

PERSPECTIVES

TOWARD A FREIRIAN APPROACH TO COUNSELLING

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Abstract

This article articulates a Freirian framework for counselling and provides detailed suggestions on how such counselling might proceed. It is based on Freirian theory as well as on the author's own attempts to operate as a Freirian counsellor and to teach Freirian counselling. It is predicated on the position that:

1. Oppression and the internalization of oppression invariably contribute to the problems which people have in living.
2. Adult educators should alter their approach to counselling in order to be congruent with adult education's liberatory mandate.

The significance for counselling of such Freirian concepts as "oppression", "internalized oppression", and "dialogical learning", are explored in detail. Examples of concrete interventions are provided.

Résumé

Cet article montre en quoi le cadre référentiel de Freire peut être utilisé dans l'exercice de la fonction conseil en éducation des adultes. Il fournit également des indications précises quant à la manière de procéder. L'article s'inspire de la théorie de Freire ainsi que des expériences de l'auteure comme conseillère de type «freirien» et comme enseignante de cette approche. Deux considérations essentielles militent en faveur d'une telle approche:

1. l'oppression et surtout l'intégration qui en est faite à un niveau personnel contribuent invariablement aux problèmes que les individus rencontrent dans leur vie.
2. les éducatrices et les éducateurs d'adultes doivent changer leur approche de la fonction conseil s'ils veulent rester congruents face au mandat de libération que leur impartit l'éducation des adultes.

Les concepts d'«oppression», d'«oppression internalisée» et d'«apprentissage dialogique» sont examinés en détail de même que leur signification en regard de l'exercice de la fonction conseil. Des exemples concrets d'interventions de type «freirien» sont également apportés.

La signification par le conseil de ces concepts Freirien comme «oppression», «oppression internée», et «éducation dialogique» sont sondés en détail. Des exemples concrets d'interventions thérapeutiques sont fournies.

Introduction

Counselling/therapy is a personal learning process into which adult learners known as “clients” enter in the interests of achieving a greater understanding of their selves-in-the-world and to find ways to improve their overall situation. It is intentional adult learning which includes and enhances self-direction. As such, counselling fits with the overall aim of adult education.

Counselling has long been considered a mode of adult education and courses on counselling are included in adult education curricula. I in no way disagree with this inclusion. There is, nonetheless, a serious problem with the nature of the counselling courses offered. To date, they have focussed on approaches which are individualistic and psychologistic. The implicit assumption underlying these approaches is that if people individually access their inner strength and learn a few neutral and time-honoured communication skills, they will become free souls who can more-or-less do/have what they want.

A case in point is the course called “Foundations of Adult Counselling” offered by the Adult Education Department at The Ontario Institute

for Studies in Education. In the early years this course covered a number of general skills assumed to be neutral, while focussing on three modalities—gestalt, Rogerian, and rational-emotive.¹ Whatever value these modalities may have, and I do not deny that they have value, all of them are politically problematic. Rational-emotive therapy, not only does not address the problems presented by systemic oppression, it teaches people that their situation is not so bad. If you think that your situation is awful, rational-emotive therapy tells clients, this is only because you are engaged in “crooked thinking”. Gestalt trivializes the significance of external obstacles, asking clients to replace phrases like “I can’t” with “I won’t” as if human difficulties could all be swept away by an act of will. Rogerian, correspondingly, not only assumes that it is possible to be neutral and nondirective but that clients need only get in touch with their feelings in the presence of an empathic genuine counsellor to lead happy and fulfilling lives.² More recent course outlines are similarly problematic. The reading list for the 1988 summer outline, for example, does not contain a single politically-aware text; and the exercises and assignments do not incorporate political analysis.³ And while the winter 1990 outline contains a statement referring to issues of power, that statement does not appear to shape the overall conceptualization of the course.⁴

I do not doubt that the counselling featured here can facilitate certain types of empowerment and that we can legitimately draw on them. Their value, notwithstanding, the individualizing and psychologizing of human problems which is fundamental to them and the “neutralizing” of communication and other skills are at odds with adult education’s fuller commitment to human liberation and empowerment. It clashes more particularly with the knowledge of oppression, internalized oppression, and hegemony which adult educators like Freire have brought to us. The direction is clear. We need more politicizing texts and assignments. More particularly, though, as adult educators who are doing counselling, we need more politically-informed approaches.

