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REVISITING PAULO FREIRE AS A THEORETICAL BASE FOR PARTICIPATORY PRACTICES FOR SOCIAL WORKERS

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INTRODUCTION

This paper revisits the work of the Brazilian pedagogue, Paulo Freire, and considers the possible impact of his theories for social workers and other helping professionals, particularly in relation to participatory practices. Freire had an enormous influence; some might say his ideas produced a paradigm shift in professionals' perceptions about people, specifically those who were regarded as poor and oppressed. It also became clear that Freire's ideas were a watershed in thinking in various fields and disciplines in different countries. Godono (1998:30) refers to a "before and after" Freire and indicates that Freire's work has been read, discussed and applied by thousands of people in a great variety of disciplines. Freire's ideas are particularly important for social workers who attempt to facilitate participatory processes with individuals, couples and families, groups and communities.

Freire (1998:141) stated that we cannot train or work impartially as if we were wearing gloves and masks in order not to contaminate or not to be contaminated. As Godono (1998) points out, many people (including me) have been "contaminated" by Freire's thoughts. Inevitably we have our own ideas and values about and towards people and the world, but reading this article may guide the reader to reflect also on his/her own ideas and values.

In this paper I extract and summarise Freire's thinking about and valuing of people which form the basis of, or theory for, his and others' participatory practices. It is hoped that this revisiting of his theory will provide us with guidelines to improve people-centred, participatory practices in social work.

In addition to Freire's own writings, many articles have been written and published about Freire. There is also no shortage of comments on or critiques and summaries of the thoughts of Paulo Freire on the Internet. The question can then well be asked what makes this article unique and different from the others. The uniqueness of the article lies mainly in the way Freire's theory is presented.

In South Africa we have been deprived of the richness and depth of Freire's thinking for a long time because his work has been banned. We can now explore all he had to offer in working with suffering and disadvantaged people. Freire offers a theory on participatory practices and in particular participatory community development. He enables us to ground our work in well-founded and formulated ideas.

In their manuals Hope and Timmel (1995) give us very practical ideas on how to operationalise Freire's methodology but in this article I have formulated his ideas as a clear, lucid, usable theory. I have concentrated on the optimistic, positive nature of his approach, which really can lead to people's liberation. As there is still oppression and poverty in this country, Freire's approach is as relevant today as it was when he first wrote in 1972.

HOW DID FREIRE'S IDEAS EVOLVE?

Writers in the various fields of participatory work refer to the Freirean era as a radical era characterised by post-modern beliefs, attitudes and actions in respect of the poor and oppressed

people in Brazil. Godonoo (1998:30) also sees Freire as one of the prime creators of an alternative perception of the world, and as one whose philosophical viewpoints have found a lasting place in several disciplines and form the basis for participatory practices in different fields.

Freire's ideas evolved before and during the reign of the military regime in Brazil. He was born into a middle class Brazilian family and came to know extreme poverty when his parents lost everything in the world-wide economic depression of the 1930s. Freire found that sharing the life of the poor gave him an understanding of their "culture of silence", which he believed had to be broken. Apparently at the age of 11 Freire had already promised to fight hunger. He later began with his conscientisation of the poor in order to encourage them to speak up for themselves.

During the military coup in 1964 Freire was banned from Brazil and subsequently lived in Bolivia, Chile, the USA and Switzerland. He was sent into exile because he was considered dangerous to the Brazilian government and because he made the peasants aware that change seems possible. His first and probably most famous book entitled *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was published in 1968 in Portuguese and in 1972 in English, thus reaching an international audience. It was banned and even burnt in Brazil and further afield by oppressive governments because he believed that the oppressed are not "marginals" or people living "outside" society. As far as Freire was concerned, poor people should be integrated into society by transforming the social structures that marginalised and oppressed them.

