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Freire's Message for Social Workers: Looking Back, Looking Ahead

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ABSTRACT. This paper re-examines key concepts in Paulo Freire's popular education approach and their compatibility with social work philosophy and practice on the group and community levels. Freire's vision of the field of social work is explored, and two case studies are utilized to illustrate the application of this approach and its promise for community practice at the dawn of a new century. [*Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com>*]

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INTRODUCTION

When Brazilian educator Paulo Freire died in 1997, the world lost a key architect of the popular education movement in Latin America, and

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This paper is dedicated to the memory of Paulo Freire with gratitude for his contributions to our own thinking and practice and to that of countless social workers, health educators and others concerned about social justice and social change.

the individual most responsible for helping that movement cross both geographic and disciplinary boundaries world wide. But it also lost a man whom Harvard scholar, Cornell West (1996) recently had described as:

. . . a profound theorist, who remains 'on the ground' and a passionate activist who gets us 'off the ground'-that is, he makes what is abstract concrete without sacrificing subtlety and he infuses this concrete way of being-in-the-world with a fire that fans and fuels our will to be free. (p. xiii)

Although most closely associated with adult education, Freire's philosophy and methods, with their emphasis on "creating critical consciousness" through dialogue and praxis, or action based on critical reflection (1968, 1973, 1985, 1994; Freire & Faundez, 1989), have been adapted and used in case work (Lee, 1994), youth empowerment (Wallerstein, 1992; Wallerstein, Sanchez-Merki & Dow, 1997), work with abused women (Mann, 1987), worker health and safety (Weinger & Lyons, 1992), English as a Second Language (ESL) programs (Auerbach and Wallerstein, 1987) community health organizing and education (Killian, 1988; Merideth, 1994; Minkler & Cox, 1980; Minkler, 1997), homelessness (Breton, 1991; Lee, 1989; Ovrebo, Ryan, Jackson, Hutchinson, 1994; Sachs, 1991; Yeich, 1996) social work education (Gutierrez et al., 1998) and macro practice with communities of color (Gutierrez & Lewis, 1997; Rivera & Erich, 1992).

Although, as John Poertner (1994) has noted, the application of Freire's approach in social work practice outside Latin America has been limited, "the very name 'popular education' sounds a resonance in social work circles in the North" (p. 270). The Freirian use of non-formal education and group methods, with its emphasis on overcoming alienation, respecting culture, and an action orientation to change, thus suggests that many of the core elements of this approach are compatible with some of the most basic historical, theoretical and methodological underpinnings of social work practice.

This paper will begin by highlighting key concepts and Freirian approaches in popular education, with special attention to recent refinements and adaptations. Freire's vision for the application of this perspective in social work, and the compatibility of his approaches with the field's philosophy and methods then will be discussed. The paper will conclude by highlighting two Freirian case

studies in social work on the group and community levels, with a call for further exploration and use of this methodology by social workers at the dawn of a new century.

FREIRIAN CONCEPTS AND APPROACH

The essence of Freire's vision of popular education is probably still best captured in his classic work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1968) which, despite often dense and complex prose, has sold millions of copies world wide and been translated into over 30 languages (Hurst, 1997). In subsequent writings such as *Pedagogy in Progress* (1983), *The Politics of Education: Culture, Power and Liberation* (1985), *A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education*, (Shor & Freire, 1987) *Learning to Question: A Pedagogy of Liberation* (Freire & Faundez, 1989) and *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1994), Freire expanded upon some of the themes introduced in *Pedagogy*, and consciously worked at writing in a more accessible and personal style. He told many more of his own stories from work with oppressed people, and shared freely his personal struggles, e.g., as he worked to incorporate feminist perspectives in his thinking and writing (hooks, 1996; Freire & Macedo, 1987). With the important exception of "a dramatic shift in his understanding of what must be done to eliminate oppression" (Kohl, 1995, p. 9) however, neither Freire nor those who have carefully studied his work see his later writings as constituting a "radical departure" from *Pedagogy* and the key concepts and philosophical commitments it embodied (Freire, 1994; Hurst, 1997; Kohl, 1995, Wallerstein, 1999).

Among the most central of these core concepts is "education for critical consciousness" through which people who have been alienated from their culture are encouraged to identify, examine and act on the root causes of their oppression. As Herbert Kohl (1995) has pointed out, this Freirian notion of "conscientization" always involves group, rather than merely individual transformation or "consciousness raising" - a fact reflective in part of Freire's conviction that his politics (democratic socialism) were inseparable from his pedagogy.

