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### Paulo Freire: Neglected Mentor for Social Work

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## Paulo Freire: Neglected Mentor for Social Work

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*Paulo Freire, Brazilian educator and author, advocated radical educational approaches to empower oppressed peoples. Social workers contributing to English-language journals and other literature have made only limited use of Freire's ideas. Explanations may include social work's clinical drift, discomfort with radical ideas, obliviousness to contributions from the developing world, unease with religious thought, and avoidance of primary sources, in addition to the complexity of Freire's writing style. This article introduces Freire's contributions and suggests consistent approaches in social work practice, past and present, illustrating that those who practice with marginalized and disempowered people can benefit from reading Freire as a mentor.*

**KEYWORDS** *Freire, conscientization, progressive practice, radical social work*

"Social workers are conditioned by the structure of the society in which they live, in which they are formed" (Freire & Moch, 1990, p. 5).

Paulo Freire, Brazilian educator, policy maker, and author, was celebrated during his lifetime as an advocate for radically different educational approaches that empower oppressed peoples. In many disciplines, a flurry of international attention to Freire's writings followed his death in 1997, illustrating how he inspired progressive practice in education (e.g., Jackson, 2007; Ledwith, 2005); theology (e.g., Lange, 1998); psychotherapy (e.g., Demmitt & Oldenski, 1999; O'Hara, 1989); and medicine and nursing (e.g., Connor, Ling, Tuttle, & Brown-Tezera, 1999; DasGupta et al., 2006). His

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theories have been applied widely in Africa (Godonoo, 1998), the Indian subcontinent (Narayan, 1999; Shefner-Rogers, Rao, Rodgers, & Wayangankar, 1998), Europe (Aambo, 1997; Kirkwood & Kirkwood, 1989), and North America (Demmitt & Oldenski, 1999), in addition to Central and South America (Dunn, 1998; Holst, 2006; Martin, 1998).

Having first read Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) more than 25 years ago, I set out to address the following question: What influence has Freire's writing had on professional literature concerning the practice and teaching of social work in the United States, the United Kingdom, and other English-speaking, postindustrial, Western countries? After summarizing some of Paulo Freire's major educational concepts and their application in other fields, this article employs literature review and citation analysis to explore the use social workers contributing to English-language journals have made of his influential ideas. Although Freire spoke of having taught social workers in Brazil, and he addressed and inspired social work audiences internationally (Freire & Moch, 1990), the English-language, refereed social work literature has drawn surprisingly little from Freire's extensive work. A less systematic review of texts found Freire's ideas applied primarily by those adopting the label "radical" or similar ideological terminology.

Long-standing neglect of Freire in the English-language literature has been an opportunity lost by those who practice with marginalized, oppressed, and disempowered people. This article explores possible reasons that Freire is neglected in social work literature and concludes with a discussion of historical and contemporary modes of social work practice compatible with Freire's ideas.

### FREIRE'S LIFE AND CAREER

Born in Recife, the capitol of Pernambuco, Brazil, in 1921, Freire describes how poverty and hunger affected him as a child: "I did not understand anything because of my hunger. I wasn't dumb. It wasn't lack of interest. . . . Experience showed me once again the relationship between social class and knowledge" (as quoted in Gaddotti, 1994, p. 5). Freire's childhood experiences led to an early career as a teacher and shaped his approach to teaching as a means of personal and political liberation. After graduating from university, Freire worked in a variety of roles in teaching and welfare work. Beginning in 1946, he headed the Department of Education and Culture in Pernambuco, where he began, in 1962, to formulate his radical theory of personal and social liberation through pedagogy. A political coup in 1964 led to his imprisonment, flight to Chile, and work in exile (Collins, 1997; Freire, 1996; Horton & Freire, 1990). From 1969 to 1970 Freire was a visiting professor at Harvard, followed by 10 key years as education advisor to the World Council of Churches. He was invited to return to Brazil in

1980 and was appointed Professor at the University of Sao Paulo. He became City Minister for Education in Sao Paulo in 1988 and died in 1997 (Freire, 1996; Gaddotti, 1994; Horton & Freire, 1990).