According to Godonoo (1998: 31), Freire's philosophical stance is comprised of a configuration of existential, phenomenological and Marxist thought as well as Hegelian philosophy. Freire was strongly influenced by philosophers like Husserl, Sartre and the Frankfurt group and also influenced by psychologists, e.g. Fromm and Buber (dialogue). Unfortunately, according to Godonoo, some people only see Freire as, or reduced him to, a Neo-Marxist. Godonoo stresses that to understand Freire in this way is to sell him short. Freire's thinking also flows from his life experiences. His last book, published after his death in 1998, *Pedagogy of Freedom* was post-modern in nature and critical of Marxism and he also indicated that he had never abandoned his first preoccupation with human nature or what his critics referred to as his "psychologism" (influenced by psychologists) (Schugurensky, 1998:22). By this he meant that his focus was not only on the liberation process, but more on the liberation of the person.

In this article I do not claim that the ideas, values and actions formulated on the basis of Freire's writings and conversations belong to him only. Many other psychologists and educationists hold similar ideas, values and attitudes, e.g. Carl Rogers (perceptions about and actions towards people) and John Dewey (on experiential learning). In this article I merely formulate his thinking into a clear logical order to enable us to see why he had such a big influence on professionals in many disciplines and specifically those of the third world.

As John Dewey is recognised as the thinker on education in the first half of the 20th century, so Freire is seen as one of the important critical thinkers of the second half of the 20th century, specifically in relation to informal and popular education.

FREIRE'S THEORY

To facilitate the process of liberating a person implies that a practitioner or facilitator needs to hold certain fundamental ideas, values and attitudes towards that person.

Throughout his writings Freire used the terms below as the fundamental ideas, values and attitudes that need to be present when facilitating a liberation process within a person.

PEOPLE ARE CAPABLE AND KNOWLEDGEABLE

Freire (1972: 46) believed that there is no such thing as absolute ignorance or absolute knowledge. He believed in the ability of (illiterate) people to analyse their own reality (Nangle, 1997:13); in their power to make and remake, to create and recreate (Freire, 1972:62); to think and decide for themselves; to engage in self-reflection and to be critical. These ideas are counter to prevailing attitudes regarding the ignorance of the people and their need to be educated. People are not empty vessels who believe and accept anything they are told, as the Marxists with their socialist ideals had implied. People's mind are not merely passive repositories (banks) for ideas so that knowledge could easily be imposed on them. People are critically reflective beings who are experts about their own experiences, realities, values and culture.

PEOPLE ARE TRUSTWORTHY

The belief that people are capable requires faith and trust in their capacity for growth and change (Freire, 1972:62). Professionals often tend to talk about the people, but they do not *trust* them. Trusting people, according to Freire, is the indispensable precondition for change. Freire believed that humanists can be identified by their trust in people and their ability to facilitate dialogue, reflection and communication. "If you fail this trust, you fail to bring about dialogue reflection and communication" (Freire, 1972:41).

CONTINUOUS GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

Freire further believed that the person is engaged in a constant quest for human completion, always in a process of becoming, that they are never finished or complete, and that their realities, in turn, are constantly changing. Hope for change and development is based on the incompleteness of the person.

HUMAN BEHAVIOUR IS PURPOSEFUL

All human activity, according to Freire, is purposeful and directional. People are always striving to meet their needs; no matter how awkward behaviour might appear, it still has a purpose.

WHOLENESS/COMPLEMENTARITY

For Freire the world and the person do not exist apart from each other. People are always part of a broader context. He referred to wholeness and the connectedness of emotions, reason and behaviour that exist in constant interaction (1972:49). For him reflection and action are part of the same process. Reflection without action is verbalism and action without reflection is pure activism. Freire argued that objectivity and subjectivity cannot be dichotomised. The one cannot exist without the other (Freire, 1972:27). To believe only in subjectivity is to be solipsistic, and the denial of subjectivity denies people's existence because people have different experiences and perspectives of the world, which are influenced by their particular contexts. Freire believed that traditional (didactic) education overlooks human feelings and experiences, concentrating only on reason and action. With this Freire places the person at the centre and sees the connection between reason, feelings and actions in the same way as John Dewey (Dewey, 1916) and Carl Rogers (Du Toit *et al.*, 1998). For Freire feelings are also facts and therefore they have to be recognised as central to the way that people make sense of or construct their own realities.

