

Social work needs paulo frierie

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Abstract: *This paper attempts to revisit the work of the Brazilian pedagogue, Paulo Freire, with special reference to the relevance and interrelations of the theories propounded by him with social work profession. Freire had an enormous influence across several sectors of life and social work is no exception to it. The concepts of Freire are vital to social workers who attempt to empower and enable the individuals, families, groups and communities at large, but lately in India, his work seems to have been neither well accepted nor well-understood. This paper is a small endeavour to summarise Freire's thoughts about valuing people which is the foundation of all people-centred development processes and participatory approaches utilized by social workers. Especially considering the socio-economic, cultural and political situation in our country, we strongly contend that Freire's views are still very much relevant as they were at the time it was written in 1972. The assumption that we safely make here is that we have read his works, especially "Pedagogy of the Oppressed".*

INTRODUCTION

This paper attempts to revisit the work of the Brazilian pedagogue, Paulo Freire, with special reference to the relevance and interrelations of the theories propounded by him with social work profession. Freire had an enormous influence across several sectors of life and social work is no exception to it. The concepts of Freire are vital to social workers who attempt to empower and enable the individuals, families, groups and communities at large, but lately in India, his work seems to have been neither well accepted nor well-understood. This paper is a small endeavour to summarise Freire's thoughts about valuing people which is the foundation of all people-centred development processes and participatory approaches utilized by social workers. Especially considering the socio-economic, cultural and political situation in our country, we strongly contend that Freire's views are still very much relevant as they were at the time it was written in 1972. The assumption that we safely make here is that we have read his works, especially "Pedagogy of the Oppressed".

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. He has utilized the terms below across most of his writings and we attempt to present a lucid way of achieving an understanding of the same.

People are capable and knowledgeable

Freire believed that there is no such thing as absolute ignorance or absolute knowledge. He believed in the ability of illiterate people to analyze their own reality, in their power to make and remake, to create and recreate, to think and decide for themselves, to engage in self-reflection and to be critical. If we look at the prevailing ideas and attitudes about the ignorance of the people and their need to be educated, Freire's ideas contradict the same. In his view human beings are not empty vessels who believe and accept anything that they are told as contrary to the Marxist approach. The minds of human beings are not *idea banks* where knowledge can easily be deposited by imposing it on them. They are the best persons to decide for their own lives with expert knowledge of their own experiences, values, culture and realities surrounding them.

People are trustworthy

The core belief that people are capable, implies the requirement of faith in their capacity to grow and change. As professional social workers, it has been noted several times that though we talk about people, we do not *trust* them. As opined by Freire, trusting people is indispensable precondition for change. "If you fail this trust, you fail to bring about dialogue, reflection and communication". It is thus the social workers primary responsibility to have trust in the clients and in their ability to facilitate dialogue, reflection and communication.

Growth and development are continuous

Every human being is constantly involved in the quest for human completion, always in the process of becoming, that they are never finished or complete, and that their realities in turn are constantly changing. The hope for change and development is based on the incompleteness of the person.

Purposeful human behaviour

Freire believed that human behaviour is always purposeful and the same is also an assumption of social work. People always strive to achieve their needs, no matter how awkward the behaviour towards achieving those needs may seem, but still it has some purpose. This purpose is primarily known by that individual himself/herself.

Complementarity and Wholeness

Can we segregate people from any process that impacts their lives ? The answer is a definitive *NO*. In the opinion of Freire, the world and the person cannot exist apart from each other. He referred to the wholeness and the connectedness of emotions, reason and behaviour that exist in constant interaction. For him reflection and action are part of the same process. Reflection without action is verbalism and action without reflection is pure activism. He argued that objectivity and subjectivity cannot be dichotomized. The one cannot exist without the other. 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.

The works of Freire clearly explain that the traditional education overlook human feelings and experiences with emphasis only on reason and action. Person is the central element for Freire and thence the reason, feelings and actions are facts that construct the reality of that individual. The realities of our lives and the meanings attached to those realities are socially constructed and they change through language that we utilize. Realities are subjective, keep on transforming and can be reflected upon critically. People create and recreate their world through naming objects and communicating meaning and understanding through language and generative metaphors. To exist, according to Freire, is to name the world and to change it. Realities, therefore, are constructed through language.

Though language we convey meanings. We say and mean simultaneously. Words on their own do not convey meanings, but the meanings come to surface out of dialogues. It means that people construct their own realities and problems through naming them as such. Problems are not existing realities; they are named, created and constructed by people. People construct realities socially and in interaction with other people, where language provides them with required naming metaphors. Appropriate articulation is very important in social work which is expressed through the medium of language. Freire sees language as the means to critical consciousness, which in turn is the means of conceiving change and making choices to bring about further transformation. This is the basis of the theory of conscientisation.