There are a number of politically-informed counselling approaches and/or frameworks for us to draw upon, such as feminist counselling, and radical therapy.⁵ I would like us to use these more. At the same time, they have an intrinsic limitation for us. Arising out of psychology—not adult education—they do not have a fully developed adult learning perspective although they clearly facilitate empowering adult learning.

A still more congruent source for us are politically-informed adult education theories and praxis itself. By developing counselling theory and approaches out of adult education theorizing and practice, we can at once develop congruent practice and make our own unique contribution to counselling theory. It is to this area, accordingly, which I have been turning. More particularly, for many years now, as a therapist and educator, I have been attempting to develop and teach an approach to counselling based on the work of adult educator Paulo Freire.

Significantly, while this source has been more or less ignored by adult educators, structuralists from other areas have begun discussing the possibility of Freirian-based counselling. Social work professor David Webb and psychologist Alfred Alschuler, for example, have written articles suggesting that Freirian principles have relevance for counselling.⁶ To date, however, no one has articulated a Freirian counselling framework or provided substantial direction for Freirian-based counselling. The purpose of this article is to begin providing that framework and that direction.

What follows is an articulation of a Freirian framework for counselling and suggestions on how to proceed. It is written for adult educators generally, for counsellors who are already political, and for counsellors who simply find existing approaches insufficient when dealing with certain oppressive situations. It is intended as a framework—not as something which rules out the selective incorporation of less political approaches. It has relevance to *all* clients.

The framework and the suggestions provided are adaptations of a Freirian theory and practice and arise out of my own attempts to operate as a Freirian counsellor. They are not intended as a final statement on Freirian counselling. Hopefully, however, they provide direction and will help facilitate more truly empowering counselling.

Key Freirian Terms

The human being's ontological vocation, says Freire, is "to name the world in order to change the world."⁷ Our calling insofar as we are human beings, Freire is saying, is to transform the world. We do this by reflecting on the world, making new choices, renaming the world in accordance with our vision and our choices, and acting in ways which allow us to "real-ize" our choices. The dialectical movement

between reflecting/naming, and acting is called *praxis*. Our *power* is our ability to name and to transform. Another ontological obligation is to *humanize* the world. We humanize the world insofar as we create a world in which more and more people have the power to name and to transform. We *dehumanize or oppress* insofar as we rob others of their power to choose, imposing our names and our choices upon them.

Systemic oppression exists insofar as a few, known as *elites*, systemically impose their names and choices on others. People are dominated, not only by the acts, but even more fundamentally by the words/views of the oppressor. The world view of the elite is so embedded into the fabric of social life that it ends up looking like the *only* or the *one objective* way of seeing the world. This domination by world view is known as "hegemony". Oppressed people's internalization of this world view is known as "internalized oppression".

The elite typically see themselves as kind and charitable people, attempting to help disadvantaged and supposedly unskilled and marginal groups. The help which they offer is itself oppressive. They set up programs intended to impart allegedly neutral skills. The conceptualization of the skills and the programs are predicated on the elite myths. The training in question, accordingly, serves to further camouflage the reality of oppression. Freire calls it "domesticating education". Correspondingly, he calls the depositing of skills and concepts into people's heads "banking education". Freire contrasts banking education which objectifies people to *dialogical* education or learning which addresses people as subjects. Dialogue is typified by mutual respect, love, and mutual analysis or "co-investigation" of people's lived experience.

Freirian facilitators are adult educators who assist in the struggle for liberation. Facilitation is predicated on dialogue, co-investigation, and mutual praxis. Gaining a critical analysis and understanding of the world generally and one's situation in particular is the focus of the learning; and the ongoing learning process which is involved is called "conscientization".