## FREIRE'S CONTRIBUTIONS AND INFLUENCE

Beginning with *Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1968/1974), Freire wrote prolifically throughout his life. The classic *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) became his most famous work, but he published regularly until his the year of death (Freire, 1997), and his final book was published posthumously (Freire, 1998). Although a summary of his extensive body of work is beyond the scope of this article, it can identify key themes that communicate Freire's views. In his final work, *Pedagogy of Freedom* (1998), Freire presents an apt framework summarizing his philosophy of education. The balance of this section highlights these themes, along with language he introduced or shaped, influences on his thinking, and applications of his work.

### Teaching and Learning

"THERE IS NO TEACHING WITHOUT LEARNING" (FREIRE, 1998, p. 29)

Freire's own words best explain his concepts. Regarding the interplay of teaching and learning, he writes:

Although the teachers or the students are not the same, the person in charge of education is being formed or re-formed as he/she teaches, and the person who is being taught forms him/herself in this process. . . . Whoever teaches learns in the act of teaching, and whoever learns teaches in the act of learning (1998, p. 31).

From this principle flows Freire's emphasis on reciprocal and equalitarian relationships between professionals and those with whom they engage in personal and social change. A later section of this article discusses approaches to social work practice that are most consistent with Freire's equalitarianism.

"TEACHING IS NOT JUST TRANSFERRING KNOWLEDGE" (FREIRE, 1998, p. 49)

Freire writes frequently about the "banking system of education" practiced by teachers who attempt to deposit knowledge into the heads of their students (e.g., Freire, 1998, p. 32). He rejects everything the image implies. Not only is learning for Freire never passive, it also is not limited to the cognitive. Freire (1998) stresses that correct pedagogy involves self-awareness,

autonomy, common sense, ability to perceive reality accurately, conviction that change is possible, and curiosity. The goal of Freire's pedagogy is to prepare the learner for what others might call a life that is purpose-driven, self-actualized, and based on a high level of moral development. Freire's broad vision of human development shares much with social work values concerning the "dignity and worth of the person" (e.g., International Federation of Social Workers, 2010; National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2008).

"TEACHING IS A HUMAN ACT" (FREIRE, 1998, p. 85)

Freire explains the consciousness of shared humanity that underlies his approach to teaching and learning:

The climate of respect that is born of just, serious, humble, and generous relationships, in which both the authority of the teacher and the freedom of the students are ethically grounded, is what converts pedagogical space into authentic educational experience (Freire, 1998, p. 86).

In Freire's pedagogy, teachers and students encounter each other as fallible fellow seekers after truth. His call for openness and authenticity in professional relationships is relevant in both education and other human services.

## Language, Influences, and Applications

### LANGUAGE OF PEDAGOGY

While communicating his central message of liberation, Freire introduced or redefined key concepts that have become inseparably associated with his name. One of these is *conscientização*, which he explained as "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (Freire, 1970, p. 35). The Portuguese term is variously rendered in English as "consciousness raising," "critical consciousness," or "conscientization." Pedagogy, for Freire, became a liberating force "which must be forged *with*, not *for* the oppressed (whether individuals or peoples) in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity" (1970, p. 48). Conscientization is a force at work in movements for empowerment and social change, as discussed in the final section of this article.

### Sources and Influences

Those familiar with Catholic social teaching will recognize it as a root of many of Freire's ideas. For U.S. readers, his work is reminiscent of Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin of the Catholic Worker Movement (Kleiment, 1986).

Leonard (1993), writing from a U.K. perspective, places Freire within the social gospel tradition, while others cite a connection with liberation theology (e.g., Lange, 1998) because he mingles the voice of Christian conscience with radical, even revolutionary, political thought and theory. He draws freely from critical theory as he quotes and applies writings by Marx and Engels, Lenin, Che Guevara, and Mao Tse-Tung. Trained as a philosopher as well as an educator, Freire also builds on the works of Frantz Fanon (1968); Martin Buber (Buber & Kaufman, 1983); Reinhold Niebuhr (1960); and others who apply moral reasoning to social problems. Freire discusses revolution in the sense of fundamental change to bring about social and economic justice for poor and oppressed peoples, a mission highly consistent with social work values (International Federation of Social Workers, 2010; NASW, 2008).

