The transformation of society through broad-based organizations

Sue M. Scott, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada

The present research concerns the study of a new structure that exists in US cities. This structure is composed of institutions that have traditionally been called civil society. They are primarily voluntary, primarily concerned with the promotion of democracy, and the health of families, the common good, the public interest, and social safety net. The structure is called a broad-based organization (BBO) and seeks member groups (not individuals) from specific churches, unions, school councils, community associations, and civic groups. Primarily faith-based organizations, BBOs seek to recover the debates and forums necessary for a healthy democracy. They exist in all of the major 25 cities in the US, and most of the second largest cities. Some cities have more than one BBO, such as Los Angeles, San Antonio, and New York City. There is one forming in Edmonton, Canada, and several in the UK and Germany. Each city-wide organization has a minimum of twenty institutional members and as many as 200 in Chicago. Presently there are sixty-five BBOs primarily in the US. All of the organizations contract for leadership development and training with the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), a training institute that has existed in the US for approximately 50 years.

Research with these IAF organizations has been approached from the political science perspective (Warren, 2001), the theological perspective (Rooney, 1995; Freedman, 1993), the psychological perspective (Rogers, 1990), and the sociological perspective (Gecan, 2002; Greider, 1992). My research approaches these large structures from an adult education and transformative perspective. I have tried to view the data socially, both the personal psychic structural changes and the societal structures that change as a result of people's participation in social action. These broad-based organizations are in many ways the answer to continual pleas for a renewal of public dialogues on the well-being of society (Barber, 1999; Putnam, 2000; Frazer, 1999). They also are reflected in Inglehart's (1999) world values report that documents adults' growing direct participation in democracy. In addition, Wildemeersh, Finger, and Jansen, T. (2000), cite studies of a growing social responsibility being taken by citizens in Europe. Broad-based organizations, similarly, have arisen to balance the postmodern condition (isolation, fragmentation, and lack of community) and capitalism that fosters consumerism, not citizenship. They contribute to the renewal of democracy as well as the transformation of people into socially responsible and critically aware citizens.

This article is organized primarily as a description of the phenomenon of broad-based organizing. I use Paulo Freire's theoretical framework, integrated to some extent with Habermas's communicative action, as a way to show how BBOs affect citizens and society. Individual constructivism is contrasted with the social construction of transformation and a blending is attempted of the two. It is, after all, the individuals who transform and it is their own "personal growth", as the ten organizers call it that is the real aim of the work of a BBO. Through experiential learning in a primarily critically oriented structure that is set up to gain power to get something done in a city, it is not characterized as "resistance" or "anti" to globalism, to neo-liberalism, to world trade, or any of the other resistance movements presently mobilizing power in large numbers. There *is* an attempt to *organize* many people for power to increase their quality of life in the inner cities; these can be characterized as the poor working class, middle and low middle congregations, racial minorities and the unemployed, reported as being 74.5 million in the USA (*New York Times*, April 25 2003). These people, as members of ailing mediating institutions (e.g., churches, unions, schools) that have historically protected the family from bureaucratic practices, are seeking some kind of respite from the stress of eking out an existence. The effort of BBOs is positive and

in many ways joyful as success after success on issues, give people confidence, hope, and energy to participate in a more just future for themselves and their children.

The research

The research presented here is a result of interviews of ten community organizer/trainers in a national network called the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF). The author participated in two 10-day training sessions, one in 1981 and one in 1997, and two broad-based organizations, one for 12 years. The focus of the interview questions asked of these organizers was about the nature of their work (what they do daily as an organizer), the possibility of transformation emanating from their work, and some background material/stories on their lives and why they do what they do. The data were collective at two times, in 1997 at a national training lab in New Orleans and in 1998 in a trip to Texas. Some organizers were interviewed more than once and all were sent transcripts for verification after the interviews.

The ten organizers interviewed for this study are highly skilled with as little as six years and as many as thirty years experience organizing people. They have direct knowledge of both structural changes in individuals and within city and regional political units. Three of the women are women religious in the Catholic church. One man was a Baptist minister in the south and another organizer was a former Jesuit. Three are black, two Hispanic, and the rest are white. Five are men and five are women. All of the organizers, are lead organizers in local organizations that they oversee in their various cities, and most teach sessions in the IAF ten day training labs that meet four times a year.

