

**PERSONAL CHANGE THROUGH PARTICIPATION  
IN SOCIAL ACTION: A CASE STUDY OF TEN  
SOCIAL ACTIVISTS<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

Through the study of the leaders in the Lincoln Alliance, a short-lived but powerful community action organization in Lincoln, Nebraska, the relationship of personal to social transformation is assessed. Themes, categories, and units of analysis that emerged from qualitative study indicate that personal change was evident as a result of conflict situations where the process used was action, reaction to the action, and reflection. Thirteen propositions were derived in an attempt to achieve a substantive theory. Graphs attempt to show the process through which personal change and transformation occur in social action.

**Résumé**

On évalue le rapport entre la transformation personnelle et sociale par une étude des dirigeants du *Lincoln Alliance*, une organisation communautaire d'action à Lincoln, Nebraska. Thèmes, catégories, et unités d'analyse émergents de l'étude qualitative indiquent que le changement personnel était évident à cause de situations de conflit où le processus utilisé était "action, réaction à l'action, et réflexion." On a puisé treize propositions dans le but de réaliser une théorie substantielle. Des graphiques essaient d'illustrer le processus à partir duquel le changement et la transformation personnelle se réalisent dans l'action sociale.

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Social action has traditionally been an important program emphasis in the field of adult education. Eduard Lindeman (1926), a major proponent for both progressivism and education through social engagement, placed education for democracy (defined as people engaged in joint activity to solve their common problems in democratic cooperation) at the heart of social reform. Progressives in the early 1920s and 1930s understood that for cooperative democracy to flourish there must be opportunities to share in decision-making on issues or problems in the community. Otherwise, citizens become mere ciphers.

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Citizenship in a democracy is a privilege that requires the acceptance of responsibility. It is assumed that when people take responsibility to govern themselves participation in the decision-making structures of the commonwealth is a necessity. There are two modern problems that can arise when one takes the concept of citizenship seriously. One is the problem of encouraging people to want to participate in citizenship activities. People often become complacent or take for granted the running of a city or a state/province. The assumption is that elected representatives will serve the needs and wishes of the electorate. The second problem is that those in power often hold onto that power with a tenacity which excludes others who want to participate in the decision-making activities of the democracy. When there is denial of participation, those who are left out have the opportunity to critique and organize for their own self-interests, as they did in establishing the Lincoln Alliance of Lincoln, Nebraska.

The study of the Lincoln Alliance is about progressive adult education in a voluntary, community-based context. From the leaders in the Alliance we can learn how they developed personally, what they learned, and how they developed their leadership skills through an organization designed to bring about both personal and social changes. Learning to take responsibility for citizenship was enhanced when those in the Lincoln Alliance practiced cooperative democracy, including community action, on issues that people determined were a threat to their quality of life.

Canadian adult education, too, is rich with programs and projects in the field of citizenship. Under the leadership of its first director, E.A. Corbett, the Canadian Association for Adult Education (CAAE) set up the National Farm Radio Forum and the Citizens' Forum. Both of these ventures were attempts to include citizens in the dialogue on major issues in Canada. Each helped build a Canadian national community and sought to increase the quality of life in rural small towns. The Joint Planning Commission, created in 1947, also involved many voluntary organizations, government departments and agencies, university extension departments, business and professional groups, provincial departments of education, and church and labour organizations in dialogue on important national issues such as broadcasting policy (Selman, 1991). The most famous community development project in the country was the Antigonish Movement in Nova Scotia which seems to parallel the activities of the Lincoln Alliance in this study. Championed by Moses Coady, this project organized fishermen and the poor of Nova Scotia into cooperative economic projects to improve the quality of life in the region.

The Lincoln Alliance also was a cooperative project with the purpose of improving the quality of life of citizens. The Alliance became a decision-making body which sought to determine the agenda in the city of Lincoln and served as a forum on city-wide issues. The Alliance worked on issues that sought social transformations of structures which citizens determined were not equitable at the time. The Lincoln Alliance changed the structures of Lincoln, increased the numbers of people involved in community affairs, and in the process changed

the people themselves. It is this change in the people that is the focus of this article.

The relationship of personal to social transformation has been discussed by such scholars of adult education as Sue Collard and Michael Law (1989) and Paulo Freire (1970). Problematic are the use of words such as personal change, social change, personal transformation, and social transformation. The word "change" is usually used as the common term for some sort of alteration, e.g., change of career, change of hair colour, change of residence. In the case of social change, it often means progressive movement toward a better quality of life in a community. Social transformation has come to mean a critique of the structures that are set up to serve humans. It involves a collective group of individuals who come together for the purpose of changing dehumanizing hierarchical structures in the economic and political systems. The aim is to alter the power relations, which often represent narrow points of view (self interests), and to balance the power equation by building an alternative power structure that offers valid, different, and alternative self interests. Thus social transformation involves conflict and struggle, as power relations are altered. Social or community action by citizens is required in accomplishing this task.