### Application and Transfer of Ideas

When Freire's writings began to appear in the late 1960s, they were embraced by people working for human rights and social change, both in postcolonial societies and in the postindustrial West (e.g., Giroux, 1993; Margonis, 2003). Freire's 10-year affiliation with the World Council of Churches and the establishment in 1991 of the Paulo Freire Institute, now with more than 90 sites on all continents, have added to the international influence of this work, particularly in the developing world (Instituto Paulo Freire, n.d.). Translation of Freire's works into English, as well as his time as a visiting faculty member at Harvard and later travels to international conferences, all served to raise his visibility in the United States.

Freire's teachings have applications far beyond education, and social workers can discern both familiar and unfamiliar principles in his writings. For example, Freire's work affirms that each individual is the expert concerning his or her own situation, making the principle of "starting where the client is" highly consistent with Freirean perspectives. On the other hand, professional distance between "client" and "professional" may conflict with Freire's vision of both personal and political change as shared journeys demanding personal engagement and authenticity by all involved. Certainly, social work interventions suggesting that one person can change or act on another, including "treatment," "therapy," and other medically derived terms, are antithetical to Freire's worldview.

Freire's work suggests that people are not only capable of addressing and resolving their own concerns, they are the only ones who can do so. The clearest contemporary social work applications of Freire's teaching are in strengths- and empowerment-based approaches to both micro- and macro-practice, including community-based participatory research and social development. This article returns in its final section to connections between Freire these modes of practice.

## LITERATURE REVIEW CONCERNING FREIRE AND SOCIAL WORK

To address the question posed in the introduction concerning Freire's influence on social work in the English-speaking West, I conducted a literature review using the search terms Freire, Freire's, Freirean, and Freirian to search both Social Work Abstracts and Social Science Citation Index. Social Work Abstracts (SWA) indexes and abstracts English-language journals from several countries, including both core social work publications and allied journals. Search of the on-line version of SWA, from its beginning in 1977 through early 2011 identified 11 abstracts that concern Freire's ideas or work (Aambo, 1997; Bock, 1980; Brigham, 1977; Burstow, 1991; Carroll & Minkler, 2000; Findlay, 1978; Kline, Dolgon & Dresser, 2000; Narayan, 1999, 2000; Sachs, 1991; Spencer, 2008).

A similar search of Social Science Citation Index, ISI Web of Knowledge, the interdisciplinary citation index to many hundreds of journals, yielded more than 300 articles, including three directly relevant to social work practice and not already identified in SWA (Juliá & Kondrat, 2005; Prigoff, 1998; Quoss, 1992). I was familiar with three additional articles (Brenton, 1994; Reisch, Wenocur, & Sherman, 1981; Townsend & O'Neill, 1994), and a colleague mentioned an additional reference (Freire & Moch, 1990), yielding a subtotal of 18 published articles that had appeared in social work journals, been authored by social workers, or had applied Freire's work in ways closely linked to social services. Other articles cite Freire or refer to his ideas and contributions, but this review focuses on articles with titles or abstracts that suggest central concern with Freire's ideas.

Leonard (1993) and others identify *Case Con: A Revolutionary Magazine for Social Workers*, the British alternative journal first published in 1970, as an outlet for radical social work thought. A Google Scholar search for the terms Case Con, social work, and Freire produced 18 hits. However, this led to identification of only one additional article (Lynn, 1999). Other relevant references had been identified earlier, suggesting that the literature review had approached the point of saturation. The following sections discuss the 19 identified articles as they apply to social work practice, social work education, and closely related topics.

