

Building A Healthy Community:
Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Down Town Springfield

Kevin Hull
Western New England University, Springfield MA.
May 1, 2015

Abstract

This paper is about deconstructing and reconstructing the community of downtown Springfield, which can be translated to every community around the United States. We focus on changing education, child care, transportation, shelter, police, health care, treatment on demand, government for the people, no corporations, housing, criminalization, Prison Industrial Complex (PIC), and most importantly the deconstruction of capitalism. Then we look at who will be needed to make this change.

Key Words: Out Now, Community building, education system, Prison Industrial Complex, Socialism, Capitalism

1. Out Now's mission statement is a youth led, adult advised, queer youth organization that works to promote harm reduction, self determination, and community building through anti-oppression organizing. Through what I have observed and participated in through out this semester, Out Now follows its mission statement and their goals to the tee. This semester I set up a fundraiser and film to spread the word about Out Now and what they stand for. This fundraiser and film was focused on building the community through anti-oppression organizing. Also, this semester I sat in on a court case to show support, and I observed the members of Out Now successfully protest at the "X" in Springfield to stand up against police brutality and to promote black lives matter.
2. Currently at Out Now, I would say that the problem that negatively impacts the youth is that our community, like most around the country, is filled with white supremacy, poverty, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and transphobia. All of these contribute to unhealthy living by the LGBTQ youths of color at Out Now, on every level including physical, emotional, and spiritual. When people do not have their basic needs met this creates problems, and this is especially true for the youth of Out Now whose needs are not being met. Building healthy communities builds healthy lives and people are then empowered. To only look at this from a singular unmet need is to isolate things in a way that feels further oppressive. We have to keep pushing ourselves to get to the root and begin from there.

I chose to focus on community building because through the nature of the work I have done this semester at Out Now, it would be impossible to pick one

unmet need of the clients because that would further the oppression of other unmet needs. Instead we have to get to the root of the problem and work from there and that all begins with the community.

I do not think the larger society sees this condition as a problem even in the slightest bit. People in the larger society are so caught up in the politics of gay marriage and "equality" for LGBTQ people or "equality" for people of color they do not see the underlying problems. The only ones that understand these problems are the people that live it everyday, and sadly they have no voice within the larger society. That is why social workers and others have to go against the power structure to make changes possible (Netting, 150-151, 2012).

3. Out Now provides services to LGBTQ youth of color. Being a young person of color growing up in today's society is difficult; add to that being queer and life becomes nearly impossible. LGBTQ youth of color are not looking for equality but rather are looking for liberation. Many of the youth at Out Now are scared to go to school because they get harassed both physically and emotionally. They are scared to be on the streets because of the police. Also, they do not want to be home because much of the time they are disowned or mistreated by their parents. The only option they are left with is the drop in center at Out Now.

There are many different social problems surrounding the LGBTQ population of color all over the country such as homelessness, violence, and health. At Out Now, the youth are provided with a safe place to meet and talk over what they are feeling and going through in their everyday life. It is here that they have the ability to connect with others that may be going through some of the

same issues. Having group sessions like this is great for the youth of Out Now because it shows they are not alone. If they were to enter a group in the larger community and share their feelings and emotions, many of the youth would not be able to connect with them because of their differences.

For this paper it is important to also focus on the larger community of downtown Springfield as a whole and not just LGBTQ youth of color from Out Now. This community needs to be deconstructed and reconstructed in every way in order to build a healthy community for all people in the community from the youth to the elders and from the white people to people of color. It will be measured by the five functions of a community and if they are running smoothly then the community is healthy (Netting 135-136, 2012).

4. The social work profession is comprised of a majority of white people, and their “clients” are commonly people of color. Social workers, like most whites in the United States, do not have a historical understanding of institutional racism and white supremacy. There is a lot taught about how to treat people, but little about privilege and oppression. Lacking this knowledge leads to the inability to recognize the strengths of the client. For example, a counselor working with a person of color should think deeply about racism and the emotional issues related to racism at all times. Not being educated in oppression and privilege inhibits one's ability to do this. Another diversity factor that you can not overlook is the fact that many members of Out Now and the community of downtown Springfield are as much part of the LGBTQ community and other oppressed groups as they are of the community of color.