Personal change and personal transformation are words that have been used interchangeably until recently. The concept of personal change is often attributed to developmental theorists who suggest that personal growth is teleological, with increasingly complex stages. Often these phases are age-related. However, Paulo Freire (1970) proposes that adult personal growth is dependent on a relationship between political action and reflection. Freire maintains that adults learn and grow best when they are immersed in experiences that provide material for reflection. Through the political, economic, and social interaction with their environment a group of people (not individuals alone) can become transformed through a process of conscientization which requires action and reflection on that action (praxis). It is a process which liberates people from their past oppression, both self imposed and structurally imposed. Freire's theory is based on the interrelationship between personal and social transformation. One cannot become transformed apart from a community that is seeking liberation from oppressive social structures. Both personal and social transformation occur simultaneously with the collective of individuals moving together toward conscientization.

Jack Mezirow, more recently, has attempted to explicate the cognitive process that Freire more generally describes as a deepening of critical consciousness. Personal transformation for Mezirow (1990) is the shift in a person's "meaning perspective" which can be as broad as a worldview orientation or as narrow as a specific cognitive attitude or assumption. Integral to perspective transformation, as he calls it, is reflection. Reflection is best accomplished in group discourse on issues that challenge underlying assumptions and premises that each participant holds. This may occur in classrooms, in social action groups, in consciousness raising groups, and/or in board rooms.

## **The Context for Social Action**

The Lincoln Alliance was a successful, broadly-based, city-wide community organization that emerged in Lincoln, Nebraska, in the early 1970s. It emerged to build power by organizing large numbers of citizens on specific issues that they determined were problematic. At the time, in Lincoln, a very small number of leaders, mainly private sector leaders, were making decisions that affected the road system, the school system, and the economic system. These decisions directly influenced the nature of the neighborhoods where low and moderate income people lived. The building of a coalition of existing groups to work on issues that the people themselves determined were important was the aim of the organization. Through organized action in the political, economic, and community arenas, social change became possible. However, the focus of this study is not on the organization itself but rather on how adults changed as a result of participation in a grassroots organization. In this qualitative study, ten leaders in the Lincoln Alliance were interviewed. The categories that emerged exemplify the nature of the change that these leaders experienced.

## **Background and History of the Lincoln Alliance**

Guided by progressive principles, the Lincoln Alliance assumed that ordinary citizens have the ability to affect and control their environments. Democratic principles were used internally in the organization to give citizens the opportunity to experience collective decision-making which employed dialogue, negotiation, and compromise. Saul Alinsky's (1946, 1971) radical approaches to community organization were used to shape strategies and tactics. At work in the Alliance was the action-reaction-reflection model where participants would plan and act on an issue in their self interest, wait for the reaction from those in power, and reflect on the action and the reaction as a group. A guiding principle was "All action is in the reaction."

Alinsky, trained in sociology at the University of Chicago in the 1920s, would not have called himself an adult educator, but he was. After the experience of organizing Chicago's Back of the Yards neighborhood organization, Alinsky formed the Industrial Areas Foundation, a training institute for grassroots groups. Representatives of the Foundation came to Lincoln, Nebraska, in the early 1970s to help build the Lincoln Alliance. Through technical assistance from the Chicago staff and the hiring of a trained organizer, the Lincoln Alliance was able to mobilize 27 organizations and 500 citizens for a founding convention at the Lincoln Hilton Hotel in June, 1976. There were nine churches, six neighborhood organizations, and thirteen civic groups that joined the Lincoln Alliance.

One of the early issues that gave birth to the organization was the proposed construction of the Northeast Radial, a four-laned highway scheduled to be built through two low income neighborhoods. The Lincoln Alliance fought for a referendum on the project. Success enabled the people to kill the twenty year road project.

Other successful actions before the demise of the Alliance in 1982 included the stopping of the closing of older neighborhood schools, the development of district school board and city council elections, and the stopping of apartment "slip-ins" in older residential neighborhoods. The organization achieved maintenance at two-way width of streets formally slated for widening. It also challenged redlining, or home loan denials, in older neighborhoods.

Each of these issues was chosen through an elaborate planning process. Freire calls this "an investigation of meaningful thematics" in the lives of people while Alinsky calls the action-reaction-reflection process integral to democracy. For democracy to survive, the Alliance maintained that the people must take control of their lives through action on issues that directly affected them. They adopted Alinsky's iron-clad rule: "Never do for someone what they can do for themselves."