The General Freirian Counselling Framework

Freirian counselling begins with an understanding of the pervasiveness of oppression and hegemony and the roles which these play in the seemingly individual problems which clients bring to counselling/therapy. The Freirian counsellor, essentially, brings critical awareness and conscientization to the counselling sessions. She/he is very similar to the radical therapist. The Freirian counsellor, however, does not emphasize some oppressions over others as radical therapists often do, is more open to individual work, and unapologetically believes in counselling and the individual learning which is involved.⁸ By contrast, while sharing a concern for the client's well-being with the conventional therapist, the Freirian counsellor differs substantially from the conventional counsellor. While the conventional counsellor's mandate is to help the client *adapt to*, and/or, if humanistic, to *thrive in* this oppressive society of ours, the Freirian counsellor's mandate is overall client empowerment which facilitates or is at least compatible with the humanization of the world. It is to help facilitate learning which is at once highly personal and political. It is to help the client gain a critical awareness of her/his situation and to more effectively cope/resist. This does not mean either denying the existence of existential human dilemmas such as mortality and death of loved ones or assuming some simplistic equation such as: the greater the oppression, the greater the trauma. Nor does it mean doing intellectual work at the expense of emotional work or ignoring or misinterpreting problems which are less politically-based. It means, rather, a recognition that oppression and the internalization of myths *to varying degrees* always underlie and/or contribute to personal distress and fundamentally incorporating this understanding and this focus into the counselling work.

Such a focus, it should be pointed out, is important even when working with people who are predominantly members of the elite, for all people are at once oppressors and oppressed. Oppression and lies, moreover, stunt and injure the growth and the humanness even of oppressors.

There are many forms which this focus can take. While interacting with a client with a drinking problem, the Freirian counsellor for instance might be on the alert for race oppression/hegemony. A Freirian counsellor might directly advocate for some clients, understanding that their oppression is severe and that it is naive to

assume that their situation can just go “on hold” while they learn communication skills which may be totally alien to their culture. When working with a depressed woman, a Freirian counsellor would look for sexism and would work along with the client to co-investigate the impact of sexism on her life.

A Freirian and a conventional counsellor would likely understand and work very differently with same sex partners with relationship difficulties. The conventional counsellor could easily believe that the problem is one of communications and so start teaching the couple to use “I” statements. The Freirian counsellor, being on the alert for internalized oppression, is more likely to recognize, centre in on, and co-investigate the overt and covert threats and myths which the couple has faced, the isolation, the invisibility, and the impact of these on the relationship, and to co-strategize ways to resist. I am not saying that it is always inappropriate to work on communications and that we do not need to include this dimension. However, the political context and dynamic nonetheless needs to be recognized and focussed upon.

The Freirian counsellor works with oppression/therapy formulas similar to those developed by radical therapy. The radical therapy formulas for oppression and overcoming oppression are:

- | | |
|----|---|
| A1 | Oppression + Lies + Isolation = Alienation |
| 2 | Action + Awareness + Contact → Power |
| B1 | Oppression + Awareness = Anger |
| 2 | Awareness + Contact → Liberation ⁹ |

“A1” at once covers oppression *per se*, and the elite myths which underpin it. Significantly, as Freire and other structuralists have pointed out, it is not simply the reality of oppression which keeps people down; it is being lied to and believing those lies. If women were told, “You are being enslaved and treated like objects; we men want this and we have the power,” women would not be so confused or undermined. It is when people are oppressed while told that they are being treated well that oppression becomes internalized and hard to approach. Isolation, correspondingly, keeps the oppressed from pooling their concerns; it keeps them from reflecting together on their lived experience, and accordingly, it keeps them from both renaming the world and acting together to transform it.