Developed initially though literacy education efforts with Brazilian peasants and inhabitants of urban slums, Freire's approach involved using emotionally charged words to teach people to read, while at the same time teaching them to "read" the political and social situation in

which they lived. As Freire noted in *Pedagogy of Hope* (1994), "It is precisely a 'reading of the world' that enables its subject or agent to decipher, more and more critically, the 'limit situation' or contextual factors which they previously had not considered" (p. 238).

Freire is perhaps best known for arguing eloquently against "banking education" (which treats students as empty vessels to be filled) and for "liberating education" which uses a dialogic, problem posing process stressing equality and mutual respect between teachers as "teacher-learners" and students as "learner-teachers." The original approach described by Freire involved small groups of individuals in a process of (a) identifying and reflecting often aspects of their reality (such as problems of poor health or housing) (b) looking behind these immediate problems to their root causes, or the problems behind the problem (c) examining the implications and consequences of these more fundamental issues and (d) developing a plan of action, based on critical reflection, to address the problems collectively identified (Freire, 1973; Minkler and Cox, 1980).

For Freirian scholar and practitioner Nina Wallerstein (1992; Wallerstein et al., 1997), the problem posing approach may be summarized more concisely as involving a cyclical process of listening, dialogue and action that enables all participants to engage in continual reflection and action. Through structured dialogue, group members listen for the issues contained in their own experiences and dialogue about common problems, their root causes and their interconnections. Conscientization, or the consciousness that comes through this social analysis of conditions and of people's role in changing those conditions, provides a vital link to the action phase of the process, through which group members devise strategies to help transform their reality. It is this critical consciousness, moreover, that provides "a key ingredient in maintaining a broader vision and sustaining community efforts over time." (Minkler & Wallerstein, 1997, p. 41).

Although similar in many respects to more traditional approaches to organizing for change, (e.g., through helping to create in the group a realization of its power to act and transform), Freire's approach attempted to eliminate the asymmetrical, often paternalistic aspects of the leader's role in the process that has often been problematic in approaches such as Saul Alinsky's (1972) social action organizing (Horwitt, 1989). In contrast to movements for change which place the burden of responsibility for action on a relatively small group of

“leaders,” for example, Freire (1968) stressed the total participation of the people themselves. In his words:

The leaders do bear the responsibility for coordination-and, at times, direction-but leaders who deny praxis to the oppressed thereby invalidate their own praxis . . . If they are truly committed to liberation, their action and reflection cannot proceed without the action and reflection of others. (p. 120)

Further, unlike Alinsky and other radical reformers committed to redressing power imbalances by better integrating the poor and oppressed into the structure of society, Freire was a revolutionary for whom fundamental change in the structure of that society was an ultimate goal. Moreover, despite discouragement over recent historical events including the continued abundance of poverty and oppression “within the context of democratic political forms” in many parts of the world (Kohl, 1995, p. 9), Freire reaffirmed in his last writings the role of ordinary people as “makers of history” and seekers of the dream of authentic democracy (Freire, 1994).

As other authors have noted (Bailey, 1992; Gutierrez, Parsons & Cox, 1998; Lee, 1989; Moch in Freire, 1990; Parsons, 1991; Rivera & Erlich, 1992), many of Freire’s concepts and ideas have direct applicability to social work teaching, participatory research and practice, and Freire himself was convinced of the potential for strengthening social work’s incorporation of these principles and methods. Yet as Felix Rivera and John Erlich (1992) have pointed out with respect to much social work education in the domain of macro practice:

The lack of attention to critical consciousness—that is, how personal and political factors interact with each other and one’s work, as well as how values, ideas and practice skills are influenced by social forces and, in turn, influence them—is both particularly noteworthy and undermining. (p. 8)

Although we would argue that much social work education does indeed reflect attention to these broader issues and interactions, Rivera and Erlich’s concerns underscore the importance of revisiting Freire’s message for social workers and its special relevance in the arenas of group and community work in the years ahead.