### Social Work Practice

The largest subgroup of articles identified in the literature review includes 10 that apply Freire's ideas to social work practice. The two earliest, by Findlay (1978) and Bock (1980), appeared in *Catalyst*, a socialist journal published in the United States from 1978 through 1989. These two articles introduce Freire to social work audiences and apply Freirean concepts to social work in general, as does a broader article in *Social Development Issues* from the same time period (Reisch et al., 1981). Another seminal piece,

authored by Freire himself as an address to the International Federation of Social Workers meeting in Stockholm in 1988 (Freire & Moch, 1990), is reprinted in the inaugural issue of *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, the successor journal to *Catalyst*. In it, Freire describes his career-long association with social work and considers qualities characteristic of progressive social workers.

Six other articles, each published since 1990, apply Freirean concepts to social work practice concerning homelessness (Kline, Dolgon & Dresser, 2000; Sachs, 1991), health care (Aambo, 1997; Juliá & Kondrat, 2005), empowerment-oriented practice (Brenton, 1994), and community practice (Carroll & Minkler, 2000). Other than Freire himself (Freire & Moch, 1990), most authors cited in this section are social work practitioners and faculty members who are based in the United States or Canada. Additional exceptions are Aambo (1997), a Norwegian physician, and Kline, Dolgon, and Dresser (2000), U.S. liberal arts professors who published their study of student involvement in a community coalition against homelessness in the *Journal of Community Practice*. Of this group, the most extensive application of Freire's ideas to social work is by Carroll and Minkler (2000) in an article that defines and explains his key concepts, assesses their relevance and application in social work, and presents two case studies drawn from practice with groups and communities.

### Social Work Education

Although some of the journal literature applying Freire's ideas to social work practice originated in North America, more of the relevant work concerning social work education has appeared elsewhere. Of five such articles, the earliest (Brigham, 1977) offers a U.S. perspective on the concept of liberation in social work education. Burstow (1991), a Canadian author, contributes discussion of the use of codifications (stylized pictures of familiar subjects) in social work education. Both of these appeared in the *Journal of Social Work Education*. Lynn (1999), publishing in the *British Journal of Social Work*, summarizes the evolution of social work through the radical period of the 1970s, with emphasis on developments in the United Kingdom. Finally, an Indian academician published two articles comparing the perspectives of Freire and Mahatma Gandhi (Narayan, 1999, 2000). The article by Reisch and colleagues (1981) cited above in the practice section also applies conscientization to social work education. On balance, these few articles represent remarkably little attention to Freire in the English-language journal literature concerning social work education.

### Other Relevant Journal Topics

This review includes four additional articles with other primary concerns that are relevant to social services. The earliest, published in *Family Relations*

by a professor of home economics, discusses teaching family policy from the perspectives of advocacy and empowerment (Quoss, 1992). Two educational historians contributed a Freirean analysis of settlement pioneer Jane Addams' 19th century education in a women's academy (Townsend & O'Neill, 1994). Prighoff's (1998) review of Freire's book, *Letters to Christina: Reflections of my Life and Work* (1996) is the only piece identified that appears to have been spurred in part by Freire's death in 1997. More recently, a powerful guest editorial in *Social Work* draws from Freire to explore "power, privilege, and oppression" in the form of a personal reflection by a social work scholar who identifies as a person of color (Spencer, 2008, p. 99).

### Texts and Other Books

I made additional, less systematic efforts to identify social work texts and related works that apply Freire's ideas by searching for his name and the term "social work" in Google Books and Google Scholar. His concepts appear in several British books from the 1970s, including *Radical Social Work* (Bailey & Brake, 1975) and *Radicals in Social Work* (Statham, 1978). Freire also is mentioned in *Social Work: Reform or Revolution* (Pritchard & Taylor, 1978). Other applications of his work are found in more recent texts, including *The Quest for a Radical Profession* (Wagner, 1990); *Social Work Practice: Postmodern Critical Perspectives* (Pease & Fook, 1999); *The Road not Taken: A History of Radical Social Work in the United States* (Reisch & Andrews, 2001); *Radical Social Work in Practice: Making a Difference* (Ferguson & Woodward, 2009), and *Critical Social Work: Theories and Practices for a Socially Just World* (Allan, Briskman, & Pease, 2009). These titles underscore that it has been primarily left-leaning social workers who have drawn from Freire. The chapter by Leonard (1975) in *Radical Social Work* (Bailey & Brake, 1975) makes particularly extensive use of Freirean perspectives upon which the author expands in a later coedited book (McClaren & Leonard, 1993).