Formulas “B” and “A2” specify what is needed if empowerment is to occur and what any counsellor concerned with empowerment must facilitate. A counsellor concerned with empowerment must not simply help clients become more aware, but, as the formulas indicate, should help clients move toward changing the oppressive situation. In discussing praxis, Freire covers and further explicates the awareness/action dialectic which is implicit here. As the formula suggests and as Freire’s discussion of community makes clear, contact with other members of the oppressed community is key to praxis. The Freirian counsellor, accordingly, is called upon to help guide people toward contact which facilitates communal understanding and action. At the same time, an emphasis on the client’s own individual life should be maintained in the counselling session, for politically informed counselling—not community development—is the counsellor’s mandate.

These formulas provide helpful guidance, and the Freirian counsellor may legitimately use them. While being fully compatible with Freire, at the same time, the radical therapy formulas miss out on aspects which are essential to Freirian counselling. Particularly important in this regard is the emphasis on dialogue, on reflection, and on themes. The following formula, which I have used successfully with my classes, offers more Freirian-specific guidance.

Freirian Counselling Focus and Freirian Counselling Relationship

DIALOGUE

Client’s
Thematic
Universe

REFLECTION

ACTION

As the diagram illustrates, it is not just any kind of “contact” which is sought but dialogical contact which gives rise to dialogical learning. This means that banking education is out, as is the nondirective. It means that the focus must not simply be internal, but must at the same time be external, for Freirian dialogue is an encounter between people mediated by the world in order to name/transform the world.

It means that a focus on feeling, while important, cannot upstage "bringing to word". It means that counsellor and client must be Subjects together, both actively bringing their understanding of the world into the counselling session, both responsible for negotiating the sessions, both able to challenge the other, and both concerned with co-investigating the client's world or thematic universe. It means, moreover, that not simply any type of awareness is required. It is awareness which is reflective, constitutes critical apprehension, and unearths opportunities for/culminates in action. And it means focussing upon and challenging the lies/myths which the client has internalized in the past and continues to internalize. For it is internalized oppression, buoyed up by external oppression, which constitutes the subjective obstacle to empowerment.

The grounding in ontological vocation serves to humanize the process. It places as well one final fundamental obligation on the counsellor. As a human being with the ontological vocation to humanize the world, the Freirian counsellor is obliged to establish/maintain solidarity with the oppressed, and, what goes along with this, be actively engaged in her/his own personal conscientization process. This obligation, as it happens, is not only existential but also *pragmatic*. Counsellors' very capacity to assist others in the movement toward conscientization, after all, depends on being immersed in and fundamentally committed both to their own conscientization and to the larger human struggle for liberation. The upshot is that the Freirian counsellor must be actively co-investigating and combatting oppression outside as well as inside the counselling room.

Concrete Suggestions on How to Proceed

If a dialogical relationship is to be established, it is vital that the counsellor bring caring, respect, and mutuality to the relationship. Freirian counsellors share throughout the counselling processes as needed, and, indeed, begin by sharing. Counsellors should initially tell clients something about themselves. By giving clients a sheet with information about their background and training, and the counselling approach used, the counsellor can additionally demystify the process and help clients make informed choices. It is important as well to actively encourage clients to ask whatever questions they need to ask and to mutually plan and negotiate sessions. While counselling is never an equal relationship, power-sharing of this sort

is absolutely necessary if empowerment generally and dialogue particularly is to transpire. Throughout the session, moreover, the counsellor is called upon to seriously consider the client's point-of-view and to respond honestly, whether the response involves agreeing with or problematizing (presenting as a problem) that point of view.

Solidarity in relation to individual clients means joining with the client against an elite and/or an oppressive society. Among other things, this means not oppressing them yourself by manipulating them, or charging unaffordable fees, or lying to them. Examples of oppressive lies which counsellors often tell clients and that it is important to avoid include: "You can do anything you want to if you really put your mind to it."; "If you are being hurt this way, and you continue to stay in the relationship, you must want to be hurt." And "you could afford to pay seventy dollars a week for therapy if you had your priorities straight". Solidarity, more generally, means validating their anger, even when it seems misdirected just so long as it is not violent and is not sub-oppression. Freirian solidarity begins with the counsellor identifying with clients in their oppression.