**FREIRE'S VISION FOR SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE
AND ITS COMPATIBILITY:
THE FIELD'S HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL
UNDERPINNINGS**

Social Work Practice and Social Change

For Freire, the essence of the social worker's role lay in its relationship to change. In his words, the social worker "cannot be neutral toward dehumanization and humanization, nor toward the stability of a situation which no longer represents the human way." Rather, social workers must each confront "a moment of decision" in which they "pick the side of change which is pointed in the direction of humanization . . . [or they] are left in the position of favoring stagnation" (Freire, no date, p. 10).¹

In *The Role of the Social Worker in the Process of Change* (no date), Freire offered additional insight into the particular role social workers can play in facilitating transformation on both personal and societal levels. Since social workers are part of the social structure, the importance of bringing about changes that are humanistic were regarded by Freire as part of the social worker's central role. In his words:

The role of the social worker who opts for change can be nothing other than that of acting and reflecting with those people with whom [he or she] works. [His or her] purpose is to become conscious together with them of the real difficulties of their society. This implies that the social worker needs to be increasing and ever broadening [his or her] knowledge, not only of methodology and technique, but also of the objective limits [faced]. (p. 22)

Freire's accent on the pivotal role of social workers in relation to change is congruent with the historical role of social workers associated with settlement houses, who provided extensive adult education and worked to alter the societal structure in addition to offering material relief (Addams, 1910; Simon, 1994). As Marie Weil (1996) has noted:

At their best, the settlements engaged and continue to engage neighborhood residents in educational reform, environmental actions, program development, inter-group relations, and broad arenas of economic and social development. (p. 9)

Although not all early social work practice was this congruent with Freire's vision for the field (Katz, 1994; Garvin & Cox 1995) social work remains, as Jerome Sachs (1991) has pointed out, "one of the few professions with a rich history of social activism at both the clinical and policy level" (p. 88). In the former domain, as Dennis Saleebey (1997) has noted, strength-based case management helps clients identify and achieve their goals by enabling them to "discover and embellish, explore and exploit [their] strengths and resources" (p. 3). Grounded in both systems and empowerment theories (Frankel & Gelman, 1998), strength-based case management, and other approaches which focus on "human strengths and abilities as the proper starting point for social work practice," (Holmes, 1992, p. 158) are in this respect highly consistent with a Freirian approach. Yet as noted earlier, an integral part of Freirian practice involves moving beyond individual consciousness raising and empowerment to broader group transformation and action. As Cheryl Hyde (1994) points out drawing on her study of feminist organizations, a scenario to strive for might be one in which "the case worker helps make connections between individual and collective empowerment" just as organizing on the community or organizational levels contributes to individual level change (p. 61). Similarly, Alice Johnson's (1994) "scholar-advocate approach" to community practice involves a professional who "asks questions, listens to input, and helps members focus on issues and concerns as they are uncovered in the process" (p. 72-73) Further, the scholar-advocate facilitates the process whereby community members go on to design and implement strategies to solve a social problem they have identified. This approach, too, is highly consistent with Freire's pedagogy.

The Social Worker as Educator

As suggested above, Freire's commitment to social change, and his belief that social workers must reflect this commitment in their own praxis, was complemented by the accent he placed on the social worker's role as an educator. Speaking at the Social Workers' World Conference in Stockholm in Sweden in 1988, Freire (1990) argued that:

Social work practice, whether casework, group work, or community organization, is inherently and substantively educational-pedagogical. There is a particular pedagogy natural to social work where the

social worker is in the forefront in the search for a clearer understanding in coming to know certain subject matter. (p. 5)

Central to this “particular pedagogy” is the use of empowering educational methods that respect the individual as an equal. For Freire, embracing such methods meant, first and foremost, that the professional must own up to the very limited nature of his or her professional knowledge and cultivate excitement about questioning conventional explanations. The role of the progressive social worker, he wrote (Freire, 1990) “is not only to stimulate and develop a permanent critical curiosity toward the world in themselves, but also to do so in those with whom they work” (p. 7).

Freire’s use of the notions of the “teacher learner” and “learner teacher” to accent the importance of liberatory approaches to education further underscored his commitment to the equality of all parties in the educational process. He was particularly opposed to the use of any educational approach that made the teacher the guardian of knowledge to be transferred or withheld at his or her discretion. Applying this logic specifically to social work, Freire (1973) argued that:

. . . one cannot be a social worker and be like the educator who’s a coldly neutral technician. To keep our options secret, to conceal them in the cobwebs of technique, or to disguise them by claiming neutrality does not constitute neutrality; quite the contrary, it helps maintain the status quo.