The planning process used by the Lincoln Alliance made use of Habermas, notion of ideal speech or discourse:

Habermas uses the term "ideal speech situation" to refer to a situation of absolutely uncoerced and unlimited discussion between completely free and equal human agents. (Geuss, 1981, p. 65)

For this project, a condition of personal change was the presence of a group which served to support and challenge each participant's underlying assumptions and beliefs (premises) as work commenced to meet the goals of the organization. Researching issues, planning strategies and action, and reflection on those actions required a type of camaraderie that enhanced the exploration of what one thought, how one should act, and how far one could explore the limits of one's thinking and acting. The group functioned as a team in its endeavors because the issue or goal overcame the need for power plays or ego manipulation. The support and relationships built within the group pushed people to grow and stretch beyond the boundaries of prescribed (reified) thinking and behavior.

Action in the public arena which provides instant material for reflection is an added ingredient in the formula for personal transformation. One's experience in action and the consequences of that action provide common familiar experience for group reflection. While actions are common to each participant, how each person perceived them, the personal history each brought to the experience, plus each one's particular worldview, perceptual map, or meaning perspective (Mezirow, 1991), enabled each to "see" large or narrow ramifications. In the instance of the Lincoln Alliance, experiences were analyzed collectively as a group. One's individual worldview could be compared and contrasted to another's. As the group stretched beyond the boundaries of what individuals alone might do and think, individuals were able to incorporate and expand their personal worldviews to include more of a social concern for others. The support



of the group was essential, as fears, doubts, thoughts, assumptions, and beliefs were confronted and challenged.

An example of the support and accountability each felt from the group in this study is expressed by Sarah who gained

...confidence in risk taking, to feel like I could see my pants down and that the whole world wouldn't come down on me. That was important both on an individual and collective level. I think others began to see the same thing. And I think it was important and easy because we were standing in solidarity with each other.

## **Methodology**

The constant comparative method in grounded theory research as expressed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and Goetz and LeCompte (1984) provided the methodology for the study of the leaders in the Lincoln Alliance. The methods of data collection included a semi-structured interview protocol and follow-up interview checks (called member checks) for leaders to assess the accuracy and meaning attributed to the emergent categories. A document review of the Lincoln Alliance files and the Industrial Areas Foundation training sessions completed the triangulation of the data. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim and coded around the following themes: reasons leaders participated, assumptions made by them, and what they learned (this was divided into two parts, instrumental learning and transformative learning). Member charts were made for each individual on composite sheets listing all of the elements discussed in a category. Since I was involved in the early and late stages of the Lincoln Alliance, the trustworthiness of the study was checked through my understanding of the experience. Also, each leader was interviewed a second time to dialogue on units of analysis I chose as the essence of their personal change.

Ten leaders were selected in purposive sampling for their depth of involvement in the Lincoln Alliance. Of these ten, five were presidents, three were organizers, and two were vice presidents. Five were men, and five were women. Five represented church organizations, and five came from either neighborhood or civic organizations. Eight attended the two week intensive Industrial Areas Foundation training while two did not. Nine leaders moved to Lincoln in the late 1960s and early 1970s while one moved there in the 1950s.

Each of the leaders is presently involved in a job that requires organizing (all the names used are pseudonyms). Sarah is presently working for a consortium of organizers in a Pacific Coast university. Abe is the assistant to the president at a church related university in Lincoln and a former minister of a large Protestant church. Paul is a lawyer in rural Nebraska and works for a public employee union while Rebecca is a Lincoln city council representative and community worker at a large Protestant church. Deborah is the administrator of the court system in Lincoln while Sam is still a professor in the sociology

department at a large university. Esther teaches political science at a small midwestern university while Josh teaches political science at a large university. Luke is the city manager for a city in Florida, while Naomi is the director of a state agency in Nebraska.

The research questions that guided the research were: 1) To what extent did transformation occur as a result of leaders' participation in the Lincoln Alliance and what was the nature of that transformation? 2) What theoretical assumptions guided their actions? and 3) What were the reasons they participated in the Lincoln Alliance? For this article, the nature of the personal change (as they called it) that each leader experienced will be assembled into the various categories that emerged from the data.

The leaders expressed the notion that personal change was essential for social action because it involved individuals gaining a sense of empowerment to seek social change on issues. It also appeared that the relationships built in organizing would last in the community while issues came and went. The social, collective nature of the Alliance was an important ingredient in the transformation that occurred in individuals. As each leader described his or her experience in the Alliance, specific units of analysis emerged through textual analysis of transcripts. Philosophies, theories, ideas, concepts, or notions about their involvement in social action became theoretical assumptions that guided their actions. Seven categories emerged which were placed within two large conceptual themes—cognitive or rational assumption changes and socio-emotional belief changes in the self.