Realities and meanings are socially constructed and change through language. Realities are subjective and socially constructed, they can be reflected on critically and they are in constant transformation. People create and recreate their world through naming objects and communicating

meaning and understanding through language and generative metaphors (Freire, 1972:46). To exist, according to Freire, is to name the world and to change it. Realities, therefore, are constructed through language.

Through language we convey meanings. We say and mean simultaneously. Words on their own do not convey meaning, but meaning emerges in dialogue. This implies that people construct their own realities and problems through naming them as such. Problems are not existing realities; they are named and created and constructed by people. People construct realities socially and in interaction with other people. In so doing language also provides generative metaphors (Freire, 1972:46).

Language is thus seen by Freire as the means to critical consciousness, which in turn is the means of conceiving change and of making choices to bring about further transformation (cf. also Macedo, 1987:xix). Unfortunately Freire did not really elaborate on transformation through naming and re-naming the world. He merely stated it as the principle on which the act of conscientisation is based. This process of constructing realities determines the person's values, judgements and actions. These ideas of Freire link strongly with post-modern ideas.

PEOPLE ARE AUTONOMOUS AND POWERFUL

Freire believed strongly in autonomous power or people's self-determination, which means that they can be trusted to take responsibility for their own decisions and actions. In the Kantian tradition he believed that removing people's decision-making power reduces them to mere objects and shows disrespect for their unique knowledge and abilities.

People are reduced to objects if their own decision-making capacities are ignored.

THOUGHTS ON OPPRESSION

Freire referred to the pedagogy of the oppressed. Originally Freire refer to pedagogy of the oppressed but change it in his last book 1998 to pedagogy of freedom as the pedagogy of man. He saw oppression as the "domestication" of people in the sense that oppression lodges itself in the minds and hearts of the oppressed, who internalise the oppressor who begins to live within him or her (Keough, 1997:159). Hence Freire emphasised conscientisation as the process by which people became aware of themselves in their own world as a beginning step to liberation. He also emphasised the idea of self-liberation and proposed unlocking the intrinsic humanity of the oppressed. He referred to himself as a liberator and not a domesticator.

PEOPLE ARE UNIQUE

People's unique knowledge, abilities, differences and diversity are stressed, appreciated and utilised.

CONSCIENTISATION

The concept of conscientisation became central to Freire's theory. Conscientisation is having the power to transform reality (Smith, 2001).

In his "Letters to Christina" (1989) Freire explained the concepts of consciousness and conscientisation as follows:

Consciousness is fragmented knowledge....While conscientisation is a process of critical reflection on a person's own world, perceptions and reality by perceiving the relationships among the objects and their reason for being.

In terms of current terminology the process of conscientisation seems very close to the concept of empowerment.

REFLECTING ON FREIRE'S THINKING AND VALUES

In reflecting on Freire's ideas the following aspects can be highlighted:

The importance of theory

Freire was criticised for the excessive "psychologism" of his original approach (Schugurensky, 1998: 22) and this paper again focuses on the importance of "psychologising" or theorising about people as a basis for participatory practices. To be able to facilitate participatory practices requires certain perceptions about and belief in people. According to Bizzel (1992:321), Freire had a strong belief in theory and held that professionals need to be aware of their own theories and ideologies and the way they construct their own realities or world. This awareness will make them accountable for their perceptions and actions. Hence, as Leonard (1999) indicates, Freire was a precursor to social constructionism. Carl Rogers (1986) himself also made the link between Freire's ideas and his own person-centred approach.

Freire believed that the facilitator should be equipped to think theoretically, so that when difficulties arise, one can be more inventive in thinking of ways around them. The facilitator should be able to think on his feet. The fact that Freire emphasised the importance of our awareness of our theoretical perspectives is one of the factors that makes him, in my opinion, so important for social workers.

As already indicated, Freire was influenced by many philosophers, but he believed that it is important to use the work of others flexibly, not dogmatically. If you understand and integrate the theory, the practitioner will be able to work creatively and in an accountable manner. He referred to his own thoughts not as a political system nor as a philosophy, but rather as a perspective and an optimistic way of looking at the world that guided his actions (Godonoo, 1998:32).

