled participants to speak broadly about their experiences in the neighborhood association. For example, we asked interviewees to comment on potential challenges facing the association, their relationships with outside organizations, their perceptions of meetings, and their reactions to various initiatives and projects. While we asked the three external constituents similar questions as the HANA members, we also asked additional questions about their experiences working with HANA and their overall impressions of the neighborhood association. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis, resulting in 123 pages of single-spaced text.

Data also included field observations of HANA meetings over a 4-month period. Meetings lasted about 90 minutes each, plus informal socializing before and after. Meetings were attended by HANA members, with usually 15 to 20 members in attendance. Discussion topics included progress reports on neighborhood initiatives, conversations about upcoming events, updates on negotiations with city officials, and reports about HANA's budget and membership dues. Observing meetings gave us a firsthand look at the organizing activities of HANA and their patterns of interaction. Meeting observations also provided us with specific examples and reference points to discuss in our interviews with HANA members. Field notes from these meeting observations were typed up for analysis, resulting in 33 pages of single-spaced text.

The interview transcriptions and field notes from meetings were examined using a two-step coding procedure and analyzed via the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1994). The first step involved a system of *open coding* (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995) where the data were considered in detail to develop initial emergent categories. The second stage involved *focused coding* (Lofland & Lofland, 1995), where the initial subcategories were examined for congruence and collapsed into broader categories and metathemes. Data were then analyzed to ensure that interview comments and field notes not only represented the initial categories of the open coding stage, but also the themes of the focused coding stage. These methods also provide a measure of triangulation because comments from interview transcriptions could be compared with field observations, and our observations of HANA meetings could be clarified in interviews. For example, when one

Table 2 Organizational Tensions and Explanations

Organizational Tensions	Organizational Features	Explanation of Tensions
Dispositional Disagreements	Prayer	Association members have many different religious perspectives and strong views for and against prayer, yet prayer before meetings is a unifying event that all respect.
	Diversity	Many association members say that diversity is one of the great qualities of the neighborhood and one of the main reasons they enjoy living there, yet the obvious age and racial divisions in the neighborhood may point towards a lack of diversity. The White residents communicated the most concern about maintaining diversity, yet they cause the lack of diversity.
Positional Paradoxes	Gentrification	Many new, young, and professional residents are very concerned about gentrification in the neighborhood; yet new, young, professional residents are a major cause of gentrification. The older residents who are most affected by gentrification are encouraged by the new, young residents and the energy they bring to the neighborhood.
	Neighborhood Quality	Many association members are motivated to improve the poor quality of the neighborhood (drugs, prostitution, vagrancy, etc.), yet they all say it is such a great neighborhood to live in; the lack of neighborhood quality leads to high community involvement, thus perceptions of a quality neighborhood.

interviewee discussed the way decisions were made at HANA meetings, we were able to confirm this by observing actual decision-making processes at the HANA meetings we attended and extracting information from our field notes. Similarly, when we observed what we interpreted as a power struggle between two members at a HANA meeting, several interviewees confirmed our observation by sharing examples with us about the ways in which these members did in fact compete for authority in the neighborhood association.

Results

Research question one asked what organizational tensions emerge in neighborhood associations. Our analysis identified two broad themes of organizational tensions

in this neighborhood association, one involving differences between association members and the second involving apparent contradictions in perceptions about the neighborhood's situation. The first we call *dispositional disagreements*, referring to tensions about the arrangements, inclinations, and temperaments of this neighborhood association. This broad theme was comprised of two subthemes that illustrated dispositional disagreements: (1) prayer, and (2) the diversity of the neighborhood association. These subthemes related to the place of religious expression and issues of age and ethnic representation in HANA. The second theme, *positional paradoxes*, refers to apparent contradictions regarding the situation, issues, and concerns of the neighborhood association. Two subthemes that exemplified this broad theme were: (1) gentrification, and (2) neighborhood quality. These paradoxes spoke to the structural features of the neighborhood and the social practices that constituted the association. Table 2 lists and explains these tensions.