The criteria for placement of categories within each theme depended on my intuitive judgment about whether a category composed of units of analysis was cognitive or affective in nature. For instance, the gaining of confidence through the action of being creative in the public arena I considered affective rather than cognitive in nature. Therefore, as the personal change categories emerged and were classified, they served as a foundation upon which various theories of personal transformation could be assessed.

## **The Findings**

### *Cognitive rational assumptions*

Cognitive rational changes occur within the realm of the ego: the specific construct of the self that sees, perceives, and relates to the outside world. As a result of the leaders' participation in social action, most of them said they "saw things differently" in four different ways: 1) an awareness of how power can be organized and serve people in the community; 2) an ability to focus both personally and socially on community issues relevant to people; 3) connections made between personal values and social engagement in community action; and 4) a vision for how democracy should function. In the first category, awareness of power, the leaders became aware that acquiring power is necessary for a democracy to flourish. Inherent in this category is an understanding of what real power is in a democracy, who holds it, and how one can attain it. "Seeing

beneath the surface” in both the social stratification system and in social communication were ways leaders described their ability to discern who held power and why. At the same time, while they learned who held power, they sought to gain power themselves. Seeking alternative ways to hold power, they changed their premises from a personal orientation, e.g., individuals wield power through built social networks, a one-on-one assumption about how social change takes place, to a new premise that a collection of individuals, highly organized and orchestrated for action, can bring about change faster with more lasting effects. The leaders made distinctions between access and power and their naive assumptions were challenged in the context of social action. For instance, Josh said:

I saw how naive I was in the early 1970s thinking I could have power because I was invited to serve on an advisory committee or that I could have power if I could call someone on the phone. That easy access is misleading because you can have access and be without power.

The second category is the ability to focus which occurred in two ways. The first focusing included the act of attention: focusing “their thoughts” “on the issue,” “on the importance of setting goals,” and on “knowing what is important.” These are cognitive functions which heightened the leaders’ intellectual abilities to be more analytical, more systematic, and more logical in their thinking. This new ability to focus had ramifications in both the personal and social lives of the leaders. One leader focused her career on political science rather than library science, the direction she had assumed she would take once her children were in school. Another learned to “cut the issue,” a social focusing that included differentiating what was nonessential from the essence of the issue. Freire (1970) maintains that the longer the problematization proceeds, and the more the subjects enter into the “essence” of the problemized object or issue, the more they unveil it, the more their awakening consciousness deepens, thus leading to “conscientization” of the situation.

Another way to focus was to concentrate on gaining power for the community.

What I learned was the importance of setting your own goals, knowing what you want to get out of everything you do regardless of how trivial it may seem.... It's not just a selfish thing but what you think is important for the community, not just yourself.

By focusing in this way, these leaders were able to break out of individual ways of thinking and learned to regard the health of the community as a whole as significant. Furthermore, “by learning to focus on purposeful action, the frustration was gone.” By combining a cognitive function (focusing on action) with a value the leader held (changing significant structures in the community for the collective), the normative repression (Habermas, 1978), perpetuated by the hegemonic influences of those in power, was lifted.



Third, the leaders made connections or relationships that were grounded in their explicit moral and ethical values. One person brought together her “enhancement of self-confidence as a public actor” with her “feeling of responsibility to be engaged.” Another made a connection between his faith and “how to act in accordance with that faith.” He experienced the Lincoln Alliance as a place to challenge himself “collectively on how what you are doing or propose to do is consistent with your values.” One woman saw herself “as a leader for the first time” and saw “that I ought to provide it [i.e., leadership].” This shows a commitment to a principle which includes a shift in perception of one’s social role in society.

As a result of the action-reaction-reflection process, one leader said she was “exposed for who [she was] and what [she] believed in.” What one “understands” about oneself is placed on the line in social action. One is forced to take stands or positions that begin to clarify and alter assumptions, beliefs, and premises. These represent one’s worldview through which one makes sense of reality.

As a result of the focusing, clarification, and connections that people made about themselves, they emerged with a new vision for democracy. Almost all of the leaders spoke of this fourth category as a process of influencing the decisions in the community. They saw that human nature is fraught with self interests, personal desires and wants, which must be challenged to promote the social well-being of the community. These leaders tried to restructure individual self-interests toward social and community self interests. Through action in the public arena, it was hoped that self interests would broaden and become more inclusive of diversity. This held true for both opposition targets and the people in the Alliance themselves. Without a group such as the Lincoln Alliance, people become locked into a narrow personal worldview or personal self interests which create one’s vision of what one can and cannot do. Often this includes a victim self-image, e.g., a sense of helplessness in influencing utility rate hikes or in preventing a road being built through one’s backyard. Thus a vision emerged that victim images can be dissolved through powerful, organized coalition.

