

Chapter One: Introduction



“ I’ve learned that I can do more than I think I can many times. That there’s solutions to problems. . . That there’s a process that takes place and it takes time and it takes commitment. I’ve learned. . . that all of us have some gifts that we are born with and that we have to develop that gift. And we do it through working with other people. And that I’m just one part, because there are many others that come together that form that whole.”

- Valley Interfaith Leader, 2000

“My position was that I believed in changing society by first changing individuals, so that they could then struggle to bring about social changes. There’s a lot of pain in it, and a lot violence, and conflict, and that is just part of the price you pay. I realized that it was part of growth--and growth is painful. A plant comes through the hard ground, and it breaks the seed apart. And then it dies to live again.”

- Myles Horton
Highlander Folk School Founder, 1999

Chapter One:

Picture a conference room. Wide oak table, glass doors, newly carpeted floors. Picture the people around the table. On the one side all men: a white engineer with a deep Texan drawl, a local city official, the water company representative with a wide handlebar moustache. On the other side all women: Lidia Flores is a fifty year old Mexican American, she wears a large cross around her neck. She is accompanied by five of her neighbors, all Mexican in their fifties and sixties. Most are monolingual Spanish speakers. Lidia shakes her finger at the men and admonishes, "We are tired of waiting. We have been waiting for ten years. When will our neighborhood get sewer lines installed?" The men squirm uncomfortably at her tone and reaffirm their pledge of support. They take out their appointment books, agree to give the women an update next month. The meeting is adjourned.

Lidia grew up in Rio Grande City, a small Texan town just north of the Mexican border without electricity, without sewage lines, without any of the basic infrastructure that most Americans take for granted. Lidia also grew up in a culture where one was taught to respect authority, where poverty was expected, and where corruption was deeply embedded in the political system. Forced to leave school at age ten to take care of her younger siblings, Lidia has spent the majority of her fifty years working---working as a waitress, working in the fields, working as a bus driver. Never working for a decent wage. Never working in a job that would enable her to move out of the poverty she, like many of her neighbors, had come to take for granted. Lidia is still working, but, for the past five years her work has taken on a different twist.

Lidia currently lives in San Juan, about an hour and a half west of where she grew up, in a neighborhood with conditions only slightly better. Lidia's work is now a mass of countless hours in meetings, planning sessions, and phone calls. She successfully led a campaign to bring an elementary school to her neighborhood, and is now embroiled in a battle with the

municipality to obtain running water. Lidia's effort is only part of a struggle that has received national attention in the past few years as the Texas Industrial Areas Foundation has lobbied successfully for over seven hundred million dollars from the state legislature to bring infrastructure to the colonias¹ (Sanchez, 1999). Over the past decade, Lidia has worked with Valley Interfaith, a broad-based community organization spanning Texas's Rio Grande Valley to bring about these changes in her colonia. Paved streets, electricity, schools, and a city government that knows to stop and listen when the organization comes calling. But Lidia's neighborhood isn't the only thing that has changed through the organizing efforts of local churches and schools. Lidia herself has changed. No longer afraid of authority, in her own words, Lidia is a woman with a voice that makes people stop and listen. She herself is astounded by what she refers to as "her new self" and explains that she has learned about "...the capacity. The intelligence that we can come up with. The power. The things that I never dreamed that I can do." (Personal Interview, 1/00) In short, just as Lidia's neighborhood is undergoing a transformation from a place of despair to a symbol of hope, she herself is undergoing that same transformation. And the two are intimately related.

"Unity equals power." "*La union hace la fuerza.*" "Together we stand." These are the mantras that organizers and activists have carried with them into the depths of low-income communities. Be they revolutionaries or "social capitalists", advocates for community development have long emphasized the role that collective action plays in bringing about sustainable change. One of the most frequently cited models of success for such action lies literally on the outskirts of this country, in the historically impoverished and neglected Rio Grande Valley. In this southernmost corner of Texas, where neighborhoods

¹ *Colonias* are defined as settlements that lack basic services such as running water, sewers, street lighting, and paving. Eighty percent of *colonia* residents live at or below the poverty level in trailers or self-built constructions. Residents are almost exclusively Mexican or Mexican-American. Ward. Colonias and Public Policy in Texas and Mexico. (University of Texas Press, 1999) Introduction.

still go without basic infrastructure and the per capita income is a meager \$12,045, an increasing number of citizens have found success in their battle for socioeconomic justice (Valley Interfaith, 2000). These citizens work through the forty-plus institutions that make up Valley Interfaith, an Industrial Areas Foundation organization. Traditional explanations of IAF's broad-based model of community organizing focus on the increase of power that results from the careful, deliberate, and painstakingly slow work of building relationships. It is the strength of these relationships to which the multiple victories of Valley Interfaith are attributed. While it is obvious that collective action and strengthened institutions play a paramount role in the organizing of the Valley, this thesis will explore the hypothesis that changes are occurring at a more fundamental level, the level of the citizen.