Simon (1994) discusses Freire in the context of the development of empowerment-based practice, and Brenton (1994) also applies his work to explore empowerment, a topic discussed further in the final section of this article. Sachs and Newdom (1999) draw from Freire to consider how clinical social work and social action can interconnect, expanding on Sachs' (1991) earlier contribution to the journal literature. Hardcastle, Powers and Wenocur (2011) apply some Freirean concepts to teaching community practice, as do Ferguson, Lavelette, and Whitmore (2005) in teaching global social policy. This review of the literature also identified extensive application of Freire's thought in an edited practice text by Australian social work educators (Pease & Fook, 1999), particularly in the chapter by Jessup and Rogerson (1999).

Despite these important contributions in texts, the English-language social work literature refers with striking infrequency to Freire's work, which is addressed "to the oppressed, and to those who suffer with them and fight at their side," as reads the dedication of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). Freire does not appear in the extensive biographical sections of the *Encyclopedia of Social Work* (neither the 19th [Edwards, 1995] nor the 20th [Mizrahi & Davis, 2008] edition), nor does his name appear in either index. The same is true of other recent, major works of reference, including the *Canadian Encyclopedia of Social Work* (Turner, 2005); *The Social Workers' Desk Reference* (Roberts, 2009); and the four-volume *Comprehensive Handbook of Social Work and Social Welfare* (Sowers & Dulmus, 2008). Freire's name does appear in Barker's *Social Work Dictionary* (2003) as coiner of the term *conscientization*. Possible reasons for the considerable neglect of Freire's contributions are explored in the next major section of this article.

### Other Impact by Freire on Social Work

Nonacademic venues have provided alternative ways for Freire's ideas to influence progressive social reform. One example comes from the Highlander Institute in rural Tennessee, established in 1932 as an educational and research center to help people organize for social change in the American South. Highlander works "with people fighting for justice, equality and sustainability, supporting their efforts to take collective action to shape their own destiny" (Highlander, n.d.). Among those who have participated at Highlander over the years are progressive social workers engaged in community organization and advocacy, particularly in civil rights, labor organizing, and environmental protection of rural and low-income communities. Highlander cofounder Myles Horton, who worked at Hull House during Jane Addams' lifetime, published a dialog with Freire about education and social change (Horton & Freire, 1990).

Social workers also encountered Freire during his time as a visiting faculty member at Harvard University in 1969-70. His influence appears to have been particularly strong at Smith College. For example, the text by Sachs and Newdom (1999) cited previously is based in part on interactions among faculty and students at the Smith College School of Social Work, where there has been some emphasis on melding social action and clinical practice. In addition, Cowhey (2006) writes of the inspiration she received from studying Freire at Smith as a student of education. The connection linking Smith College with Freire's ideas persisted after his death, as five colleges there hosted a colloquium in 2000 titled *Beyond Paulo Freire: Furthering the Spirituality Dialogue in Education* (Smith College, 2000). Reisch and Andrews (2001) provide a thorough discussion of "radicalism in social work

education,” including Freire’s influence, in other schools of social work in the United States. (2001, pp. 182–186).

Lynn (1999) contributes a similar overview of radical practice from a U.K. perspective. It is clear that Freire’s ideas guided the development of the social work program at the University of Warwick (Warwick School) under the leadership of Leonard, author of chapters and a book discussed above (1975, 1993). According to Leonard (1993), the goal of the Warwick School between 1974 and 1986 was to engage with students in an educational process shaped by the philosophies of Freire and Gramsci, who wrote from a more Marxist perspective. Leonard explains the outcome:

The role of the critical social worker was to be committed to conscientization, to enabling service users and others experiencing oppression to develop their consciousness of the structural forces which shaped their lives and their deprivations. No longer would the social worker reinforce the official state definitions of social problems which focused on individual, family, or community pathology, but would resist them and help others to do the same, individually and collectively (Leonard, 1993, p. 162).