What occurred in the Lincoln Alliance, as Abe described it, is that people,

...increasingly took responsibility for their own lives, got in touch with their own power, and prepared to invest their lives in making a difference in the future. [They] acted on their convictions and then reflected on their actions, learned from those actions and then acted again.

Sarah illuminated it further. “What emerges from process,” she indicated, “will take you to vision, rather than have everything very concrete and planned out.” Sarah developed a constructionist notion of how knowledge is created. In this instance, the vision and knowledge of who the people were and what they were to do came from the people themselves.

### *Belief changes about the self*

Three socio-emotional categories emerged, as leaders attempted to explain how being involved in social action affected them. The internal process of personal change included the disequilibrium that results from confrontation in the public arena. What occurred externally in "actions" precipitated internal conflict. As Abe said, "Whenever you're involved in action, you're immediately put into a situation where you wonder, "What am I doing here?" and "What's going to happen?" The collective was essential, Sarah argued, "...to evaluate after you've done something, to try to instill the fun and spirit in something that is often very hard, draining, and painful work." The reflection stage required the painful work of changing assumptions and beliefs from what one was reared with to assumptions and beliefs more relevant, more realistic, and more useful for social purposes today.

What was this confrontation that caused so much pain and how useful was the conflict personally and socially? Several assumptions were at work in the Alliance. One was that reality is already distorted to some extent; no one person within or outside the organization had the true picture of reality. Collectively, there was an agreed upon vision and sense of purpose about what should exist in the community; this included justice on issues which were threatening the well-being or quality of life of the poor. As "outsiders," the poor and the powerless gathered in a collective and were guided by both Alinsky's action-reaction-reflection model and Biblical values and tenets. Those who found themselves in leadership were charged with the job of listening to participants, interpreting what the new reality was, and guiding the actions and strategies determined by the group. Inherent in the Lincoln Alliance were two forms of conflict: 1) the constant questioning of the participants who were planning and acting on new premises and assumptions collectively conceived and; 2) the reaction to the action.

Strategies developed for actions were guided by Alinsky's theory that one must disturb the status quo by going outside the experience of those in power. In the case of the Alliance, the sheer act of coming to city council meetings in large numbers and forcing representatives to take stands on ambiguous and politically dangerous issues rattled the cages of the status quo. In other words, the Lincoln Alliance "distorted reality" in the public arena.

It drew the line in the sand, if you will...Yes or no, good or bad...[Joe Blow] wasn't totally ineffective, maybe 90%. But all of our issues were defined in terms of "good guys" and "bad guys"...That's part of creating the electricity, the dynamics, and it's critical (in bringing about clarity on issues).

Forcing public officials or those in power to take stands forced Lincoln Alliance members also to take stands. The action of making change in the public, social arena directly related to dialogue or discourse in the private arena among leaders who decided on the strategies and actions. When Alliance members

came to large meetings designed to confront those in leadership on critical issues, the reaction of those in power to the people themselves (they are "communists") forced Alliance members to reassess their own assumptions and beliefs on issues.

The final categories within the socio-emotional theme are 1) confidence, personal efficacy, empowerment, and creativity and; 2) transcendence of the ego. All ten leaders spoke of how important it was to "be empowered, to have the tools, skills, and understandings to deal with their constituencies and also the larger issues around the problem." To be effective, people had to learn instrumental organizing techniques that seemed to engender confidence in their "abilities to orchestrate what would happen, to feel very much alive with no threat." The social action process "promoted self confidence that these people understand me, are willing to listen to my ideas and take them seriously, are willing to depend on me for some things and it's things I can do." Such a statement is powerful and includes heightened self-esteem and self-concept.

Because of the confidence that was gained in the collective, people were able to take risks more easily. Standing in solidarity with each other, people were free to try new ways of thinking and acting which were decided by the group. The leader became the mouthpiece for the group as a whole. Creative, alternative ways of problem resolution were possible because they had been hammered out in the various committees and task forces. A large number of people had participated and finally endorsed the alternative structure, proposal, plan, or scheme.

Several of the leaders said that, through the Alliance process, they transcended personal self interest for the good of the collective. Mark's new perspective spoke about a "collective ego":

I think the Alliance taught us the difference between being self-serving and an individual victory with a collective. You worked as a group. You didn't spin off as an individual. I mean we kept people in line. When you do an action and you sit down afterwards; you collectively evaluate it. People didn't wander off to talk to someone. You gather as a group, assess what you're doing and where you're going. You work constantly as a group.

