

Dawn Belkin Martinez  
Children's Hospital  
Simmons College School of Social Work  
(617) 355 – 7549  
dawn.martinez@childrens.harvard.edu

## **THERAPY FOR LIBERATION:** **THE PAULO FREIRE METHODOLOGY<sup>1</sup>**

### **Synopsis**

#### **The Freire Methodology:**

- 1) To SEE the problem or situation lived by clients.***
- 2) To ANALYZE the factors (personal, cultural, institutional) that contribute to the problem.***
- 3) To ACT to change the problem or situation.***

### **Who Was Paulo Freire and How Did He Develop His Methodology?**

Paulo Freire was a Brazilian educator who began a national literacy program for peasants and slum dwellers in the 1950s and 1960s. The Catholic Church, Catholic Action, and other grassroots organizations sponsored this effort. Catholic Action, a coalition of university students and workers was a particularly important influence on him. The members of this organization met weekly in small groups to discuss their ongoing work among the poor. They developed a method of identifying problems, analyzing the root causes

---

<sup>1</sup> Loosely adapted from: Ferreira Castano, Eleonora and Ferreira Castano, Joao Paulo (1993). *A Practical Application of Popular Education Techniques: Workshop At the Brecht Forum, New York.*

of the problems and initiating action plans. Many of members of Catholic Action went to work among the illiterate workers of Brazil, teaching them to read and write and organize themselves, with the goal being for workers to have an active role in their country's destiny.

Freire and his colleagues had two goals; to develop an efficient literacy method for adults, and to raise the social consciousness of the Brazilian workers. Through their work in the field, educators and activists discovered that many workers and peasants were fatalists; poor and working class Brazilians believed it was impossible to change their individual circumstances and were resigned to their situation in society.

In response to this world view, Freire and his group of educators utilized the Catholic Action method - to see, to analyze, to act - and discovered that when people began to talk about their problems in community, and began to plan some action about these problems, they began to free themselves from their fatalism and internal oppression. In order for individuals to embody a proactive worldview, he suggested, they needed to move from an object position in society (being acted upon) to a subject position in their own lives. Some key points of Friere's conceptual framework include the following:

- Knowledge is not neutral; it is the expression of historical moments where some groups exercise dominant power over others.
- Oppressed groups of individuals often experience life as "objects" being acted upon rather than "subjects" of their own lives.
- "Objects" often lack certain critical skills essential for influencing the institutions that have control over their lives.
- "Subjects" not only have skills for influencing institutions, but also have the opportunity to exercise these skills.
- The learners are the subjects in the learning process and not the objects - as they have to be subjects of their destiny.
- The learners and educators are equal participants in the learning process; this process is developed by a continuous dialogue between the educators and learners.
- Through dialogue, learners or subjects are able to focus their attention on the reality which mediates them and which—posed as a problem—challenges them. The response to that challenge is the action of dialogical subjects upon reality in order to transform it

- The objective of the learning process is to liberate the participants from their external and internal oppression; to facilitate learners becoming capable of changing their lives and the society they live in. (Freire, 1971).

Freire's many volumes of work are highly theoretical and some critics have charged that his ideas were devoid of practical activities and specific techniques. Freire himself agreed that there were no ready-made formulas to apply the methodology in a classroom. However, he believed that each practical experience with each group of learners was different from others; the role of the educators / organizers / was to develop their own activities and techniques with the people they were working with. For Freire, theory and practice were inseparable: theory is a moment of practice; from the practice is born the theory, and the theory returns to the practice to be changed and reformulated.

The national literacy program directed by Paulo Freire had enormous success, but it was of short duration. In 1964, following the military coup in Brazil, Freire and his co-workers were arrested. Their work was considered subversive and destroyed. Many spent the rest of their lives in exile.

## What is the Freire Methodology?

Briefly summarized, the Freire methodology can be outlined as follows.

1. **Identify the Problems:** The first step in the Freire methodology is to "identify the problems." In order to identify the problems, learners and educators usually engage in some sort of participatory research about the problems. Educators need to get to know learners outside of the problem as well. This includes getting to know about the learners work life, school life, and the issues the learners face on an ongoing basis.
2. **Produce the Codes:** The second step is to produce a material representation (code) of the problem, or as Freire might say, the generative theme. Learners can create a drawing, video, audiotape, or for children, a puppet show, which represents the issues at

hand.. The educator then instructs the group to compare and discuss the list, with the goal of creating one list of problems that represents all group members concerns.

### **3. To See the Situation as Experienced by the**

**Participants:** The third step is for individuals or group members to describe the situation, shown in the code, to the educator. . Participants are asked to define the problems in the situation and make the link between themselves and the problems.

### **4. To Analyze the Situation:**

The fourth step is for learners and educators to problem -pose; in other words, to ask themselves why this is happening and what are the immediate and root causes of these problems? This involves having both the learners and the educators analyze the problem from three perspectives; (1) **the personal**, (2) **the cultural** and (3) **the institutional / political**. After the individual or group discusses the immediate and root causes of the problems, they are asked to draw a problem tree. The trunk of the tree represents a specific problem the group has agreed upon, the leaves represent immediate consequences of the problem, and the roots of the tree represent the root causes of the problem. Individuals or groups then present the results of their analysis in a visual form to the educator.

### **5. To Act to Change the Situation:**

The final step involves participants discussing an immediate plan to resolve the problems and long-range plan of action. Learners and educators can produce a "Planning the Action" chart. This chart consists of consists of several categories; (1) **identification of the problem**, (2) **what to change**, (3) **long range vision**, and (4) **immediate plans**.