It is, of course, easier for counsellors to identify with clients when they are subject to the same oppression as the client. Where the client suffers from many oppressions or some formidable oppression like racism which is not shared by the counsellor, the client might be better off with a different counsellor and the issue, accordingly, should at the very least be raised. Where the client chooses to stay, counsellors are called upon to learn more about the client's culture and oppression. The client can and should be turned to as a learning resource in this regard. It would be inadequate and indeed oppressive, however, were the client to become the only such learning resource.

Whether oppression is shared or not, solidarity and identification need to be expressed. Solidarity can be voiced by expressing honest outrage at what has been done to this person in particular and to their peer group or community more generally. Where oppressions are shared, "we" statements can be very forceful and, indeed, empowering. A woman counsellor, for example, responding to a woman who has been saddled with most of the cleaning, might say "Yes, men are always using us that way, aren't they?" Where there is no shared oppression, the counsellor might search through her/his own oppression, looking for similarities to serve as touchstones.

Freirian mutuality and solidarity in themselves help clients learn about their own oppression and how they have internalized that oppression. More generally, Freirian counsellors help clients unearth and explore their oppressions by the questions which they ask and the statements which they make. As a Freirian counsellor, I typically make certain kinds of statements and ask certain kinds of questions. It is not so much that I follow a formula, for dialogue is more spontaneous than that, but there is an identifiable pattern which can be discerned and which I tend to keep tucked away at the back of my mind. Examples of questions and question combinations which facilitate the exploration of oppression include:

- What do you want? What stops you from getting it?
- This is an interesting setup that you've just described. Let me ask you, who wins and who loses if things are left this way?
- In whose interest is it that things are the way they are?

The "we" statements discussed before similarly help clients explore their thematic universe. Examples of other types of statements that help and are more challenging are:

- Your school accommodated white people's styles of learning just like everything else is arranged for whites. And it is not good enough.
- No, I don't find it surprising that you are depressed. And I don't think that it's because there's something wrong with you. Being yelled at by your office supervisor all day *is* depressing.

Questions and statements similarly are used to unearth and explore internalized oppression. The use of words like "myths", "lies" and "beliefs" help in identifying internalized oppression. Examples of questions and question combinations which facilitate the exploration cognitively and/or affectively are:

- So what are your family myths? ... How did these affect you?
- You must be believing something about yourself if you are taking these psychiatric drugs. What *do* you believe? ... *In whose interest is it that you believe that?*

An example of a more challenging statement is:

- I feel sad at what you are saying and angry at what has been done to you. You stay away from Natives because you think that you are bad, that it is the Native within that makes you bad. I don't think *you* are bad or that *Natives* are bad. Natives have been mistreated and lied to for years. What I see is someone who has been beaten by white stepparents and lied to ever since she was a child. And I would really like us to do something for that abused Native kid within.

As the above comments demonstrate, “political empathy” is part of the process and can be incorporated into the statements and the questions. Political empathy contrasts with the purely individualistic empathic remarks made by humanist counsellors and it can significantly contribute to the learning experience. As with other emphatic remarks, of course, political empathy must be genuine or it is itself a lie and constitutes oppression.

A vital part of exploring oppression and internalized oppression is helping clients distinguish between oppressors and helpers. Some of the questions already listed help clients identify oppressors—questions like “Who wins and who loses?” and “In whose interest is it that you believe what you believe?” Making these distinctions and identifying oppressors becomes harder when oppressors masquerade as friends—when there are people around, that is, who are, essentially, *false friends*. There are three major modes of false befriending. Freirian facilitators need to be aware of all three, be on the alert for them and to help clients identify and explore instances of them in their lives.

The first of these Freire himself comments on, giving it the name “false generosity”.¹⁰ It is typified by the federal government which showers money on government-run programs for Natives while giving almost nothing to Native-run programs and making sure that Natives remain poor and powerless. Politically aware people tend to be familiar with this mode, and politically aware counsellors, correspondingly, are likely to be fairly astute when confronted with it.