Structures and processes that contribute to transformation

The social construction of transformation is ontological, a quest to understand the knowable, society as it exists today (external reality) and the vocation of becoming more human (internal reality). To distinguish transformation from mere change, there are three assumptions that guided this research. First, transformation requires a structural change (Scott, 1998); i.e., on the personal level there is a worldview change, a developmental stage change, a personality change, and/or an irreversible public role change. The psychic structures within an individual, that are subject to change, revolve around psychoanalytic discoveries of the ego, the personal unconscious, and the collective unconscious. On a social level, there are structural changes in institutions (churches, schools, community associations, unions), in city administrative structures, and market driven businesses and corporations. All of these social structures constitute the body politic. Second, constructivism is viewed as an individual's internal constructions or cognitions upon which the learner bases his/her meaning. These are founded in sensory experience, bodily, physical sensations that arise through individual perceptual and motor actions. Reliance on internal constructions creates habits that stymie creativity. Something external needs to "agitate" these constructions. Third, there is an assumption that the context for this research, broad-based organizing (BBO) in large urban areas primarily in the US, is a legitimate venue for adult learning and citizenship development, within the broad purview of nonformal/informal learning in adult education.

Theoretically the dialogical learning processes that are used in BBOs can be explained by Paulo Freire's praxis, a humanist project aimed at transforming society, but often interpreted as derived from technical rational strategies of action and reflection. When praxis is viewed within the communicative paradigm, however, it allows us to see that communicative action is integral to subject—subject relationships that have already been constituted within a world of interaction. Whereas *subject-to-subject* relations are subjective and can be characterized as undifferentiated (as in a naïve consciousness), subject-to-object relations in social theory have historically been viewed as how an oppressor views the oppressed. The oppressors hold the power and the oppressed view themselves as victims. Until these ontological orientations change, the internalized social mind of both the oppressor and the oppressed maintain society as stratified with haves and have nots, and both are denied their ontological vocation of becoming more fully human. Both have distorted thinking/consciousness that keeps them in bondage. Until the oppressor "stops regarding the oppressed as an abstract category and sees them as persons who have been

unjustly dealt with, deprived of their voice, cheated in the sale of their labor—when he stops making pious, sentimental, and individualistic gestures and risks an act of love" (Freire, 1970, pp. 34-35), only then will the subject-object split be dissolved.

Work, or rather the production of work in Marxian terms, has been viewed in terms of a subject – object relation, with work as the object of instrumental action. Habermas has noted that this subject-object relationship, dominated by post-Kantian philosophy is grounded in an individualistic philosophy of consciousness and downplays the linguistic and communicative aspects of social life and intersubjective theory of communicative action (Morrow and Torres, 2002, p. 27). In a similar way, Freire's theory of consciousness is socially derived with collectives of people moving through stages of development (called conscientization). For this research, the building of power is the key element that forces the oppressor to *review* the organization of society, as it is reorganized into a new configuration. A broad-based organization is a new structure in society and requires traditional state and market institutions to view the poor/outsiders in a different way. The social construction of transformation shifts the oppressor-to-oppressed relationship from a subject-object relationship to a transition stage where power is built that forces the oppressor to recognize the oppressed as capable, intelligent and above all, organized. A final subject—subject relationship is reconstituted with the same people who previously viewed themselves as victims within the collective. People within the collective have distanced themselves from each other to objectify each one's uniqueness, if not individually at least by each group's stand on issues. The new object for dialogue in the subject—subject relationships is the world "out there", that is, the nature of reality, and those in power that shape that reality in their own self-interest. Broad-based organizations call this "the world as it is" based on greed, self-interest, organized money and power. Building a city-wide organization that has the power to negotiate with those already in power, and to shape society into "a world as it should be", is the liberating practice that transforms people into critical citizens, and eventually transforms the structures in society.

Public relationships in the work of democracy
Unfortunately the oppressors do not give up their power easily or willingly, as this research shows. Their distorted communicative action deceives their own quest to become more human. "As the oppressed, fighting to be human, take away the oppressors' power to dominate and suppress, they restore to the oppressors the humanity they had lost in the exercise of oppression" (Freire, 1970, p. 42). The work to build a power structure in society that is a broad-based organization of thousands of people is a check and balance for those in power. Another purpose of these broad-based organizations is to develop leaders (i.e., develop people into their ontological vocation of becoming more human) through the practice of developing public relationships.

There are three learning components to a BBO and each contributes to the teaching/learning of private citizens into public actors: Learning institutes, research/dialogue groups, and actions on issues. Learning institutes are set up to help potential leaders understand and practice public relationships. Through systematic study of the characteristics between individual/private relationships and those of public relationships, potential leaders, familiar with private relationships, are sent out to practice public relationships within the institutions that belong to a BBO. The social capital that this generates within organizations revitalizes the organizations themselves, and prepares them for potential battles in the public arena on issues that are vital to their existence. Second, developing public relationships requires a dialogical learning process that includes a diverse group of people, networks of groups across a city that come together for alliances on issues of mutual concern. The building of public relationships and the practice of dialogue facilitate the realities of human needs and the capacity to reflect and act in liberating ways. Third, opportunities to participate in action in the public arena provide the practice of viewing the world differently. Not only are there concrete gains on the issues as power meets power, there also is concrete evidence that those in power view themselves as dominant and citizens as subordinate. Actions provide citizens with the possibility for testing new skills in leadership and new thinking about how they

want society to operate. Society is not a static, pre-determined thing. It is open and dynamic and capable of being shaped. The vision for how society is to be shaped rests with those who hold the power, the ability to act, to shape it in a particular way. By including ordinary citizens in a democracy in the decision-making process for the kinds of policies and practices that govern their lives, democracy is renewed as new ideas and thoughts engage in the public debate about the common good. Work in these broad-based organizations many feel is "real" work in the sense that personal and social growth is possible as psychic structures transform within the minds of citizens and social structures in society transform to increase the quality of life that supports the growth of families and society.