Our second research question asked about the possible effects of organizational tensions in a community organization. Results indicate that organizational tensions can have a positive effect on community organizing, especially in terms of accommodating competing perspectives, providing motivation for action, and sustaining participation and involvement. Lastly, research question three explored the role of communication in responding to these organizational tensions. We found that various communicative responses/practices enabled this community organization to foster productive ambiguity, make sense of uncertainty, and promote continued collective action. These include balance, diversion, deflection, sense-making, reframing, and qualifying. We expand on our research question answers below, describing the themes of organizational tension that emerged from our analysis, as well as the effects on the neighborhood association and various communicative responses.

Dispositional Disagreements

The first theme of organizational tension we identified involved differences in the overall makeup of the neighborhood association and the practices that constitute the nature of the organization. Two subthemes made up the tension of dispositional disagreements. First, prayer was universally recognized in the neighborhood association as a common practice in HANA since its inception. Yet there were many divergent views about the role of prayer, and the way prayer was discussed revealed a tension in this practice. Second, the issue of neighborhood and association diversity revealed a tension regarding how residents communicated about the neighborhood and how neighborhood quality affected perceptions and involvement.

Prayer

One of the common features of all HANA meetings was an opening prayer at the start of each gathering. The meeting always took place in a local church. Some of HANA's members are religious, but several others are not. When asked about traditions of the group, the HANA president said, "I like to open in a word of prayer; I like to close in

a word of prayer” (Jonah). Before an association meeting another member told us, “We start with prayer, which is very nice . . . stand around, hold hands” (Eunice). These members spoke of prayer as appropriate for the group and a natural part of community involvement.

Other members felt differently about the use of prayer. When asked about prayer, one member said, “I am *very* agnostic . . . I’m just glad no one has ever called on me to lead the prayer. I’m just not sure what I would do” (Sylvia). Another member explained that prayer was one of the things he disliked about HANA membership:

There are a lot of people who have found strength in religion throughout their lives and getting through difficult times and I respect it . . . It’s just not part of how I go about social events. (James)

An excerpt from our field notes also revealed the apparent tension in the practice of prayer:

The meeting began with an opening prayer offered by the association president. Everyone held hands and listened to the president’s request that God bless their discussions and decisions. Some members closed their eyes and displayed a sense of reverence that seemed to imply that they found meaning in this religious practice. Other members seem uncomfortable, eyes opened, looking around, and awkwardly waiting for the prayer to end.

Yet another member represented more of a middle ground:

One thing I think is pretty cool is they open every meeting with a prayer. I’m not a churchy person but I think that’s a nice thing. It pays respect to the elders in the neighborhood, it’s important to them. And it really helps everyone come together and realize that we basically want the same thing. (Winston)

Although religion can be a divisive issue, prayer was not a source of argument in HANA and did not appear to result in organizational conflict. There was enough ambiguity surrounding the practice and purpose of prayer that members could approach the subject in a variety of ways and develop their own meanings. HANA members chose to speak ambiguously about prayer in the group, allowing the tension to continue yet still maintaining group unity. Clearly communicating the purpose of prayer for the meeting might alienate members and have a negative impact on the association. However, in this example, ambiguous communication seemed to be more productive than open, clear communication.

Furthermore, at the conclusion of the opening prayer all the HANA members immediately joined in reciting the following statement about their community involvement: “I am only one, but I am one. I cannot do everything, but I can do something. And I will not let what I cannot do interfere with what I can do.” Our field notes recorded how this statement balanced the tension from the prayer:

The mood seemed to shift during the reciting of the statement. Members who appeared awkward during the prayer now seemed motivated and engaged. The conclusion of the statement brought many smiles and interpersonal gestures of warmth and appreciation towards each other as people took their seats to begin the meeting.