Educators, organizers, feminists and civil rights leaders throughout history have argued that it is impossible to transform society without first changing the individual. It is actually the individual that is the base unit for most social movements. Yet, in the theory and practice of urban planning and renewal, the point of departure is that of the polity, the *collection* of citizens. In this thesis I will consider the role of individual development and transformation in the field of community development. Specifically, I will argue that an understanding of and attention to the individual is essential to the success of efforts to develop institutions and communities.

Why consider individual development in the midst of social and economic problems that confront urban areas? Possibly because we can no longer afford not to. Citizen participation has long been deemed essential in creating strong and democratic communities. Likewise, proponents of community development have suggested that engaging residents in the decisions that affect them will facilitate effective and efficacious growth (Stoecker, 1999, Boyte, 1980). However, in the midst of efforts to rebuild community through constructing affordable housing, creating job training programs, and granting loans to local businesses, what is inevitably overlooked is the investment in the people that will live in these houses, work in these jobs, and run these businesses. What is inevitably assumed is

that if the structures for participation are in place, the people will follow. Unfortunately, time and time again efforts to engage neighborhood residents result in empty chairs and frustration. While housing, employment, and social networks are all viable components of healthy communities, just as critical are the ways in which people interpret and act on their roles within the collective. It is time to engage in a dialogue about community development that not only envisions seats at the table, but fosters the growth of the individuals who will sit there.

In a time where our national prosperity stands in marked contrast to income inequality and astonishingly low rates of citizen participation, the *belief in the potential for change* is a critical first step to strengthen democracy. Creating mechanisms for citizen participation will only be effective if the citizens themselves see the value of their voice and their vote. This thesis, therefore, expands upon the traditional discussions of “civic skills” as a prerequisite for participation. In my analysis, I will explore how a sense of personal and political efficacy can grow as individuals bear witness to the power of collective action. I will argue that an investment in individual development can lead to profound transformations in people’s sense of power, their understanding of citizenship, and the actions they take based on this efficacy and understanding.

Advocates for regionalism have recently called attention to the social, political, and economic forces that manifest themselves downward at the level of the neighborhood or city (Orfield, 1997). This thesis will turn that argument on its head. I will consider how the cumulative impact of individual change can catalyze and manifest upward to impact these same communities, often serving as a countervailing force to larger pressures affecting families. I will suggest that this relationship is reciprocal—the development of individuals can impact communities just as community development can foster the health, the well-being, and the growth of individuals. Mark Granovetter, in his groundbreaking work “The Strength of Weak Ties”, claims that understanding micro-level interactions is key to understanding relationships on the macro-scale. He critiques current sociological theory, “A fundamental

weakness. . . is that it does not relate micro-level interactions to macro-level patterns in any convincing way” (Granovetter, 1973). The Granovetter framework of “micro-macro” bridges reinforces the need for a careful exploration of individuals and communities, the need to start at the micro to better build on the macro. In order to move from a theoretical argument to practical application, such an approach immediately raises two questions central to this thesis:

• ***What are ways in which community development efforts can foster the development of individuals?***

• ***What evidence is there to suggest that investing at this level can result in changes at the level of the individual?***

This thesis is exploratory in nature. My intent is not to prove a causal link between individual and community development. Rather, I intend to demonstrate why I believe that it is important to consider human development in the theory and practice of urban studies. This argument will require an exploration of current models that demonstrate the complex interplay between individuals and communities. In *A Tradition That Has No Name*, a study of organizations dedicated to women’s development, Mary Belenky writes “Organizations that sponsor the development of a public voice among their members seemed particularly important because people are withdrawing from civic life at an accelerating rate.” (1999, p.9) In order to illustrate the power and potential of approaches designed to combat this increasing withdrawal from the public sphere, I use a case study of Valley Interfaith, one of the Industrial Areas Foundation’s community organizations along the Texan border. The IAF provides a strong example because its approach to building grassroots organizations is acknowledged as one of the most successful efforts to bring about change at the local level (see Berry, Portney, et.al, 1993, Boyte 1980, Warren, 1999). Also unique to the IAF is the extraordinary ability of its constituency to articulate and name how they have developed through their participation. Valley Interfaith, therefore, not only serves as a basis for understanding the relationship between

community development and individual development, the stories of its members provide empirical evidence of how people can change as a result of such a model.