Perhaps no school of social work in the United States has applied Freire’s philosophy to the same extent as the Warwick School in the United Kingdom. However, I had the opportunity to teach during the early 1980s in a historically African-American university in the southern United States that drew from Freirean educational philosophy to deliver a social work curriculum infused with the themes of advocacy, empowerment, and transformation. That school, Southern University in New Orleans, has produced literature in the empowerment tradition (e.g., Hegar, 1989; Hegar & Hunzeker, 1988; Mancoske & Hunzeker, 1990, 1994).

### Limitations of the Literature Review

It is somewhat contradictory to search the social work literature for references to concepts that remain on the fringes of professional thought and practice. In that sense, it may be unsurprising that relatively few applications of Freire’s work surface. However, the central purpose of this article is to gauge the influence of Freire’s ideas on a profession, so reference to those ideas in the professional literature constitutes a valid indicator of influence. In order to do justice to the topic, it was necessary to expand the literature search beyond prominent databases of refereed journals to include Google searches for relevant books, additional articles, and Web sites.

It is obvious that sources other than refereed journal articles would be missing from searches of Social Work Abstracts (SWA) and Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), but refereed articles matching the search terms also

may have failed to surface. For example, review of SWA for specific journal names shows that numerous issues, and in a few cases whole volumes, of *International Social Work*, *British Journal of Social Work*, and *Journal of Progressive Human Services* are missing from that database. Other researchers have confirmed similar shortcomings in SWA (Holden et al., 2009). These unfortunate gaps suggest that authors reviewing the professional literature should look beyond the most obvious search engines.

### EXPLANATIONS FOR NEGLECT OF FREIRE IN SOCIAL WORK LITERATURE

Given the impact Freire has had on many disciplines in a range of geographical regions, it is interesting to reflect on why his ideas have not been more central to mainstream social work scholarship in English-speaking countries, particularly the United States. The most obvious set of reasons probably has to do with the turn toward clinical, psychotherapeutic practice that social work has taken in the United States by incremental degrees over several decades. This move to “abandon its mission,” to use Specht and Courtney’s title phrase (1994), has served to align U.S. social work with health professionals oriented toward treatment, rather than with advocates for structural changes in society. As this article illustrates, Freire has had stronger influence in Britain, where the profession is less engaged in psychotherapy, and his work has been highly influential in developing countries, where social workers identify strongly with advancing human rights and promoting social and economic development.

However, there are additional possible reasons for the relative lack of emphasis on Freire’s work within social work, including discomfort with radical thinkers and ideas; obliviousness to theory and contributions from the developing world; unease of progressives with religious thought; inaccessibility of some of Freire’s writing; and neglect of primary sources in social work education. These possibilities are considered briefly in this section.

Although it would be unwise to generalize too much about social work in English-speaking countries, it is clear that the profession has been shaped primarily by political traditions ranging from liberal democratic to social democratic. Radical social work has been the exception in scholarship and in practice. Furthermore, the past 3 decades of social and political conservatism in much of the postindustrialized West have had an impact on social work. In Freire’s words, “Social workers are conditioned by the structure of the society in which they live, in which they are formed” (Freire & Moch, 1990, p. 5). Mainstream social work has been generally unreceptive to radical voices, and Freire, though not a political revolutionary, draws extensively from critical theory that may be unfamiliar or discomfiting to many social work students, faculty, and professionals.