As Poertner (1994) has pointed out, the educational role of the social worker may involve educating parents about rights and strategies in accessing special education for their children, helping groups of youth come to terms with their drug abuse, or educating key decision makers about the need for a policy change. When such education involves “working with” individuals rather than on “behalf of” clients, and when it, in Judith Lee’s (1994) words, “enables us to see the realities of oppression and to stand side by side with clients as coinvestigators and scholarly peers” (p. 118), it can truly complement and reflect Freire’s philosophy.

Freire and Empowering Social Work Practice

The empowerment tradition within social work practice, particularly as it relates to working with oppressed groups and individuals (Browne,

1998; Lee, 1994; Mancoske & Hunzeker, 1989; Gutierrez et al, 1998; Holmes, 1992; Parsons, 1991; Rivera & Erlich, 1992; Simon, 1994) appears especially well suited to the application of Freirian methods. In her historical look at the profession, Barbara Simon (1994) thus pointed out that the empowerment tradition in the field in the 1990s includes social workers' self conceptions as nurturers, facilitators and mobilizers, and their increasing tendency to see "clients" as "causal agents"—a metaphor akin to Freire's notion of oppressed individuals as "subjects" capable of acting on and transforming their reality (Freire, 1968, 1973, 1994).

Yet despite this strong tradition of empowerment in social work practice (Browne, 1995; Parsons, 1991; Lee, 1994; Gutierrez et al., 1998; Rose & Black, 1985), its utilization is far from consistent. What is particularly needed, as Lorraine Gutierrez (1989) notes, is a broad and multi-tiered approach. In her words:

It is not sufficient to focus only on developing a sense of personal power or developing skills or working toward social change. These elements combined are the goal of empowerment in social work practice.

In the remainder of this paper, we offer two case examples of applications of Freire's philosophy and methods by social workers working on these multiple levels toward the end of broader group, community and social change.

APPLYING FREIRE ON THE GROUP AND COMMUNITY LEVELS: CASE EXAMPLES

Within social work practice in the United States, a potent area for the application of Freire's philosophy and methods can be found in the area of homelessness (Breton, 1989; Lee, 1994; Sachs, 1991, Yeich, 1996). Jerome Sachs (1991) has described one such effort at Freire-inspired community organizing among a group of current and formerly homeless men and women and their allies in a small New England town. Concerned about a dramatic increase in homelessness, and unsuccessful in their efforts to secure passage of a rent control measure that would have helped curb this trend, members of a grassroots hous-

ing advocacy organization approached several homeless persons about working together for change. With the exception of a VISTA worker, members of the advocacy organization, which included a social worker and other professionals as well as several formerly homeless lay people, operated in an unpaid volunteer capacity.

An attitude of mutual respect for and co-learning with the homeless participants was demonstrated from the onset (Sachs, 1991). The social worker in the role of teacher-learner thus encouraged homeless group members to tell their stories and to recognize and assert "the power they had" (p. 195). Critical dialogue and reflection helped the social worker and other privileged members of the group grow and change as they were helped to understand the contradictions that frequently occurred in the course of the organizing. Sachs described, for example, the piercing irony and discomfort experienced by the housed members of the group who, on several snowy occasions, dropped their homeless counterparts off near their tents in the woods before driving back to their own warm houses. Group members also dialogued about the contradictions inherent in the fact that the local Homeless Alliance routinely held meetings to which homeless persons were not invited! By drawing attention to political issues concerning the ownership of knowledge, group members helped educate themselves and others about a vital and neglected dimension of the experience of homelessness in their community. Similarly, problem posing dialogue was employed by the teacher-learners in helping homeless group members examine their tendency to fight among themselves and attack each other. In Sachs' words (1991) the discussion that took place "raised both political and psychological consciousness" as homeless group members "began to recognize that their energies could be used collectively to help one another" (p. 198).

As growing mutual trust and critical dialogue led to an increased sense of power, group members discussed actions they could take, such as writing a newsletter, inviting Homeless Alliance members and faith community representatives to their own meetings, and planning and executing a protest. Their subsequent well publicized demonstration—a nine hour vigil in front of the Town Hall—resulted in the local powers-that-be agreeing to use the Town Hall as a nightly shelter until a more permanent homeless shelter was completed. In their successful action, and in the personal, group and community change that came with their efforts, the homeless and their allies illustrated Freire's

(1990) conviction that “History is made by us, and as we make it, we are made and remade by it” (p. 9). They further well demonstrated Freire’s commitment to “specific, situated practice done in the context of political and moral struggle” (Kohl, 1995, p. 10).