As a result, Mark learned that "the ego wasn't the over-riding force."

What was the over-riding force was the goal. So it became goal oriented.... We developed even a greater sense of personal efficacy. As a result, our egos didn't have to be that strong. We still had them. But I think the egos became less over time and the importance of serving the community became more.

Others mentioned this phenomenon as well. Josh spoke about the importance of seeing the group's goals: "it's not just a selfish thing but what you think is

important for the community, not just yourself.” Esther also talked about how involvement in larger societal questions and issues involved people

...who didn't come from the perspective of responsibility to community but who had some particular concerns that an organization such as this could address. Perhaps through that involvement their view of their responsibility would broaden; it wouldn't just remain limited to “keeping my school.”

One person transcended the need to operate out of his ego solely. Abe learned that an “intellectual awareness was not adequate.” He came to understand that one really needs to be “in touch with a transcendent source of power to be able to endure that kind of situation.”

There does need to be, in order to sustain social action, a value system that provides a basis and context for critical reflection on what is happening, an ability to understand human nature realistically and to bring an acceptance to human nature that transcends just our human capacity for self acceptance. So I guess it led me into a sense that I needed to strengthen that spiritual base in myself and I needed to find a transcendent resource in my own life that I could both relate to and be sustained by.

Out of seemingly hopeless situations, Abe commented,

...one needed to be able to believe in new possibilities where there were none before—new possibilities in yourself, new possibilities in others...To be able to do that is a faith stance.

A faith stance included not only a belief system (worldview) but also an ability to transcend or look over or down on the situation, see it for what it is, forgive its inherent nature, and vision something new in spite of it all. Left to its normal functioning, the ego is limited in its cognitive processes and can inhibit the entrance of new ways of thinking and being. It seems that the social action process, which involves conflict and “shakes up” one's image of who one is and what one thinks (ego functions), enables one to transcend these functions of the ego, transform them, and embrace higher collective values.

### **Propositions Resulting from the Research**

The examination of the Lincoln Alliance as an organization for adult education suggests several propositions:

1. To have a powerful self-image, people must have some experience that shows them that they can make a difference. Through organizing for political action, people can learn to be adept in making social change and thereby incorporate powerful self-images.
2. People operate according to self-interests based on assumptions, beliefs, and attitudes acquired from the past. Unless those are

questioned or disrupted in some way, one remains naive about how democracy functions.

3. Focusing as a cognitive function, using abstract formal reasoning skills, is increased as one participates in social action to make change.

4. Focusing on social changes in the community increases an awareness that it is necessary to acquire power collectively to get things done.

5. Dialogue and participation in community action leads to an affirmation that one can take responsibility for his/her life and community and not be a passive victim in human affairs.

6. Commitment and responsibility to be engaged in the community is enhanced when one acts on his/her values, beliefs, and assumptions. As one acts and exposes his/her beliefs, values, and assumptions, he/she is challenged to be consistent with those beliefs.

7. Social conflict invokes personal disequilibrium which can cause remembering previously held beliefs. Critical reflection that occurs in dialogue in a group structure after action facilitates the surfacing of repressed assumptions which then become available for work.

8. To be empowered one must have both instrumental knowledge and transformative learning experiences. Confidence and competence are necessary ingredients in establishing adults as actors in the public arena.

9. Through participation in a broader-based community organization, adults learn to transcend their egos in service to the community. The group promotes and supports individual responsibility to contribute to society.

10. Social conflict and personal conflict promote change in the structures of society and in the structures of the psyche. Conflict should not be feared. Cognitive and emotional disequilibrium provides the opportunity for those social and personal structures to become more integrated, more expansive, and more holistic.

11. By focusing on issues of consequential value in the community, individual egos can be transcended. Higher values, operating for the common good or the public interest and established by consensual validation (Habermas, 1978), become more important than serving one's own individual ego needs.

12. Critical education helps adults differentiate and integrate new thinking about the nature of democracy and society. Previous meaning perspectives are questioned and altered and new ones take their place;



these are “more inclusive, more permeable and broader in scope” (Mezirow, 1990).

13. The creation of a city-wide, broadly-based community organization provides the forum necessary for dialogue on substantive issues in the community. Without that forum, citizens are only reacting to the agenda set forth by elected leaders and paid staff. With such a forum, citizens are able to participate in meaningful dialogue on substantive issues which affect their lives. Through this interaction, they are able to change personally from naive to critically aware citizens.