5. To solve this problem of an unhealthy community, we have to start at the root of the problem. I chose to talk about the entire community because to help the youth of downtown Springfield and especially the youth of Out Now we have to completely deconstruct and reconstruct the community as a whole and, hypothetically, totally start over. We have to change literally everything: education, child care, transportation, shelter, police, healthcare, treatment on demand, government for the people, no corporations, housing, criminalization, Prison Industrial Complex (PIC), and most importantly the deconstruction of capitalism. The overall strategy is to change the entire community, but you have to take separate tactics to make this overall change possible (Netting, 304, 2012).

I want to focus more on the PIC and on surplus of labor, which are the heart of capitalism. To rebuild into a healthy community we need to first transfer from a capitalist society to a socialist society. The theory behind a socialist society is that production, distribution and consumption of all goods are a shared responsibility of each person within the society or community. In socialism, there is no privately owned property. To make this change we first need to deconstruct the PIC. "The PIC helps and maintains the authority of people who get their power through racial, economic and similar privileges. There are many ways this power is collected and maintained through the PIC, including mass media images that keep alive stereotypes of people of color, poor people, queer people, immigrants, and youth as criminal, delinquent or deviant" (Out Now Packet). The PIC is a tool that "the state" uses to control people, and legitimizes itself by claiming that only it can create "safety" for people living under it.

Next, to rebuild the community we have to focus on rebuilding the education system. Over time education has been built on the idea of doing more with less. The No Child Left Behind Act was created in 2001 to increase school accountability and to decrease the achievement gap. However, this was not the outcome of the program because of program flaws consisting of unrealistic goals, failure to incorporate diversity education, and a lack of accounting for students with disabilities. This policy quickly turned into making sure that all the children could "pass" the standardized tests, and if a student can not pass, this became a contributing factor to increased school drop rates eventually leading to the idea of the school-to-prison pipeline. Next we need to eliminate tax-based public education. State and local taxes have always financed public education, with very little federal funding. As wealthy communities are able to spend more on education the quality of education increases, however, less wealthy communities can not spend as much money on education and the quality suffers. Through this system of funding, education becomes uneven and reinforces large achievement gaps (The Four Ways to Really Fix Education 2013). What would you do if you were proposed the question, how would you fix the public education system in America?

Another huge issue is health care in the community of downtown Springfield. First, health care has to become universal. The idea of universal health care is to guarantee that the community members can obtain the health services they need without suffering financial adversity when paying for them (What is Universal Health Coverage?).

It is hard to talk about the resources that are already in place for this problem, because the community of downtown Springfield is very unhealthy and riddled with many different problems. Although limited, there are some different organizations already involved with the revolution of deconstruction and reconstruction of the community. On the other hand, there are many resources that are not available for making this change possible. The first and biggest issue with changing this problem is that people in power do not see the community as a problem in the same way that people of the target population do.

Everyone in the community would benefit from this reconstruction because there will no longer be an overall unhealthy community. First and most importantly, a socialist society would need to be developed so everybody will have the right to participate in the social decisions that affect them (Netting, 197-199, 2012). I understand that many socialist societies around the world are corrupt, but with a democratic socialist society that can be avoided. Simply put, the belief of a democratic socialist society is the elimination of an all powerful government, as well as not allowing big corporations to control our society. With that in affect it will be a very healthy baseline to build a healthy community (Democratic Socialists of America 2015).

6. Organizations and people have been trying to deconstruct and reconstruct communities and societies since the beginning of time. There is no exact time when a group of people pushed for a whole reconstruction of community because it can not happen at one time. It needs to happen in multiple layers and in many different movements. However, there are many moments in history when people

have pushed for more rights, and somewhat of a reconstruction of society, but not on the level that I have talked about.

One of the huge movements that people are very familiar with is the Civil Rights movement. During this time there was an organized fight to secure basic rights and privileges for all American citizens. These organized fights were planned by both people of color and white people. Also, this movement involved many different organizations both local and national, like the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), CORE (Congress of Racial Equality), the SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) and the SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference) (Løken). This purpose of this movement was to make people of color legally, politically, and morally equal to their white counter parts. Based on this stated purpose I would have to say that the movement was not completely successful. With everything that is happening in today's world, in Baltimore and Ferguson, it is hard to say people of color are legally and morally equivalent to white people.