The issue of prayer spoke to the tension in the overall disposition of this neighborhood association. People in HANA had divergent, even contradictory views about religion, yet group prayer was actually a unifying factor. The tension surrounding views on prayer and religion required HANA residents to transcend personal differences and focus on what they had in common in order to sustain coordinated action, and also to make sense of prayer in ways that did not exclude others and their involvement. In meetings the agnostic/nonreligious HANA members communicated about prayer as “tradition.” Conversely, religious members discussed prayer as “inspiration.” The communicative practice of a closing statement served as both a conclusion to the prayer for religious members and a shift to secular/community concerns for nonreligious members. Although religious and nonreligious members had stronger personal convictions about prayer in private, in the organization they communicated about prayer in ways that embraced the tension rather than tried to resolve it.

Diversity

A second dispositional disagreement present in the organizing of HANA involved issues of diversity in terms of age, race, and social class. Many HANA members communicated that diversity was one of the great qualities of the neighborhood and one of the main reasons they enjoyed living there, yet it was clear that there were different meanings of diversity embedded within the language use of HANA members. For some, diversity was synonymous with ethnic and racial (non-White) representation. Therefore, they could speak of the “great diversity in the neighborhood” (Rachel) or “preserving the diversity of the neighborhood” (Pete), even though the neighborhood had a fairly homogeneous racial and social-class makeup. Younger, White professionals moving into the neighborhood could thus be perceived as a threat to diversity. Other residents spoke of diversity in terms of a balanced representation of race, age, and class. Therefore, younger, White professionals represented *more* diversity because they expanded the racial and social-class composition of the neighborhood.

From another perspective the obvious age and racial divisions in the Hazelnut neighborhood actually demonstrated a *lack* of diversity. As one HANA member informed us, “Most of the elderly are black and most of the new people are white, and there are a lot more older people than younger people” (Dave). Although there is a growing Hispanic population in the neighborhood, there was no Hispanic representation in HANA. There was a lack of diversity within the perceived diversity of HANA, depending how one understood the concept of diversity. This illustrated a tension of HANA’s organizing regarding different meanings of diversity, which influenced the ways they communicated within and about the organization.

It was also interesting that most of the HANA members concerned about preserving the diversity and racial character of the Hazelnut neighborhood were White. One White couple explained in a meeting, “That’s one of the main reasons why we moved here, it’s a very diverse neighborhood” (Kathryn & Robert). At the same

meeting another White HANA member said that “keeping the diversity” (Erin) was one of the important challenges facing the organization. These members seemed to evoke a particular meaning of diversity that implied ethnic and racial representation. Yet from this perspective they were actually contributing to the *lack* of racial diversity because they were increasing the White population. Janice, another White resident, expressed this tension in an interview: “There’s all these Anglos moving in . . . it will eventually lose some of that character and flavor . . . it’s wonderful, but some of the original feeling [will be lost].” Yet a rational resolution of this tension may not benefit HANA, since these young, White residents are active members in the community and a significant voice in the organization. The police officer who patrolled the neighborhood also recognized the tension between the younger and older residents, but that this tension was productive in HANA:

The association needs to be aware that you can’t completely discount the old. It’s survived so long for a viable reason and I think you really need to stay in contact with the roots of the community and not just disregard it. A lot of younger people tend to do this. But [with younger members], it seems that the neighborhood association suddenly rejuvenated . . . kind of the new wave . . . we see residents becoming active . . . I like the energy.

It may be better to live with this tension in the organization, which seemed to be fostering productive organizational activity and interaction. Since most members believed diversity exists (however they defined diversity), they participated with high levels of interest and involvement in order to maintain that diversity.