Rationale for study:

Much of my own motivation to explore these questions is rooted in what I see as a disjuncture between theory and practice. Before beginning graduate school, I worked in the field of adult education as a teacher of English as a Second Language, family literacy, and citizenship. I had been highly influenced by the model of Paulo Freire, in which adult education serves as a vehicle for politicization as individuals learn to read both “the word and the world”. (Freire, 1972) It was through my work in adult education that I learned about Pima County Interfaith Council (P.C.I.C.), an IAF affiliate based in Tucson, Arizona. From 1995 to 1999 I became progressively active in the organization. I attended both local and national leadership trainings, and participated in campaigns ranging from a battle for living wages to lobbying the city for funding a new adult education building. I also engaged in numerous individual conversations that are at the root of the IAF’s approach to relationship building. Shortly after becoming involved, I remember Frank Pierson, the lead organizer for P.C.I.C., asking me, “How are you thinking about your own development?” The question floored me. It was the first time in my professional or academic life that anyone had showed an active interest in my own growth, in pushing me to reach my own potential. Yet this question was common, this attention to people’s growth part of the organizational culture. As I became more involved, I listened in awe to both my students, and other leaders of P.C.I.C. as they shared their stories of their own personal change. I was inspired by both the intensity of the faith and power that surrounded me, and the emphasis that the community organizers and leaders placed on cultivating and challenging individuals to develop.

After spending two weeks conducting initial research in the Rio Grande Valley in January of 2000, I found that much of what I saw and heard

resonated strongly with the themes of voice, connectedness, and efficacy that I had experienced over and over in my experience as an adult educator. I was also struck by how noticeably absent these themes had been from my academic studies of community development. I have moved away from my work as a community educator and organizer to consider issues of participation, civic renewal, and community from theoretical vantage points. Both the theory and the practice of community development draw on economics, political science, sociology, and numerous other disciplines. While the literature in these fields addresses social systems, it lacks an in-depth discussion of the individuals that make up these systems. If it is true that there is a strong link between individual and community change, this would suggest that avenues for human development should be further investigated and implemented. This thesis is an opportunity to close this gap, to consider the theoretical models of individual transformation and citizen participation in the context of practice.

Methodology:

In Acts of Meaning, Jerome Bruner writes of the power of narrative. He explains, “It can even teach, conserve memory, or alter the past.” (1990, p.53) It is with great deference to Valley Interfaith that I embark upon the daunting task of documenting and interpreting their story. The use of narrative is a particularly appropriate research tool in this context; while existing studies of the Industrial Areas Foundation often employ more traditional methods, the nuances and changes that occur in human development are difficult to capture with surveys or other quantitative measures. This research is therefore grounded in a narrative constructed through personal experience, intensive interviews, and participant observation.² My first hand experience in the organization’s approach to community organizing was supplemented and enhanced by the opportunity to conduct research with Valley Interfaith. After conducting a primary series of interviews in January of 2000, I established a relationship with the

² See Worthen, et.al. 1997, Lofland and Lofland, 1984 for discussion of these methods in qualitative research.

organization that permitted me to participate, observe, and videotape several subsequent events. ³ My experiences include, but are not limited to, a regional three-day training for leaders from throughout the Valley, *comunidad de base*⁴ meetings, and local and state actions designed to influence the agenda of the Texas legislature. The combination of my personal experience, renewed participation through the lens of an observer, and conversations with experienced leaders and organizers provides me with rich data to analyze the organization.

In order to understand how people change through their participation, I begin with what Valley Interfaith organizer Sister Judy Donovan refers to as, “their greatest treasure”, the stories of the individuals that make up their constituency. The majority of the data for the “findings” chapter is based on the transcripts of two series of interviews. This first interview series of twenty-five leaders of Valley Interfaith formed the basis for further investigation and query. Interviews were semi-structured; while I used a protocol to cover specific themes, the questions were open-ended and designed to provide a space for individuals to explore and expand on areas of interest. I spent from one to two hours with each individual, and all interviews were audio-taped, transcribed, and later analyzed and coded according to both pre-determined and emergent themes.

The initial sample of twenty-five leaders of Valley Interfaith was primarily obtained through a combination of self-identification and snowballing. While there is not an exact number of Valley Interfaith leaders⁵, it is estimated that there are about one hundred individuals who are equally involved in the organization. Valley Interfaith organizers presented the opportunity for participation in the research project at an executive steering committee meeting of a few dozen leaders. About half of the sample expressed interest at this point. This initial dozen then recommended others.