Furthermore, Freire sees theory as the pedagogical correlative of critical consciousness. It is not inculcated, but is developed and formulated as an essential activity of all learning.

PEOPLE ARE CENTRAL/FIRST

Freire's major work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, opens with the following comment:

While the problem of humanisation has always been, from an axiological point of view, man's central problem, it now takes on the character of an inescapable concern (1972:20).

The implication is that the concern for humanisation leads at once to the recognition of dehumanisation. This viewpoint refers to the way we perceive and see people. We dehumanise them when they are regarded as *objects* or *things*.

With regard to Freire's perception of people, he puts the person in context in a central position. Pedagogy of the oppressed (freedom) is referred to as the pedagogy of man. Freire's emphasis on the person as central to any process makes his theory important for social workers and participatory practice. The central concern of participatory practice is the person, his or her perceptions, feelings, values and action and not his/her problems or products.

As indicated above, according to Godonoo (1998:31), Freire's educational philosophy does not lend itself to quick analysis or identification with any specific school. His thinking flows from his

life experience and should also be seen in that context. He was strongly influenced by existentialism, phenomenology, Marxism as well as Christianity. Godonoo indicated that Freire has been called an idealist, communist, "theologian in disguise" a phenomenologist and an existentialist. Godonoo describes Freire's philosophical stance as a rich intellectual social *human* recipe that is capable of empowering the different needs of humanity.

ACTIONS OR PRACTICES FLOWING FROM FREIRE'S BELIEFS AND ATTITUDES

Originally, Freire's aim in his actions, based on his beliefs, was mainly to *liberate* and *dignify* people "to liberate them from passive to active citizenry". The act of liberation involves the liberation of human beings towards the fulfilment of being free and the liberation of both the individual and the community through a self-sustained effort of growth in individual awareness and community consciousness evolving from a process of learning. Freire set out to change the "empty vessel" concept of education in which the teacher imparts facts and the students receive them. This education left the poor without a critical awareness of their lives. In development terms it meant that the process should change from imposing knowledge on people to engaging them in a participatory process. How did he do it? His ways of working, based on his beliefs and trust in people, can be summarised under the following themes:

RESPECTING PEOPLE

A very important factor for Freire that links to trust and faith in people is his *respect* for people. Respect means that the person is recognised and accepted with a non-judgemental attitude. Enhance the dignity of the person is of the utmost importance.

We must also respect the plurality of voices, the variety of discourses and of course different languages and meanings (post-modernism). This means that we have to listen to all and respect all, irrespective of their different perspectives (Rogers, 1986).

BUILDING TRUSTING EQUAL RELATIONSHIPS

Freire treated people as equals and with love, humility, dignity and respect in a horizontal relationship based on mutual trust.

The main action of the facilitator is the creation of a context and framework for learning, liberation and change. The facilitator creates a safe context for learning and questioning and does not impose any values, but attempts to see people from the inside – how they talk, the way they think and construct their thoughts, and the nature of their interpersonal relationships (Rogers, 1986), with reference to Freire). The facilitator only provides a framework for thinking creatively and for active participation. At the same time the facilitator assists this collective community effort to discover existing knowledge and build the new knowledge to reshape society, so that all will have the opportunity for a full life – the process of "knowing the world".

FACILITATING THE PROCESS OF CONSCIENTISATION

Based on his belief that people are capable and knowledgeable, Freire facilitated the process of conscientisation. Burkey (1993:55) expressed the process of conscientisation as entailing the "...simulation of self-reflected critical awareness on the part of the oppressed of their social reality and of their ability to transform reality by their own conscious action". A person who has reached a certain level of conscientisation is, for example, capable of clearly perceiving hunger as more than just not eating or not having bread, but as the manifestation of a political, economic and

social reality of deep injustice. He or she will be able to connect facts and problems and to understand the connection between hunger and food production and agrarian reform; agrarian reform and reactions against it; hunger and economic policy; hunger and violence, etc. It means that people develop a holistic perspective on their situation .