We saw that communication enabled HANA residents to manage the tension of diversity by reframing and qualifying diversity in ways that were supportive to many residents. Racial diversity was reframed as ethnic diversity, allowing White residents to use the label “Anglo,” for example, which spoke more about their European heritage rather than their skin color. Diversity would also be qualified as “age diversity,” for example, so that younger, White residents could be acknowledged for contributing to the “diversity” of the neighborhood. In this way communication enabled HANA residents to overcome this dispositional disagreement and sustain collective action by speaking about diversity in ways that did not exclude those who wanted to be actively involved and support the association.

Yes, there were real disagreements about the issue of diversity in HANA that cannot be eliminated through language alone. Privately some Black residents were concerned about HANA turning into “an all white neighborhood” (Doris). Yet the issue was not resolving or eliminating the disagreements, but instead finding productive ways to live within the tension that enabled continued cooperation, participation, and community organizing. Publicly some of the same residents who expressed concern about becoming “too white” (Harold) also recognized that many of the younger, White residents brought the energy, motivation, and expertise needed to help the neighborhood in other areas. The younger, White residents were more likely to engage the newer Hispanic residents and they were more willing to work with the city and other communities to encourage diversity. The challenge for HANA members regarding this dispositional disagreement was to wrestle with different

meanings of diversity in ways that produced shared understandings to foster collective action.

Positional Paradoxes

The second theme of organizational tension in our data involved paradoxes in the problems and issues facing the neighborhood association and the way HANA addressed these concerns. We call these positional paradoxes because they revealed apparent contradictions in the perceptions of association members about the situation of the neighborhood. Two subthemes that illustrated positional paradoxes were gentrification and neighborhood quality.

Gentrification

With the revitalization of the east side of the city, property values in the Hazelnut neighborhood increased significantly. Young, middle-class professionals were attracted to the neighborhood because of its proximity to downtown and its lower housing prices (compared to the outlying suburbs). One result was an increase in property taxes that made it difficult for residents with low and fixed incomes to keep their houses. This is an example of gentrification, a process of urban renewal involving an influx of middle-class or affluent residents into a deteriorating neighborhood, which often displaces poorer residents. As the city official who worked closely with HANA told us:

In the time that I've been here I've seen property taxes triple. You're talking about an elderly population that is on a fixed income, which means that with a market driven economy we are just devouring them because they can't pay the high cost of living that is inevitable in Hazelnut.

Other HANA members expressed concern about the issue of gentrification and its effects on the Hazelnut neighborhood. In an interview one of the younger, new residents stated:

One of my biggest concerns is gentrification. And it's one of those issues, you know, we've been talking about it for years . . . it's inevitable. I think it would be beneficial for the neighborhood to investigate ways to preserve the character of the neighborhood. (Mike)

Other residents were not as concerned about gentrification, and actually encouraged new, younger residents to move into the neighborhood. After an association meeting we attended, the HANA president even suggested that a younger member of our research team should buy a house in the neighborhood. Another older resident said in an interview, "I love to see the young people coming in" (Lucille).

Not only were there different opinions about gentrification in HANA, but the most concerned residents seemed to be the ones who may also be most responsible for gentrification—young, middle-class professionals. In our interviews and meeting observations, the young, middle-class residents were clearly the most concerned about gentrification, yet one of the main causes of gentrification is young,

middle-class professionals moving into a neighborhood and driving up the property values. This revealed an important paradox in HANA's organizing: The people who seem most concerned about preserving the character of the neighborhood were the same people whose actions threatened the survival of the neighborhood and created the very problem that HANA was organizing against.

Yet this issue was not a source of conflict in HANA. The younger residents wanted to preserve the character of the neighborhood and the older residents appreciated their hard work. This paradox was more of a unifying factor than a divisive issue. Rather than trying to resolve this issue in a traditional, rational way through open and clear communication, association members instead used communication to express concern and support for each other and their efforts in the neighborhood. One of the younger, White HANA members admitted in an interview that he probably contributed to gentrification: "Gentrification is occurring, and I know I'm a part of that" (Raymond). But rather than feel guilty about this and self-select out of the association, he used this acknowledgement to work with the city and other neighborhood associations to prevent some of the negative effects of gentrification. The paradox was that some of the guilt and acknowledgement about contributing to gentrification led to some of the most substantial action against gentrification. That action was communicated via efforts to fight against the tax increases that were pushing people out of the neighborhood. Gentrification was already happening in this neighborhood, but the association netted an overall gain in participation and involvement by encouraging the younger residents to engage on this issue.