Another movement that was built around the idea of reconstructing how much of society worked was the Women's Rights movement. This movement was focused on the idea that women should have the same rights as men. Over history, organizations such as National American Woman Suffrage Association (NAWSA), National Organization for Women (NOW), and equal now have been involved in different movements to gain equal rights, from women's suffrage to the right to work for equal pay (Women's Rights 2015). I would say that this movement, to reconstruct society, was fairly successful. First,

women are seen as equals legally, politically, and morally. However, there is still uneven pay for the exact same jobs so in this respect it was unsuccessful.

7. While interning at Out Now I have gained knowledge about different organizations that would be available to help me in solving this problem. First, Out Now is an organization that focuses on the LGBTQ youth of color in downtown Springfield, but also liberation of all oppressed groups in all places. Other organizations that would be helpful would be Arise for social justice and Springfield no one leaves, which is an organization that focuses on residents most directly impacted by the housing crisis and economic inequality within Springfield. Other organizations that fight for social and economical justice would be helpful; also it would be helpful to have organizations that have power, such as NAACP.

To make this change possible the help of multiple groups of different people is needed. First, people with resources are needed; help from the people of the oppressed groups is needed as well as many people from different organizations. After there is a base layer and the movement/movements have begun, we will need to add people of the dominate group that are allies and also people with money to keep fueling the movements. Also, it is important to get legislators on your side for such a large scale change because they can push for this huge change in the political arena.

I think that many people would resist my change effort. People think that the current community is healthy and running smoothly. Those are the people that would resist this change effort of deconstruction and reconstruction of the

community of downtown Springfield. The youth of Out Now, which are mainly my target population, would be very willing to help in this change effort. The nature of work done at Out Now is focused around far left politics and changing the community from the roots, and the youth have the same beliefs.

The youth of Out Now and much of the population of downtown Springfield is not empowered. At the moment, people of color are becoming less empowered due to all of the police brutality and racial issues. Violence towards oppressed groups is increasing, especially towards groups of color or groups of LGBTQ, which people of Out Now identify with.

8. "Change almost always involves influencing the allocation of scarce resources" (Netting, 343, 2012). Every change effort involves different types of strategies but the three main strategies are collaboration, campaign, and contest. Each of these strategies have specific tactics that make the change actually possible.

For my change effort of deconstructing and reconstructing the entire community of downtown Springfield I have to use all three strategies. First, we need to collaborate. We need to get the target population on our side and start to gain other support. In this stage of change it is important to have both participation and empowerment. Participation would be having the change efforts involve the target population. "Empowerment is the idea that refers to the steps needed to free members of the target population from real or perceived barriers to participation" (Netting, 346, 2012). This will make the target population feel safe during the change effort and increase participation. Next, we need to campaign to educate and persuade people on the change effort in hopes to gain further support.

Lastly, we need to contest everyone that does not agree with this change. After gaining the support of the target population and educating/persuading others to support the change, we need to resort to bargaining, negotiation, and large group action (Netting, 342-353, 2012).

9. If the deconstruction and reconstruction process for the community of downtown Springfield was successful, it would be equally important to make sure that this is a permanent change. The four main ideas that will keep the new healthy community running smoothly are accountability, transformative justice, coexistence, and an even mix of race in power.

The idea of transformative justice and accountability is holding people accountable for their actions in a helpful way. You also need to hold yourself accountable. Also, it is important to hold the community accountable. Community accountability is a community-based strategy, rather than a police/prison-based strategy, to address violence within our communities. Community accountability is a process which a community – a group of friends, a family, a church, a workplace, a neighborhood, and more work together to solve violence issues. "Transformative Justice seeks to provide people who experience violence with immediate safety and long-term healing and reparations while holding people who commit violence accountable within and by their communities" (What are Community Accountability & Transformative Justice? 2015).

Coexistence is very important as well, to keep growing as a healthy community. Obviously white supremacy and racism have to stop and other forms of oppression need to come to an end. It is very important that after people of

color gain liberation they understand the importance of avoiding oppression of white people. Lastly, there has to be an equal amount of all oppressed groups in power, so that not one group has a larger voice than another. Also in socialism, the community is very involved with social actions, so that needs to be equal as well.