³ Lofland and Lofland describe this process as that which “. . . an investigator establishes and sustains a many-sided and relatively long-term relationship with a human association in its natural setting for the purposes of developing a scientific understanding of that association.” (Lofland and Lofland, p.12)

⁴ *Comunidades de base*, or base community meetings are rooted in the tradition of liberation theology. They provide a space for individuals to reflect and act on the Bible’s teachings.

The second half of the sample agreed to participate after either myself or one of the organizers initiated contact upon my initial arrival in the Valley. The sample is therefore composed of a mix of participants—both relatively new to the organization and individuals who had been involved since its beginning. All participants, however, had been working with Valley Interfaith for a minimum of two years. The sample ranged in age from twenty seven years to seventy five, with an average age of fifty two. Their education ranged from completion of second grade to masters degree, with an average of twelve years of schooling. With the exception of two priests from some of the more active churches, the rest of the participants were Mexican or Mexican-American. Just under half of the interviews were conducted in Spanish, and the rest were conducted in English, depending on the preference of the individual. Quotations are presented here in translation when necessary. All names have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals, with the exception of IAF staff and local clergy.

These first conversations were open-ended, with the intention of providing the participant the opportunity to present his or her story in his or her words. In order to gain insight into how people had changed, it was critical to first understand who they were. I began each interview by establishing my familiarity with the IAF approach to individual meetings outlined in chapter three and explaining the intent of the research.⁶ I explained that the conversation would be based on this model of eliciting the story of the individual. These initial interviews, therefore, focused on learning about the backgrounds, interests, and motivations of the participants. When I asked people if they had changed, I was impressed by both by how emphatic people were in their responses, and by their ability to articulate the dimensions of these changes. While I had anticipated that participants would speak of changes in their sense of efficacy and levels of political participation,

⁵ All active individuals are known as “leaders”. Please see chapter three for discussion.

⁶ This research was conducted as part of a larger study by Professor Paul Osterman of the Department of Urban Studies and Planning and the Sloan School of Management. As Professor Osterman had been working with Valley Interfaith for several years, I was able to access both the organization and individuals in a way I might not have been able to had I been conducting research on my own.

numerous other themes consistently emerged from these interviews: the development of voice, new understandings of power, even a deeper religious faith. I collapsed these themes into the framework of changes in beliefs, understandings, and actions that were consistent with the literature on empowerment psychology reviewed in chapter two.

These emergent themes became the framework for my second set of interviews. I conducted follow-up interviews with ten of the original participants in January of this year in which I focused directly on their perceptions of their own development. I chose to re-interview participants based on obtaining a representative sample across gender, immigration status, and education, as well as availability and interest. As the majority of these second interviews were also videotaped, I was able to base my analysis on both the text and video documentation of our conversation.

The stories I heard over these four weeks were rich and powerful. Yet, as a source for analysis and interpretation, it is important to bear in mind that each narrative offers a perspective of a participant at a given time, his or her view of who they are as it intersects with the identity s/he hopes to project to others. Eliot Mishler expands upon the notion of identity performance within personal narrative. He writes, “We express, display, make claims of who we are—and who we would like to be—in the stories we tell and how we tell them.” (2000, p.19) This analysis, therefore, is based not only on these life narratives, it is based on these narratives as they were told to me at a specific time in a specific place. While the retrospective nature of these changes is a limitation in terms of strict social science, this analysis rests on the incredible consistency across these stories that the participants chose to tell. These stories of individual leaders tell a larger story of a community where hope now exists and where traditional power structures are bowing to an organized public voice.

The practice of Valley Interfaith and the IAF is unique in that it intentionally incorporates a range of theories that I draw upon to contextualize their work. The intersection of these theories with the practice of grassroots organizing illuminate the complex ways in which individuals

grow, change, and take charge of their communities. This thesis therefore begins with a review of the exiting literature relating to the role of the individual in community development practice. In chapter two I will also define and clarify related terms and concepts. From this broader perspective, my focus narrows and I move on to the case study of Valley Interfaith. After providing a brief background of the IAF and the Rio Grande Valley, I lay out the IAF's approach to fostering individual development in chapter three. In chapter four I argue that Industrial Areas Foundation organizing results in profound changes at the level of the individual. This section provides a careful analysis of the results of the IAF approach through the presentation of the interview findings. The intent of this research is not only to call attention to this often overlooked component of IAF organizing, but to consider the broader implications for community development. I therefore conclude by drawing out some of the lessons of Valley Interfaith; I explore the potential for an alternative conception of community where we pay the same kind of attention to fostering individual development as we do to creating safe highways, public spaces, and strong schools.