Social work in postindustrialized, English-speaking countries has also drawn infrequently from theory and theorists of the developing world. When that does occur, it often involves exchanges within the British Commonwealth. For example, English-speaking readers may encounter Freire's ideas as applied to India (e.g., Narayan, 1999) more often than to Central or South America. This blind spot has unfortunate repercussions, particularly for the United States, which shares many common challenges with Latin America, including inequality arising out of the concentration of wealth, tensions inherent in multicultural societies, and challenges of serving extensive rural areas. Martinez-Brawley's (1980) comparative work concerning rural social work practice is an exception to the professional tendency to ignore Latin-American perspectives. She draws from Freire to argue that "rural social work in the United States, for example, has been the result of the conscientization of rural people and the politicization of the profession" (Martinez-Brawley, 1980, p. 167).

Ironically, some progressive human service workers in English-speaking countries who might be drawn to Freire's perspectives may be alienated by the religious underpinnings of his philosophy. Although there have been many religious movements for social reform, including the Social Gospel Movement of the 19th century, the Catholic Worker Movement of the 20th century, and contemporary liberation theology, dominant religious perspectives in the English-speaking world have tended to be conservative. This is particularly true in the United States, where over the past several decades the Christian "religious right" has taken reactionary positions on many social issues. American progressives and radicals have become unused to finding allies and mentors among religious thinkers.

The nature of Freire's writing may also make it relatively inaccessible to contemporary students and practitioners, an observation supported by Schugurensky (1998). It is unfortunate but unquestionable that Freire's use of esoteric terms and his tendency to quote Spanish, French, Latin, and occasionally Greek original sources make it difficult for many contemporary readers to appreciate his points fully. Even in translation, editions of his work tend to follow Freire's lead and leave extensive quotations in their original languages. Add to Freire's linguistic complexity the general tendency in contemporary schools of social work to rely heavily on textbooks, rather than on original sources, and it becomes clearer why younger graduates may be completely unfamiliar with Freire's writings.

## FREIRE AND PROGRESSIVE SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

The title of this article suggests that, in underutilizing Freire's contributions, social work has neglected an apt mentor. His theory and methods are relevant everywhere, but nowhere more than in countries with growing income disparities, falling rates of school completion, struggling immigrant

populations, and rising social insecurity. The ongoing world economic crisis suggests that such social challenges will persist for some time and likely intensify.

It is clear from this review that the opportunity to encounter Freire has been available primarily to progressive practitioners, who have long been associated with journals such as *Catalyst*, *Progressive Human Services*, and *Case Con.* Texts concerning radical social work both from the 1970s (Bailey & Brake, 1975; Pritchard & Taylor, 1978; Statham, 1978) and from the past decade (Allan et al., 2009; Ferguson & Woodward, 2009; Reisch & Andrews, 2001) offer alternative views of social work, as do organizations such as the Highlander Institute (n.d.) and the Social Welfare Action Alliance (Hegar, 2008; Social Welfare Action Alliance, n.d.). However, Freire should not remain on the fringes of social work consciousness. His educational philosophy is most congruent with approaches that promote solidarity and de-emphasize differences in status between professionals and those they help. This article concludes with discussion of selected compatible social work approaches from historical and contemporary practice.

### Social Work's Roots

Although social work's roots in the reform movements of the 19th century predate Freire's work by about a hundred years, some historical examples of social work practice are quite compatible with his philosophy. Townsend and O'Neill (1994) even detect Freirean themes in settlement leader Jane Addams' higher education at a women's college. Settlement houses, where residents joined people in their own neighborhoods to work for social change, are salient examples that have continuing relevance (Koerin, 2003). Other illustrations from the same era include social work contributions to the international movements against child labor, for mandatory school attendance, and for better working conditions and wages.

Compatible practice approaches were also prominent during the worldwide Great Depression of the 1930s. In the United States, the Rank and File Movement was dominated by public-sector workers who grappled with helping people to meet basic human needs. Mary van Kleeck, working both within that movement and outside of it, was perceived as a radical social worker of the period (Selmi & Hunter, 2001), as was Bertha Capen Reynolds (Freedberg, 1986; Reynolds, 1934/1982). Like Freire, both women identified with organized labor and sought structural social changes to advance the interests of working people (Dunn, 1998; Shefner-Rogers et al., 1998).