10. There are two ways to evaluate change. The simple way is called process evaluation where you look at the change and you ask yourself did we accomplish what we wanted to accomplish. This can relate to evaluating my change effort by simply asking if we have created a healthy community. To evaluate if a community is healthy or not we have to look at the five functions of a community and see if they are functioning in the newly reconstructed community that we have built. (1) Production, distribution and consumption, (2) socialization, (3) social control, (4) social participation, (5) mutual support. First, production, distribution and consumption are the function of how a community designs to meet the need of the people within the community, for example food or shelter. If we have a socialist economy there is a shared ownership of resources offering a more equitable distribution of goods and services (Kurt 2015). The next function of the community is socialization to the prevailing norms, traditions, and values. To reconstruct a healthy community we need to completely shift the current norms and values of the community to a more liberating peace of mind. The third function of the community is social control or how the members of the community ensure compliance with norms and values. An example of this would be a law or regulation. Next on the list of community functions is social participation which is the interaction with other community groups, associations,

and organizations. Often people within the community need some sort of social outlet, such as religious groups. The last function of the community is mutual support that families, friends, partners, neighbors, volunteers, and professionals carry out in communities when they care for people in need (Netting 135-136, 2012). In my opinion if we change everything that I have talked about in question five I think that every function of the community will be met and the community will be labeled as healthy.

The next way to evaluate a change is called product or outcome evaluation and it is broken down into four steps. First, we need to establish a time frame for this change to occur. It is difficult to set a time for such a large change such as a community reconstruction, but it should occur in sections and in separate movements but hopefully, the whole community can be rebuilt in the next ten years. The main target population is the youth of Springfield, but actually it will affect everyone in a positive way. The result will be an entirely new healthy community that meets the criteria of a healthy community (Netting, 368-369, 2012).

11. In Policy 313 we talked about the idea of elite power theory and I believe that Out Now proves that point. The elite power theory is built on the idea that a handful of people control the policies that govern all of society. This is true in my opinion because LGBTQ do not have much say in politics and get limited representation. I do not believe this is the best way to create social policies however, I believe that this is the way they are mostly created.

Another concept in Policy we have discussed is the idea of "blaming the victim" and the idea that it is the victims' fault that they are put into their situation. For example, many people may say that the members of Out Now have chosen to be LGBTQ. However, I completely disagree with this idea because many people have problems that they did not cause or ask for.

Lastly, in Policy class we have talked about human rights and how everyone in the world deserves to have these rights. As a social worker, understanding this declaration reinforces our values because all the values are included in this declaration. The social work values that are outlined in the declaration are service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence. At Out Now there is a constant fight for social justice, and they believe that all people should have rights.

12. I feel that at the start of this semester I really struggled at Out Now because the supervision was different than any supervision I have received in the past and the topics we discussed were all new to me. However, after a great amount of listening and reading I started to become more familiar with the topics at hand and I began to feel more comfortable and did not struggle as much.

References

- Netting E., Ketter P., McMurtry S., & Thomas, M. *Social Work Macro Practice*. (5th edition) Longman Press. White Plains, NY, 2012.
- Out Now Packet
- The Four Ways to Really Fix Education* (2013). Retrieved from <http://qz.com/148393/the-four-ways-to-really-fix-education-that-no-one-wants-to-hear/>
- What is Universal Health Coverage?*"Universal health coverage" (2015) Retrieved from http://www.who.int/universal_health_coverage/en/
- Democratic Socialists of America*. "Doesn't socialism mean that the government will own and run everything?" Retrieved from http://www.dsausa.org/govt_run_everything
- Løken, Karin Dwyer. *The Civil Rights Movement and Black Power*. Retrieved from <http://ndla.no/en/node/109405>
- Women's Rights*. (2015) World History Group. Retrieved from <http://www.historynet.com/womens-rights>
- What are Community Accountability & Transformative Justice?(2015) Retrieved from <https://www.transformativejustice.eu/accountability-and-sexual-violence/community-accountability-transformative-justice-resources/>
- Kurt, Daniel. (2015). *What Exactly is a Socialist Economy?* Investopedia, LLC. Retrieved from <http://www.investopedia.com/articles/investing/082014/what-exactly-socialist-economy.asp>

<http://qz.com/148393/the-four-ways-to-really-fix-education-that-no-one-wants-to-hear/>

http://www.who.int/universal_health_coverage/en/

http://www.dsausa.org/govt_run_everything

<http://ndla.no/en/node/109405>

<http://www.historynet.com/womens-rights>

<https://www.transformativejustice.eu/accountability-and-sexual-violence/community-accountability-transformative-justice-resources/>

<http://www.investopedia.com/articles/investing/082014/what-exactly-socialist-economy.asp>