In HANA meetings members communicated in ways that transcended this paradox by diverting attention away from the tension and instead towards a "common enemy" that all could relate to (corporate developers) and a "common ally" (the revitalization organization). At HANA meetings residents discussed how outsiders contributed to gentrification: "All these lots getting bought up by developers at exorbitant prices" (Dave); "The challenge is going to be keeping the [variety] and not have this just go to investors" (Stephanie). And as the city official explained, "You see private, speculating, big developers coming into the neighborhood almost daily, putting flyers on people's doors saying they will buy your property . . . 'close within 24 hours'. I mean, they can do that." Yet rather than confront the paradox within the membership of HANA related to the issue of gentrification (i.e., some HANA members actually contributing to the gentrification of their own neighborhood), during meetings residents chose to focus their criticism on the builders who were developing the properties that caused gentrification and towards supporting the revitalization organization that was working with the city to encourage responsible growth. This enabled the members of HANA to unify against a common enemy. In fact, the same resident who above acknowledged being part of gentrification also discussed what he was doing to help on this issue:

We're trying to get the word out . . . to create unity we have more people involved in the neighborhood, because we have people that have been around a long time. We just need reasons to stay involved . . . so we can stay strong. (Raymond)

His acknowledgement of being part of the problem motivated him to action and to invite the participation of others. In the end the neighborhood association may gain much more from his involvement than they lose from him moving into the neighborhood.

By diverting their attention to outside constituencies HANA members were able to maintain unity and sustain collective action around the issue of gentrification. In this way, communication served as a diversion to redirect attention towards a unifying "common enemy" or "common ally" and away from having to confront an organizational tension, thus allowing the tension to remain and serve as a productive feature of the neighborhood association. In the end, this paradox resulted in more action taken by certain association members who might contribute to gentrification and more assistance provided to residents affected by gentrification. Resolution of this paradox might eliminate both of these valuable outcomes in the neighborhood association.

Neighborhood quality

Positional paradoxes also emerged within the issue of neighborhood quality. Every resident we talked to spoke of how much they liked living in the Hazelnut neighborhood. "I wouldn't live anywhere else," one resident said in an interview. Another interviewee stated, "I've owned houses in different parts of town, but this is the first *neighborhood* that I've lived in. This is a true neighborhood where everybody knows each other and kids play together" (Earle). However, the east side of the city in general and the Hazelnut neighborhood in particular are known for crime, drug use, prostitution, and public school deficiencies. In fact, these issues were what motivated HANA members to meet and discuss improving their neighborhood in the first place. "We have drugs, we have prostitution," explained a HANA member named Cynthia. Doris, a long-time neighborhood resident said in her interview: "[Hazelnut] is considered one of the three 'hot spots' in the central east section, which means it's really bad." The city Parks and Recreation supervisor working with HANA told us, "It's an aging neighborhood . . . with many economic and social problems." At HANA meetings other residents spoke about crack houses in vacant lots and problems with the neighborhood liquor store.

Residents extolled the qualities of their neighborhood, but it was the *lack* of quality that actually served as one of the main reasons for their organizing. Paradoxically, the lack of quality in the neighborhood lead to the quality of the neighborhood: crime and social problems called for an organized response by the residents, and this organizing created a sense of solidarity, camaraderie, and community that produced favorable perceptions about the neighborhood. This apparent contradiction, that the lack of neighborhood quality actually improved neighborhood quality, demonstrates how paradox can be a beneficial aspect of community organizing. It may not be rational for the residents to communicate about the quality of their neighborhood despite its clear lack of quality, but in solving the paradox they would lose a valuable motivating factor for their collective action.