## **Conclusion**

Conflict in the social arena forced those in the Lincoln Alliance, ordinary citizens, to grow up or “mature” and become aware of the way that those in power regard citizens. Sarah noticed,

...a certain arrogance in terms of institutions. “We know the right way; we’re making the decisions; we don’t want to let you in on exploring what the various choices might be; we don’t want to let you in on, the citizens in on, deliberating and digging deeper into the rationale for decisions that affect you.”

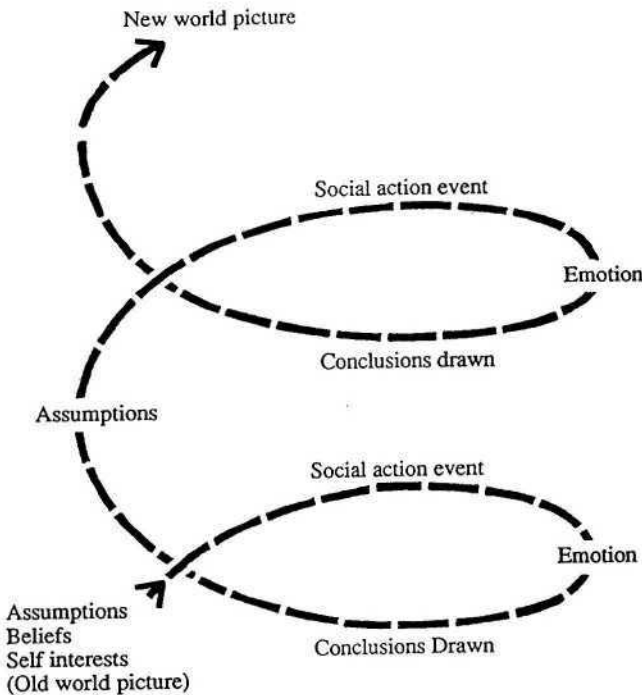
Confronted with this knowledge, citizens’ notions of “being taken care of” were challenged. They understood that they had “answers that don’t work anymore,” which were outcomes of conflict in the public arena. There was a sense of delusion, which caused disorientation as to what one does believe, a disequilibrium. Mezirow calls this a “disorienting event.” As Abe commented,

Developmental change occurs whether it is personal or social when it involves conflict. Confronting the part of yourself that you are alienated from. And then in some kind of dialogue you find some resolution that enables some sort of self acceptance, acceptance of the other, that immediately goes back into another disequilibrium. Equilibrium should not be a goal. It’s always a process.

It is the swing back and forth, the in and out, and the up and down that could characterize the personal change that each person experienced. How social action transforms adults might look like a spiral (see Figure 1). The process would include (a) the assumptions and beliefs (self interests) that each leader holds prior to social action; b) the significant event that challenges that assumption or belief; c) the emotion it engenders; d) the conclusions he/she draws in reflection (personally and in the group); and e) the final character or worldview shift that occurs as a result of the significant event, the emotion, and the conclusions drawn in reflection. The spiraling process indicates that two or more significant events or actions in the public arena can progressively elicit emotional conflict which leads to new conclusions drawn in reflection. A

worldview change (McKenzie, 1991), similar to a meaning perspective change or a paradigm shift as described by this study, is the consequence of participating in social action. As one spirals through the process, his/her transformation becomes more expansive, more inclusive of others, more differentiated, and integrated with one's past.

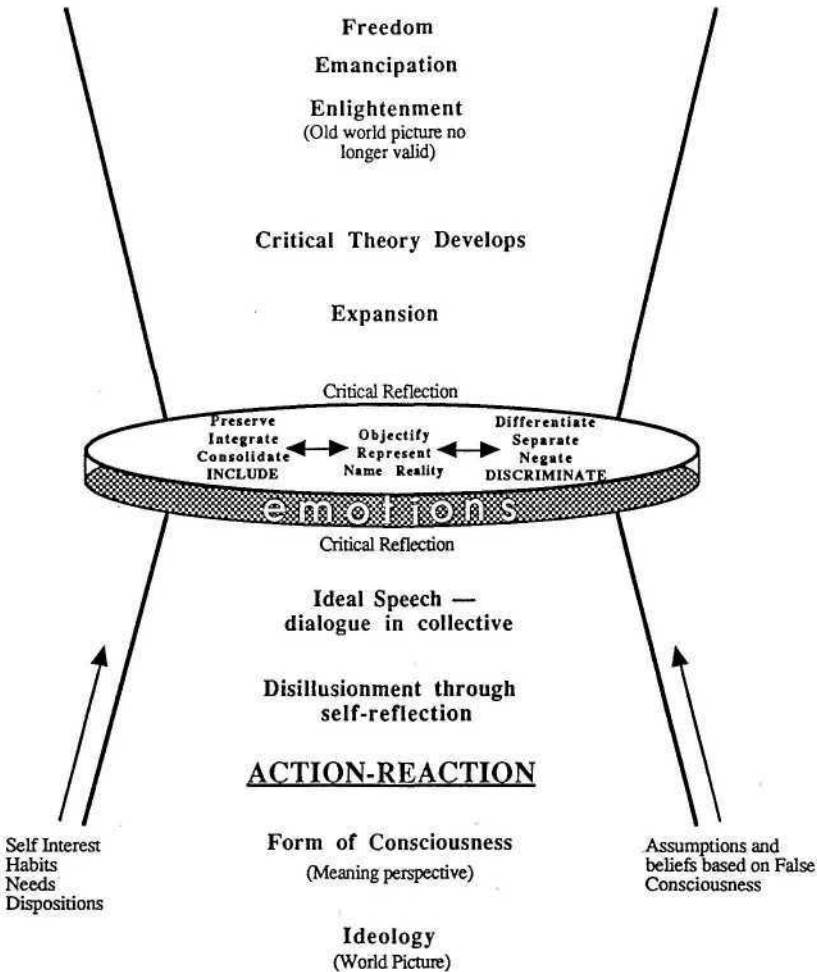
**Figure 1: Internal Process at Work in Social Action**