People are autonomous and powerful

Right to self-determination is one of the foundational principles of social work and Freire had firm faith in the same. A social worker should interpret this principle, with the awareness that if the systems or individuals filch client's power to decision-making, then the client is merely reduced to a life-less object. This also means that the social worker then disrespects the client's knowledge and abilities and thereby counters the principle of conviction in inherent worth, integrity and dignity of the individual.

Oppression

For Freire oppression was domesticating the people. He considered that oppression resides in the minds and hearts of the oppressed, they internalise the oppressor and then the oppressor begins to live within the oppressed. The conscientization is thence a process by which people become aware of themselves in their own world as a beginning step to liberation. He went further to emphasise that self-liberation is the paramount way towards conscientization. It should be made clear that as every individual is unique, has unique knowledge and abilities, there is no single full-proof way of liberation; one has to celebrate self-liberation by respecting one's own differences and diversity.

Conscientization

The notion of conscientization is the core of Freire's theory. It is the power to transform reality. In his own words, "*consciousness is fragmented knowledge...while conscientization 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.*"

The empowering approach of social work heavily draws from Freire's conscientization.

Theory is important

The undercurrent of any participatory practice towards empowerment is the firm grounding of perceptions and beliefs in people by the social work practitioners. The Code of Ethical Conduct whether in the Indian context, the one by National Association of Social Workers of USA and even the International Federation

of Social Workers, all converge on the point that it is vital for the professionals 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. 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. This is also the crux of the problem-solving model purported by H. H. Perlman.

Putting People First

The seminal work of Freire, *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.”

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. Freire puts person as central to any process and hence it becomes the very essence of participatory practices in social work. The central concern of participatory practice is the person, his or her perceptions, feelings, values and actions and not his or her problems or products. Hence, when a social worker puts the person first, which we now know as the people-centred approach, it ultimately leads to empowerment of the persons concerned.

Respecting People

Conviction in inherent worth, integrity and dignity of the individual is the very basic principle of social work. This principle has been widely utilised by Freire. He believed that to build trust and faith in people, respecting them is a prerequisite. Respect means that the person is recognised and unconditionally accepted with a non-judgemental attitude, which again are principles of social casework. Freire went a step further to articulate that we must also respect plurality of voices, variety of discourses, religions, languages and gender. It means that we have to listen to all and respect all irrespective of their different perspectives. This laid the foundation of culture-sensitive social work practice.

Roles of Social Worker

As social workers we need to treat people as equals with love, humility, dignity and respect in a horizontal relationship based on mutual trust. The role of social worker as a facilitator is to create a context and framework for learning, liberation and change. The facilitator does not impose any values, but attempts to see the people from their inside – how they talk, the way they construct their thoughts and the nature of their inter-personal and intra-personal relationships. The task of the facilitator is to provide a framework for creative thinking and space for active participation. At the same time, the social worker will assist the community to make collective efforts to know the society as it exists and avenues to reshape the society in the light of knowing the world.

As a catalyst, the social workers are to stimulate the self-awareness of persons. Once self-aware, the person will be capable of clearly perceiving hunger as more than just not eating but as the manifestation of a political, economic and social reality of deep injustice. He or she will be able to connect the facts and problems and to understand the connection between hunger, food production, agrarian reform, reactions to it, the economic policy, hunger-induced violence, to name a few. In crux, people will develop a holistic perspective of their own situation.

Another such aspect, much neglected in social work profession especially in the Indian sub-continent is that of advocacy. As an advocate, the social worker needs to things that people feel strongly enough about to take action to change them. These are known as generative themes. Only, when one is aware of self, the collective actions on generative themes can be well initiated, sustained and can achieve a logical goal. As a word of caution, the social worker while performing advocacy should not consider himself/herself as an expert but rather as a learner alongwith the community at large. It helps the social worker to learn and relearn from the community and makes him/her also critically self-aware of his thoughts, actions and behaviour – personally and professionally.

Collective transformation is also required to be done in order to take collective action, which is possible through constant communication and sharing with one another. Barriers to communication must be well addressed and an open dialogue should be initiated and guided by the social worker. Critical dialogue with one’s own self and with the clients is the main way of working through which the people discover their world and through and with which they could rename the world. For a critical dialogue, good listening, mutuality of trust, equality, patience, critical thinking and conviction in the people that they can change and will change is also required. This dialectical approach encourages human beings to change attitudes, behaviours and social relations.

The Final Word

Freire was a man who loved, who could not understand life's existence without love and without knowing. He lived love and tried to know and reflect critically on his principles and practices. He was constantly curious and asking questions of himself. In his own words, "*our being in the world is far more than just being. It is a presence that is relational to the world and to others*". He adopted a person-centred view seen as radical and threatening for any person for whom power is important. His paradigm aims at changing the relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor, the trainer and the trainees, the researcher and the researched, etc. It leads to equality in the relationships and reflects on our own position as social workers regarding power in relationships.

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