Communication in meetings and among residents helped to keep this paradox balanced, rarely gravitating too close to either end of the tension. We recorded in our field notes that when HANA residents talked too much about the positive aspects of the neighborhood, others reminded them of the negative aspects and that there was still work to do. Conversely, when residents focused too much on the negative, others reiterated the positives to remind people that much had been accomplished and that their efforts were worthwhile. Instead of resolving this tension by privileging one side or the other, communication in HANA helped balance the tension and foster continued involvement and collective action.

Discussion

Previous research on neighborhood associations tends to focus on sociological or economic factors to explain various phenomena. In contrast, the present study is uniquely communicative because it highlights the organizational tensions that emerge from interactions among multiple stakeholders, and how various communication practices are used in response to these tensions, thus constituting and reinforcing the social infrastructure of this neighborhood association. We also go beyond merely studying some particular communication phenomenon within the context of neighborhood associations (i.e., newspaper readership); instead we examine neighborhood associations as communicative structures and the processes that enable and sustain collective action. The primary contribution of our research is to demonstrate that organizational tensions in a neighborhood association can foster the interaction, participation, and involvement necessary for community organizing. This not only advances our understanding of communication in neighborhood associations, but also helps broaden the reach of a communication perspective to this important organizational context. We conclude with a discussion about implications for theory and practice.

Implications for Theory

Taking a tension-centered approach to organizational communication in the context of a neighborhood association helps expand our understanding of tension and paradox and provides insights regarding how organizational tensions are managed communicatively. In this neighborhood association the dispositional disagreements of prayer and diversity were managed through reframing and qualifying, whereas the positional paradoxes of gentrification and neighborhood quality were managed through diversion and balancing. These are related to many of the communicative responses identified in previous research (Table 1), but also extend our knowledge in important ways.

Each tension in HANA was managed differently, suggesting the nature of the organizational tension itself called for a particular communicative response. For example, the tensions of dispositional disagreements were rooted in individual perceptions and required transformation through reframing in order for individual perceptions to fit within the larger collective. This implies that tensions based on divergent

interpretations of organizational members are not only beneficial, but can be managed through communicative practices in ways that transcend individual differences in favor of cooperative understandings. On the other hand, positional paradoxes resulted from the apparent contradictory actions and perceptions of association members as they engaged various issues in the neighborhood. For example, an external enemy (the developers) was invoked to divert attention away from the apparent contradictions of gentrification, and balance was used to stabilize the community and avoid polarization around the issue of neighborhood quality. This suggests that these types of paradoxes can be managed by redirecting an organization's attention towards an external entity to mediate contradictory actions, and by countering value-laden comments with dialectical opposites.

Additionally, the fact that dispositional disagreements could be managed through reframing and qualifying suggests the semantic and grammatical nature of these tensions, and how their meanings are not inherent to the organization but embedded within the interaction patterns of organizational members. Similarly, the fact that positional paradoxes were managed through diversion and balancing indicates the situational nature of these paradoxes. Together these demonstrate the pragmatic nature of organizational tensions and their basis in the discursive practices of organizational members. Previous organizational scholarship situates tensions such as paradoxes and contradictions as structural properties of organizational systems arising from the competing demands of conflicting organizational policies and procedures (e.g., Stohl & Cheney, 2001; Tracy, 2004). However, in the voluntary context of a neighborhood association organizational tensions are more likely to emerge from the divergent interests of multiple stakeholders as they seek to advance individual interests within a collective and marshal the consent of other members apart from formal authority structures.