Another way to image the process is graphed in Figure 2. Beginning at the bottom, habits, assumptions, and beliefs constitute a form of consciousness which Mezirow calls a "meaning perspective." These are often unexamined and are based on a false consciousness or delusion about the way the world operates. Social action in the public arena shakes up or radically disturbs this form of consciousness (composed of a set of beliefs, assumptions, and habits) and disillusionment occurs. Through the process of critical reflection on assumptions and beliefs that occur in dialogue in a safe environment, ideal speech, the form of consciousness is objectified and named, then it moves back and forth between a process of preserving what is important or relevant and differentiating the important from what is not important. It is a process of separation from old assumptions or self interests and integration with new ones. This is filtered

through the emotional trauma that is experienced as individuals are “called communist” and their integrity is questioned.

**Figure 2: Process of Personal Transformation in Social Action**



Through this process there is expansion or a broader perspective that can develop. A critical theory about what it takes for a democracy to function can replace a naive or deluded form of consciousness. For those in the Lincoln Alliance, their meaning perspective included the notion that people need to “organize to acquire power, to get something done.” There is emancipation from an old world picture, of a victim self image, that is no longer objectively valid. The process seems to shift between rationally derived new assumptions or beliefs and nonrational emotional conflict which often elicits despair and a sense of grieving that how one operated in the past will be different in the future. There is a sense of letting go of who one is and of the need to control situations

with one's own ego. It is a kind of leap of faith that others or the dynamic of interaction are more important, have more wisdom, and are more reliable ultimately than one's own limited self awareness.

According to Mezirow's theory of perspective transformation (1991), meaning perspectives can be sociolinguistic, epistemic, or psychic in nature. Most of the assumptions and beliefs that guided these leaders were sociolinguistic in nature. Some were epistemic; i.e., they changed the way they viewed knowledge. In any case, before the Alliance the assumptions that guided leaders' actions were personally oriented and naive. As they entered into the action-reaction-reflection process, they became aware of the distortion to their assumptions through the action on those assumptions and reflection through critique in an egalitarian, noncoercive environment. What once was a naive theory about how life was, or was supposed to be, changed into a more critical stance or included a critical theory.

### **Implications for Practice**

The study of the leaders in the Lincoln Alliance has implications for adult educators who espouse functionalism rather than a conflict theory for learning. As one of the leaders commented: "Conflict ought not to be feared. It is through conflict that most of my learning occurred." While most learning occurs gradually over a period of time, conflict often is an integral part of the expansion or growth process.

Experiential learning is essential for significant personal changes to take place. Movement into the spiritual realms, beyond the ego, as a result of social action participation is significant learning through experience. In developmental theory, this constitutes a level or stage shift that is particularly difficult to do, as North American culture rarely recognizes stages beyond self actualization. One of the aspects of social action in a collective that makes this type of development possible is the continual focusing beyond the self on the issue at hand, on the growth of others in the collective, and on the well-being and growth of the organization, as opposed to the growth of the individual self.

Involvement in community organizing promotes growth, movement within and between levels of development which includes confrontation of falsely held assumptions, beliefs, attitudes and self interests. This is primarily due to the nature of the process which involves action and reflection and the presence of a group which supports differentiation and integration of new perspectives. Involvement in a group or collective whose purpose is social action helps people regard the self in relationship to others and calls into question the rampant individualism of today's culture. It promotes critical thinking because the self is placed in situations that require critical reflection. An essential ingredient in the process is dialogue in community for digestion of new perspectives.

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