In principle Freire facilitated the liberation process for people to enable them to take control of their lives. The oppressed have to unveil the world of oppression and through praxis commit themselves to its transformation. Freire focused on the change in perceptions of the facilitators about people as well as on the change in the perceptions of people about themselves and their world, their ethics and behaviour (Schugurensky, 1998:20).

Apparently Freire himself stopped using the term "conscientisation" after 1974. He felt that it had been loosely used in a manner which stripped it of its actual significance. It was seen as consciousness or awareness raising and not as a process of critical reflection by people on their own world, perceptions and realities. He felt the concept was misused.

PROBLEM-POSING WAY OF WORKING

The problem-posing way of working consists of questioning in different ways and with different visual aids as part of the facilitation of the process of conscientisation (see Hope & Timmel, 1995: 75). People discover their own answers and they learn to question. Freire emphasised the idea of self-liberation, proposing unlocking of the intrinsic humanity of the oppressed. Freire referred to himself as a liberator and not a domesticator.

FINDING GENERATIVE THEMES

Finding generative themes means finding things that people feel strongly enough about to take action to change them. It is important for the facilitator to get to know the community as a whole; the way the people talk, their lifestyle, behaviour at work and church, the idioms of the people, their expressions, their vocabulary and syntax, the way they construct their thoughts. This process of identifying generative themes is a collective process in which certain factors are discovered and identified by people themselves in order for them to collectively take action.

FACILITATING A SELF-REFLECTING LEARNING PROCESS

Both the facilitator and the learners/people in the community are subjects of the learning process (because we are all incomplete). A deeper understanding of one's own knowledge and its origins, as well as new knowledge – in other words conscientisation – is perhaps the most immediate and visible consequences of the Freirean approach. According to Freire, the people should be able to "read the world" (Allman, 1998:11-13).

What is important is that both facilitator or teacher and community/learners co-investigate dialectically the object of knowledge, learning from each other (Mayo 1997: 4). Facilitators are also positively disposed towards learning and re-learning from the learners, who bring a wealth of diverse experiences and knowledge into the learning group. These different experiences and knowledge form a rich basis for the learning process. To share, learn and re-learn, and to understand your own knowledge and skills and the world, happens through dialogue and communication.

FACILITATING A COLLECTIVE PROCESS

Conscientisation, liberation and transformation entail a process of becoming more fully human, but it is also a *participatory, collective*, action-reflection process between the facilitator and the *group*, which constantly reflects critically on its actions in order to be able to proceed (Freire, 1972:30; cf. also Hope & Timmel, 1995). A collective transformation process such as this is facilitated through communication and sharing with one another.

RENAMING THE WORLD THROUGH DIALOGUING

Education (read counselling and community development practices), according to Freire (1972:45), suffers from narration sickness and the act of depositing knowledge. Essentially this constitutes filling people's minds, seen as empty vessels, through instructive pedagogy (Mayo 1999: 63). Part of the process of transformation is the renaming process through dialogue.

Critical dialogue with ourselves and other people is the main way of working through which the people discover their world and through and with which they could rename the world (the liberation process). Dialogue based on good listening and the facilitation of critical thinking will enable people to generate their own transformation process. Freire (1994:75-85) sees dialogue as an encounter between people in order to name and rename the world. However, the prerequisites, for dialogue are love, trust (the relationship and context), equality, patience, humility, critical thinking and a real belief that there is something that one can learn from another person. Real dialogue cannot take place when there is dominance, humiliation and distrust (Freire 1972: 64; Allman, 1998:10). This dialectical approach encourages human beings to change attitudes and behaviours and social relations. If you rename the world, you re-relate to it (Allman, 1998:11; Keough, 1997:159).

FACILITATING A PARTICIPATORY ACTION-REFLECTION PROCESS

Freire (1972:41-42) said that at all times people must see themselves as people engaged in becoming more fully human. The reflection and action process is therefore important to facilitate the change process for people to become more fully human. The action will only be genuine praxis if there is critical reflection on its consequences. To achieve this praxis it is necessary to trust the people and their ability to reason. Dialogue and the transformation process can take place only by means of reflection and action. It is a *process*, not a method or a model.