Our research also adds to the growing body of scholarship that investigates the inherent tensions of human organizing in a variety of organizational contexts, as well as the communicative responses used in order to manage these tensions. Previous research generally locates tensions within various organizational directives and policies emanating from authority relationships and workplace responsibilities. However, in community organizations such as a neighborhood association the organizational tensions are more likely to emerge from the discourse of the collective and the voluntary engagement of the members. In the present study tensions do not necessarily manifest themselves from direct orders or policies as in much of the previous literature, but rather from the unique organizational properties of neighborhood associations that bring together an eclectic mix of members with a wide variety of backgrounds, interests, and motivations. This creates a different context for developing communicative responses to organizational tensions and new possibilities for transformation.

The unique context of neighborhood associations enabled us to develop insights about organizational tensions and communication not established in previous research. The dispositional disagreements we identified in HANA relate to the paradoxes of identity discussed by Stohl and Cheney (2001). Yet in Stohl and Cheney's model these paradoxes relate to contradictory messages from those who

design and formalize various organizational structures, such as managers and supervisors with organizational authority. In contrast, our work shows how paradoxes of disposition emerge from every day interactions among organizational members who do not necessarily have the power or authority to impose organizational changes; these paradoxes instead provide the necessary tension to sustain cooperative activity. Similarly, what we identify as positional paradoxes in this neighborhood association are not found in the previous literature. This is because neighborhood associations are more problem-driven in their activities and place a higher premium on active participation and involvement (vs. mere compliance) than other organizations. Therefore, there will be greater variety in how these problems are positioned and the solutions that emerge, resulting in the type of positional paradoxes we describe above. Thus we add to the theoretical understanding of how various tensions develop within particular modes of human organizing.

Future research can begin connecting these issues of communication and tension to specific organizational outcomes, such as membership retention and goal achievement. Future research should also explore whether or not some organizational tensions and/or communicative responses are harmful and unproductive to neighborhood associations. Our research highlights many of the positive aspects, but more research is needed to understand the full extent of organizational tensions and communication in neighborhood associations. For example, how might certain members take advantage of organizational tensions to advance narrow agendas; or how might tensions prevent the achievement of organizational goals?

Our contribution is to theorize organizational tensions (specifically dispositional disagreements and positional paradoxes) as productive forces in community organizations where sustained participation and involvement are necessary components for the development of collective action and goal accomplishment. Communicative responses to these tensions become important moments whereby the social infrastructure of neighborhood associations is reconstituted and reinforced (or not) in order to maintain productive relationships among the members and outside constituencies. Our analysis demonstrates that organizational tensions can stimulate activity and sustain the energy necessary for community organizations like HANA. By helping to facilitate things like membership retention and goal achievement, organizational tensions and the resulting communicative responses provide life-generating properties for community organizations, whose voluntary action lies beyond the mandates of the state or the incentives of financial markets. The voluntary action of community organizing requires a sustained energy source of involved members, and our data from HANA show that organizational tensions elicit communicative responses from members that continually shape the organization and underwrite its continued existence.

Implications for Practice

The present study also has important implications for practitioners involved in neighborhood associations, especially in terms of how members communicate during

meetings and how the neighborhood association is represented to new members and outside constituencies. First, during meetings it is important that the members continue to manage and balance the various tensions that comprise the association through communication with each other. Sensitive or controversial issues should be framed in ways that foster participation and involvement, not in ways that create divisions between people. Much of the work of neighborhood associations takes place in meetings, usually monthly or quarterly gatherings. Since neighborhood associations do not have buildings or other physical assets and the work is primarily volunteer and sporadic, association meetings become important sites of reconstitution and re-membering. Meetings are where social bonds are maintained and the purposes of the association are reinforced. In many ways neighborhood associations *are* the meetings of their members, for this is the primary “thing” members identify when talking about their association.