### Strengths and Empowerment

Freire's contributions are particularly relevant to contemporary social work based on strengths and empowerment perspectives, and it is there that his ideas have had the greatest impact on mainstream social work. Although

Simon (1994) traces the roots of empowerment-based practice to much earlier periods, Solomon (1976) probably introduced the language of empowerment to the profession. Writing soon after Freire's first published works became available in translation, Solomon (1976) did not cite Freire or appear to draw from his concepts in her early work on black empowerment. However, the relevance of Freire's ideas is clear, and later contributors to the literature on empowerment-based practice do make the connection with him explicit (e.g. Brenton, 1994; Lee, 2001; Mancoske & Hunzeker, 1990; Reisch et al., 1981; Simon, 1994).

Theories of power, including critical theory, underlie empowerment-based practice approaches designed to address inequities. According to Lee (2001), "The radical pedagogy of Freire is an underpinning of empowerment practice in social work [citations omitted]. Freire's notion of the dialogical process is particularly relevant. . . ." (p. 36–37). Reisch and colleagues (1981) make a similar point: "Thus, conscientization and animation provide the theoretical basis for a new social work curriculum which focuses on empowerment as part of the generic base of training" (p. 117).

Strengths and empowerment-based approaches span the direct and community practice of social work.

### Community-based Participatory Practice and Research

It is unsurprising that some of the authors who appear in the literature review because they draw from Freire's work (e.g., Carroll & Minkler, 2000) are also in the forefront of advancing community-based participatory research (CBPR; e.g., Minkler & Wallerstein, 2008). Minkler often writes from a health care perspective, a field that has pioneered CBPR and related community-based research initiatives, including empirically grounded interventions such as the Communities that Care Prevention System (e.g., Hawkins, 2011).

Ledwith and Springett (2010), although not social workers, also apply Freire's thought extensively in a book recently published in the United Kingdom that has high relevance for community-level intervention: *Participatory Practice: Community-based Action for Transformative Change*. Like social work faculty at the Warwick School in the 1970s and 1980s, these authors, with disciplinary roots in geography and education draw from the philosophies of both Freire and Gramsci. They explain:

Freire's thinking was also instrumental in the participatory action research movement, which challenged the controlling assumptions of traditional research and its role in reinforcing the dominant interest in society. . . . It offered an eclectic range of methods within an action research approach that involved understanding and working with people in a process of mutual research, of action and reflection as a cycle of co-creating knowledge and acting together to transform situations (Ledwith & Springett, 2010, p. 22).

## Social Development

Another macro-application of Freire's concepts that has close ties to participatory research and practice is social development, which seeks to make social and economic opportunities more generally available both in the developing world and in disempowered communities in Western society. In the context of developing societies, Midgley and Tang (2001) emphasize the goal of "developmental welfare," including "the creation of organizational arrangements at the national level that harmonize economic and social policies within a comprehensive commitment to sustainable and people-centered development" (p. 246). It is not surprising that social development is one of the goals of the Paulo Freire Institute (Instituto Paulo Freire, n.d.) at some of its more than 90 sites, located predominately in the developing world.

Although social work in postindustrial Western countries historically has not emphasized social development as a method of practice, exceptions surfaced in the review of literature drawing from Freire (e.g., Juliá & Kondrat, 2005). On a global level, social development is a major influence in the profession, as illustrated by the Global Agenda on Social Work and Social Development (International Federation of Social Workers, 2010) adopted in Hong Kong at the recent World Joint Conference of the International Federation of Social Workers, the International Association of Schools of Social Work, and the International Council on Social Welfare.

It is unfortunate that social workers writing in English-language journals have drawn in only limited ways from Freire, a mentor who has shaped practice in many other disciplines and regions. However, through Freire's influence on empowerment-based practice and other compatible social work intervention models, such as community-based participatory practice and research and social development, social workers can become more salient in the lives of those with whom they engage for personal and social change.

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