**The Three Basis Steps of this Methodology: *To See, To Analyze, To Act*, are Repeated Over and Over Again Following the Changes in the Situation as Experienced By the Participants.**

**Freire believed this process, which he described as praxis, led to "conscientizacao"; the development of critical consciousness on the part of the client.**

- **Critical Consciousness** is a dialectical process; changes in an individual's internal world can only come about when there are changes in an individual's external world. At the same time, changes in one's external world can only come about following changes in one's internal world.
- **Critical Consciousness** is a process that involves helping individuals **name** the multiple conditions of their lives, **identify** the limits imposed by their situation, and **take action** to transform the conditions.
- **Critical Consciousness** allows people to question the nature of their historical and social situation, to *read the world*, with the goal of transforming the object experience into a subject experience.

The principal goal of Freire's work is to change the power relationships in society; the objectives are to create mechanisms of collective power over all structures of society. Freire was very clear that the means of attaining this goal cannot be in contradiction with final objective; to construct a truly democratic society, you cannot use authoritarian methods. Hence, the participants and the clinicians must produce the projects, strategies and tactics used in the process collectively. Freire believed that critical consciousness is demonstrated by a number of qualities:

- **Power Awareness:** Knowing that society and history can be made and remade by human action and by organized groups.
- **Critical Literacy:** Analysis of discourse that goes beyond surface impressions and traditional myths.
- **Desocialization:** Recognizing and challenging the myths, values and behaviors learned in mass culture.

- **Self-Organization / Self-Education:** Taking the initiative to transform relationships and society away from authoritarian relations and the undemocratic, unequal distribution of power.

## How can Freire's Theories be Applied to Mental Health Work?

Freire's theories and methods provide opportunities to develop a new practice of therapy, one that is empowerment oriented. Ignacio Martin Baro, author of the book "Writings for a Liberation Psychology" applied Freire's ideas to mental health work. He wrote that the concept of identity is socially constructed through the culture and institutions an individual is a part of.

*"If society and individual exist as mutually dependent realities, in a dependency running through the backbone of history, then we have to consider socialization dialectically, recognizing that neither society nor the individual is real in itself, but rather, both exist to the extent that they mutually give each other existence. If the individual is a human individual, it is because he or she is shaped by society; if a human society exists, it is because there are individuals who make it up". (Martin-Baro, 1994).*

## Empowerment Oriented Therapy is...

- **Participatory:** From the first encounter, families are actively involved in designing their intervention plan.
- **Situated:** The discussion is situated in the family's thought and language, beginning from their words and understanding of the situation.
- **Democratic:** The discourse is democratic in so far as the family and the clinician construct it mutually.

- **Dialogic:** The basis 'format of therapy is dialogue around issues posed by the therapist and the family. The worker initiates this process and guides it into deeper phases. By frontloading questions and back loading lectures, the worker invites the family to assert ownership of the therapy. They are doing therapy and making it, not having therapy done to them.
- **Delocalization:** Freirean dialogue dissocializes families from passivity. It challenges their learned authority-dependence (waiting to be told what to do and what things mean).
- **Activist:** The relationship is active and interactive due to problem-posing and participatory formats. The critical dialogue also seeks action outcomes from the inquiry whenever possible.

An empowerment-oriented mental health worker is a **problem poser** who asks thought provoking questions and who encourages clients to ask their own questions. Through problem posing, individuals learn to question rather than merely to answer questions. As such, clients experience therapy as something they do, not something that is done to them. In this approach, clients are not empty vessels to be filled with facts or sponges to be saturated with official information. Instead, problem posing offers a search for knowledge. In this mutual search, the worker and the client develop "co-intentionality", that is, mutual intentions, which make the intervention plan collectively owned and not the sole property of the worker. This process leads to **Critical Consciousness**; it is accomplished through **Praxis** --- Reflection / Action / Reflection

*"The struggle for humanization, breaking the cycles of injustice, exploitation and oppression lies in the perpetuation of the oppressor versus the oppressed... To break the cycle, a revolution of ideas must take place, freedom can only occur when the oppressed eject this image and replace it with autonomy and responsibility" (Freire, 1998).*

For the empowerment oriented worker, understanding this conceptual framework is the most important component of empowerment-oriented therapy; all problems should be analyzed from the personal, cultural and institutional / political perspectives. There are many different

techniques that can be utilized to integrate these theories into our clinical practice. These include:

- Drawing the Problem
- Developing Action Plans
- Theatre of the Oppressed
- Letter Writing Campaigns
- Analysis of Problem Trees
- Externalization Interviews
- Reflecting Teams
- Bibliotherapy
- Movie Groups
- Re-membering Interviews
- Reconnection Interviews
- Cultural Banners
- Empowerment Groups

**Will any of this make a difference? Will empowerment oriented therapy help to transform the world?**

*"Our strategy should not only be to confront empire, but to lay siege to it. To deprive it of oxygen.... With our art, our music, our literature, our stubbornness, our joy, our sheer relentlessness - and our ability to tell our own stories. Stories that are different from the ones we're being brainwashed to believe. The corporate revolution will collapse if we refuse to buy what they are selling—their ideas, their version of history, their wars, their notions of inevitability. Remember this: **We be many and they be few. They need us more than we need them**"<sup>2</sup>*

In fact, forecasts can only be conditional. Here is one that seems important to me. Only **active intervention** by those who think **another world is possible** will be able to ensure that this dream becomes a reality.

---

<sup>2</sup> Roy, Arundhati (2003). Speech to the World Social Forum, Porto Alegre Brazil.