Another practical implication involves how neighborhood association members represent the association to new residents, potential members, and outside constituencies. Neighborhood associations live and die by the participation and involvement of the citizens in their community. They consistently need to reach out to other citizens to extend and maintain their membership. A central concern for association members then is to represent the association to new and potential members in ways that encourage participation and involvement, not complacency and indifference. Our field observations and interviews suggest that people were more inclined to get involved or lend their support when there was something at stake or in question. As the Parks and Recreation supervisor told us about neighborhood politics:

In the early stages when there's a need to get participation and form a consensus, you need to have as many people involved as possible . . . you come out to fight when the outcome is uncertain; you don't come out just to congratulate a foregone conclusion.

When members represent the association to new and potential members they need to highlight various tensions, including the uncertain, contingent, and apparent contradictory aspects of the neighborhood association that encourage people to learn more and get involved. This happened in HANA during an attempt to revoke the liquor license of a convenience store that was becoming a hub of illegal and vagrant activity. Instead of communicating that the association was in control and that everything would be taken care of in a clear, predictable manner, the association communicated that the outcome of this endeavor was very much in doubt and that neighborhood involvement was necessary in order to make progress on this issue. It certainly created tension between people who had different opinions about how best to approach the issue, but by surfacing this tension HANA was able to get more people involved and pursue a resolution.

Conclusion

The central finding from our analysis is that organizational tensions are an inherent part of neighborhood associations, a natural product of divergent interests and

motivations coming together for ambiguous purposes where everyone has limited information. These tensions are both material and discursive constructions: They exist within the material conditions that bound human activity, but they emerge from the various ways people make sense of and communicate about their situation. Tensions are communicative, not just in the fact that people say contradictory things, but that there are intrinsic tensions (such as paradoxes) within the discursive structure of the organization. Rather than “fix” these tensions through communication that is open and clear, neighborhood associations benefit from communication that is ambiguous, equivocal, and allows for multiple interpretations. In neighborhood associations sustained cooperation and involvement are potentially more important than technical precision and accuracy. This does not mean that everything is entirely subjective and there is no need for decisive action or decision-making. But it does mean that in neighborhood associations it may be more important to create space for multiple interpretations and motivations than it is to have everyone “on the same page” or to reach definitive conclusions about particular issues.

Our research shows how organizational tensions in a neighborhood association promote the interaction, participation, and involvement necessary for community organizing. In contrast to traditional and functionalist views about organizing where a main purpose of communication is to resolve tension and uncertainty, our results show how communication that helps manage and sustain organizational tensions and uncertainties can be constructive for community organizing. There may be situations where tension is harmful to the organizational mission, but in a community organization where participation and involvement are key, organizational tensions may be the means by which association members stay engaged and achieve goals.

This research offers further empirical contribution to the growing body of organizational scholarship that demonstrates the role of communication within the inherent tensions of human organizing. Organizational tension can lead to greater participation and involvement in community organizations, whereas attempts at rational, open resolution of these tensions may create an organizational context that limits and restricts voluntary collective action. Thus neighborhood associations benefit from communication practices that support the ambiguity and uncertainty that enable members to manage and respond to the tensions human organizing.

Notes

- [1] We assume a dictionary or common-sense definition of rationality, implying intelligent, logical, consistent, and/or reasonable action (Simon, 1984).
- [2] See Ashcraft (2000); Harter & Krone (2001); Hatch (1997); Medved et al. (2001); Meyers & Garrett (1993); Meyerson (1991); Trethewey (1999); Weick (1979); Wendt (1995, 1998); and Wood & Conrad (1983).
- [3] All organization and personal names are pseudonyms in order to ensure confidentiality.
- [4] We also reviewed a number of HANA documents and resources, such as meeting minutes, monthly newsletters, flyers announcing upcoming events, and the HANA Web site, which helped us learn about the workings of this neighborhood association. Though helpful, this

information did not directly inform our analysis; therefore we do not discuss it in our methods section.

- [5] Although this only represents a fraction of the overall neighborhood population, our focus in this study was on the actual neighborhood association and its organizational practices. In this regard, we interviewed 60% of HANA's 25 members.

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