Transformation of victimization, slavery and anger
All the ten trainers shared stories of how participation in action facilitated transformation both personally and socially. In a forthcoming article (Scott, 2004), three stories were chosen as exemplars for how transformation occurs in relationship-based organizing illustrating three themes: freedom from victimization, freedom from slavery, and use of controlled anger. Each of these themes is explored in depth in the forthcoming article. Key is the presence of a structure where dialogue on issues, ways of thinking, and action on issues, founded on emerging new images (visions) for the common good, can take place. "The most important social condition is the availability of an effective plausibility structure, that is, a social base serving as the 'laboratory' of transformation" (Berger and Luckmann, 1967, p. 157). Imagination, relationships, disequilibrium, internalization and changes in consciousness are processes that shift people out of just rational ways of "seeing" things. The emotional reactions and states that social action engenders in the social arena seem to transform passive victims with a sense of slavery into confident, compassionate, and public actors in society.

Summary
Personal constructivism hinges on communicative theory, but within the individualistic philosophy of consciousness. Constructivism focuses on individual cognition and works from the premise that the learner's basis of meaning is found in her or his direct experience with a dynamic and responsive world. It is a cognitive theory that recognizes only the presence of mind and unfortunately has been de-contextualized or limited to classroom instruction. Broad-based organizations provide opportunities for participation in social action that agitate both minds and bodies, individual as well as social bodies. These large structures operate on principles of respect and love of humanity, are grounded in spiritual traditions that provide a criteria for assessing appropriate behaviour, and are democratically governed structurally to allow for maximum participation of as many people as possible. Through hermeneutic dialogue on assumptions, concepts, ways of operating, and actual action, new meaning and finally transformation of structures in psyches and institutions are possible. "Emancipatory practice must be conceived of in communicative terms, a form of practice in which moral relations and love—not antagonism—are the ultimate grounds of constructive transformations of identity" (Morrow and Torres, p. 29).

References
Barber, B. R. (1998), 'Making civil society real: Practical strategies', chapter 3. *A place for us: How to make society civil and democracy strong*. New York, Hill and Wang.

Berger, P. L. and Luckmann, T. (1967), *The social construction of reality*. New York, Doubleday, Anchor Books.

Davis, B., Sumara, D. & Luce-Kapler, R. (2000), *Engaging Minds: Learning and teaching in a complex world*. Mahwah, NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum.

Frazer, N. (1992), 'Rethinking the public sphere: A contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy'. In Calhoun, C. (Ed.) *Habermas and the public sphere*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, MIT press, pp. 109 – 142.

Freedman, S. G. (1993), *Upon this rock: The miracles of a black church.* New York, HarperCollins.
Gecan, M. (2002), *Going Public*. Boston, Beacon Press.

Freire, P. (1970), *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (M. B. Ramos, Trans.), New York, Seabury.

Greider, W. (1992), 'Democratic promise', chapter 10, In Greider, W. (ed) *Who will tell the people,* New York, Touchstone, (pp. 222-241).

Inglehart, R (1999), 'Postmodernization Erodes Respect for Authority, but Increases Support for Democracy', Chapter 12, (p. 236-256). In Norris, Pippa (Ed). *Critical Citizens*. Oxford, University Press.

Morrow, R. A. and Torres, C. A. (2002), *Reading Freire and Habermas: Critical pedagogy and transformative social change.* New York, Teachers College.

Putnam, R. D. (2000), *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York, Simon & Schuster.

Rogers, M. B. (1990), *Cold Anger*. Denton, TX, University of North Texas.

Rooney, J. (1995), *Organizing the South Bronx*. New York, SUNY.

Scott, S. M. (1998), 'An overview of transformation theory in adult education', In Scott, Spencer, and Thomas (eds), *Learning for life: Canadian readings in adult education*. Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing.

Scott, S. M. (forthcoming, 2004). 'Social Construction of Transformation'. *Journal of Transformative Education*. Venice, CA, Sage.

Warren, M. (2001), *Dry bones rattling: Community building to revitalize American democracy*. Princeton, NJ, Princeton University press.

Wildemeersh, D., Finger, M., & Jansen, T. (Eds) (2000), *Adult Education and Social Responsibility.* New York, Peter Lang.