Although the social worker in the above case study was utilizing a Freirian approach outside the context of his paid employment, social workers also have found the process effective within more traditional agency settings (Mann, 1987; Gutierrez et al., 1998; Rivera & Erlich, 1992). Ruth Parsons (1991) describes one such example, which took place within the context of a Head Start program in an inner city housing project. A group of Head Start mothers was initially brought together to discuss discipline problems with their children. In Freirian tradition, however, the social worker as teacher-learner asked critical questions which encouraged dialogue among the women about more fundamental issues they had in common, and to which their children’s behavior might be linked, such as the stresses of single parenthood, inadequate incomes and poor housing.

As these and other themes began to emerge, the women, as learner-teachers, began to explore other environmental factors impacting on their lives, including racism, fears of sexual assault, and exploitation, e.g., by a local merchant who charged high fees for check cashing and a local city recreation director who sold drugs to children (Parsons, 1991).

Learning from the women about these environmental factors and their interrelationships helped the social worker broaden her own understanding of the complex contextual realities within which the women’s experiences of motherhood were embedded. With this heightened understanding, and the trust that developed with her openness to truly hearing and understanding what the women were sharing, she was able to better facilitate movement toward action based on critical reflection. Group members thus were encouraged to share their knowledge and skills in problem resolution. The social worker took the role of respectful learner in these interchanges while openly sharing the resources she had (e.g., information about the housing project system and city government) rather than keeping “expert knowledge” to herself or bestowing it in a patronizing manner. These interchanges further increased trust levels among the mothers such that “feelings about their situations were expressed and heard, [and] the women were ready to move on to learn more specifically about the context of their situations and about solutions” (p. 17).

The action strategies developed occurred on several levels, and included the groups' confronting authorities about the racism displayed by a school teacher and drug dealing by the recreation director. The women also confronted the local store owner. When he refused to lower his check cashing prices, the group forced the issue by successfully leading a boycott and organizing transportation to a supermarket outside the community, where residents could buy food at lower cost while receiving free check cashing (Parsons, 1991).

Critical reflection on both their successes and the barriers to bringing about desired change was a critical component of the process, and occurred after each action was taken. Through this process, group members began to identify other resources both inside and outside their community and worked collaboratively to help bring about subsequent changes. As Parsons (1991) has suggested, while the initial impetus for action in this case example was an "individual problem" belonging to each woman, the group provided a place for the commonality of their problems to emerge, and for collective praxis (p. 19). As suggested above, the social worker played a key role by demonstrating her own openness to learning and change, and by helping the women critically examine their situation and its root causes, generate common themes, identify shared resources, and move toward a plan of action. In keeping with Gutierrez' (1989) vision of empowering social work practice, both individual and collective empowerment were the goals of this effective group work and community organizing effort.

CONCLUSION

As Marilyn Moch (in Freire, 1990) has noted:

Freire is an educator, not a social worker. But he has worked with social workers throughout his life. Social workers have been his students, his colleagues, and his friends, not only in the early years in Brazil, but ever since. (p. 1)

During the last decade of his life, Freire (1990) made a special effort to direct many of his ideas specifically to social workers, with whom he felt a special kinship, and in whom he hoped to sharpen still further the qualities of activism, "permanent critical curiosity," tolerance, and "impatient patience" with and in the world (p. 7-8). Social work

scholars and practitioners in turn have been among the professionals in multiple disciplines who have employed Freire's philosophy and approach "to construct an educational vision in which self development and social transformation go hand in hand in the struggle for social justice" (McLaren & TadeudaSilva, 1996, p. 52).

In this paper, we have attempted to revisit central Freirian concepts and to demonstrate, through case studies, their continued relevance as social workers strive to "revitalize community practice" (Johnson, 1998, p. 57). It is hoped that this article will encourage social work scholars and practitioners to revisit both Freire's original writings and their interpretation and applications by members of the profession as the field moves into the 21st century.

NOTE

1. In drawing on Freire's own writings to elaborate these themes, we have chosen to replace the use of male pronouns with words and phrases that encompass both genders. It should be noted that in his later years, Freire himself did this, and acknowledged that his engagement with the feminist movement led him to take a far closer look at the issue of gender and to "rid my language of all those features that are demeaning to women" (Freire and Macedo, 1996, p. 171).

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