Attempting to liberate the people without their reflective participation is to treat them as objects that must be saved from a burning building (Freire, 1972:41). The process is based on the belief that people are capable of being reflective. Freire sees critical reflection as interpreting one's interpretations, reconsidering contexts, tolerating ambiguities so that we can learn from the attempt to resolve them. And it involves the most careful attention to naming and renaming the world.

FREIRE'S "WAY OF BEING"

Those who wrote about Freire perceived him variously as always ready to *learn* and *change*. His second wife Ana Maria illustrates the action of wholeness by saying that he was somebody who touched people physically and emotionally. He liked touching her and holding hands. He liked to touch people on the shoulder when talking to them. He *listened* patiently, paying *attention* to everybody. She said:

Paulo transformed the acts of touching, looking and listening into moments of deep communication, a communicative dialogue, and therefore, into moments of knowing.

It was from his ability to listen, to open himself up without prejudice to the other, that he constructed his theory of knowledge. Added to these qualities he also had humour and passion.

Ana Maria also said that he regretted that so many intellectuals have become separated from their marriages and in their lives as a whole, because they did not stop their work to live moments such as being with their wives ... or going grocery shopping. Freire was living his life, being human, experiencing and sharing on all levels of his life. Ana Maria (1997: 303) also said that she learned a world of things from Freire, but above all she learned not to dichotomise reason and emotion. Do not hide your emotions when you write, say what you feel; a scientist is not, and never was, neutral.

About his faith and trust in people Ana Maria said "*When he died of a massive heart attack in hospital, Paulo left, full of faith in God and certain that men and women will still build a better world, more just, more beautiful, happier ("menos feio, menos malvado, menos desumano" - less ugly, less cruel, less inhumane).*

According to Olson (1997:324) Freire ran his office *collectively*. He practised democratic politics in everyday life. The process of action-reflection was part of his "*way of being*". Freire was always open to challenges, new ideas, self-criticism and reflection and to the reconsideration of his assumptions, his arguments and his language.

Paulo Freire was a man who loved, who could not understand life's existence without love and without knowing (holism). He lived love and tried to know and reflect critically on his principles and practices. He was constantly curious and asking questions of himself: "...our being in the world is far more than just 'being'. It is a 'presence' that is relational to the world and to others" (Freire, 1998:25).

REFLECTION ON FREIRE'S AND OUR OWN THINKING, VALUES AND ACTIONS

The immediate results of Freire's ideas posed a threat to the Brazilian military regime and he was jailed for five years, after which he was "advised" to rather live in Chile. In principle his paradigm poses a threat to any form of power and control and it leaves very little security and structure. (Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was also banned in South Africa.)

Carl Rogers confirmed this in his comparison between himself and Freire. Rogers counted himself lucky that he lived in a democratic society, as he said "I have often said that if a dictatorship took over this country (USA), one of their first acts – if they were at all intelligent – would be to jail me and others who hold a person-centred point of view" (Rogers, 1986:106). (Rogers was referred to as the quiet revolutionary.)

A person-centred point of view is seen as radical and threatening for any person/s for whom power is important. This paradigm changes the relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor, the trainer and the trainees, the researcher and the researched, etc. It lead to equality in the relationships. We have to reflect on our own position regarding power in relationships.

CONCLUSION

The long-term effects of Freire's influence go well beyond those who have read his work. His liberatory pedagogy has been the foundation of an entire body of theoretical work, for popular education, participatory practices and revolutionary movements (Keough, 1997:157; Godonoo, 1998:33).

In this post-modern era social workers have to facilitate participatory healing processes and it may be worthwhile revisiting, amongst other things, Freire's ideas on reflecting critically on our own

perceptions/thinking about and valuing people and our own "way of being". Freire could easily be dismissed for a more comfortable idealism or utopianism, but despite the need to read him with a critical eye and to explore the "blind spots" of his work, it was for me more important to capture his passion, his humanity, his compassion and his siding with and belief in those who are suffering. These are qualities that we as social workers can rethink and integrate into our own "way of being" to enable us to become companions on the client's or community's journey .

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