The second type, I call the “exceptional mode” It is a much harder one for both counsellors and clients to identify and explore, yet is an enormously important one to focus upon, given how insidious it is.

The “exceptional mode” of befriending consists of befriending someone while rejecting their peers. It is, essentially, befriending someone on the grounds that they are not like the rest *that they are somehow an exception*. An example would be the misogynous male with a very close woman friend whom he keeps praising for not being like other women. Unlike other women, he tells her, she can actually think; she does not keep bringing in emotions; and she does not get hysterical. She cherishes the friendship and in the process becomes increasingly male-identified and contemptuous of other women.

The third mode of false befriending, which I am calling the “liberal mode” is the hardest of all to identify and is the most common. It consists of accepting oppressed people as “just like the rest of us”, with the implicit understanding being that *they must act accordingly*. A case in point would be a straight person who sees gays as “all right”, and has a gay friend who is accepted with the implicit, more-or-less “unreflected on” understanding that the gay friend not publicly flirt with people of the same sex, not discuss her/his own partnership at any length, and not mention heterosexual privilege.

What specific actions will arise out of the counselling and feed back into the counselling will be specific to each client and will depend on the individual client’s situation, preferences, and readiness. Counsellors can help clients choose new actions by inviting reflection on previous action, by asking action-oriented questions, and by making suggestions. Examples of questions which facilitate empowering choices are:

- What could you do to equalize this relationship?
- What needs to be done here, if you are to get more power?

Concrete suggestions which counsellors might make range from challenging/changing friends to “coming out” to parents, to pointing out instances of subtle discrimination, to co-organizing a demonstration, to changing jobs, to forming a radical caucus at work, to suing.

Insofar as knowledge of resources and of rights is essential for many of the more overtly political courses of actions, it is important that counsellors be conversant with the law and be aware of legal resources, successful political strategies, and activist and other

relevant groups in the community. It is vital, correspondingly, that this knowledge be shared with clients.

The very process of identifying tasks can help clients move toward other members of their oppressed groups and more fully embrace their community. This movement occurs as well in the process of unearthing and challenging internalized oppression. Particularly useful in this regard may be questions like:

- In whose interest is it that you have no close women friends?
- Who wins and who loses if you stay isolated this way?

Insofar as a fuller movement into the community is appropriate and is to occur, the counsellor may additionally be called upon to help clients explore the enormous limitations both of individual praxis and of the dialogue/reflecting which has been done in the counselling itself.

What goes along with this is that counsellors must genuinely be willing to relinquish their privileged position with their clients. Gradually, that is, counsellors must be willing to step aside as primary mentor and as “significant other” and let other people in.

Termination may be slightly easier for the Freirian than the conventional counsellor, since the Freirian counsellor is always in the process of helping the client move toward others. Freirian counselling too, however, involves a strong bonding, and so the Freirian counsellor too can easily end up not seeing when it is time for the client to move on, especially where clients themselves do not raise the issue. Raising the issues of dependency and the problems of termination from the very beginning is helpful. Counsellor and client, additionally, might agree to check in with each other periodically to evaluate the counselling and to honestly question whether or not ongoing sessions remain in the client’s best interest.

Concluding Remarks

This article is part of my ongoing effort to develop an approach to counselling which is based on politically-informed adult education theory and is compatible with our liberatory mandate. I have tried to be at once theoretic and concrete; I hope that the article is helpful.

Reference Notes

1. See, for instance, Harvey Silvers, Course Outline for "Foundations in Adult Counselling" (unpublished outline, Toronto: OISE, 1978).
2. For evidence of these deficiencies, see the sections on each of these modalities in *Current Psychotherapies*, ed. Raymond Corsini (Itasca, Illinois: Peacock, 1978).
3. See David Abbey, Course Outline for "Foundations in Adult Counselling" (unpublished outline, Toronto: OISE, 1988).
4. Margaret Brillinger, Course Outline for "Foundations in Adult Counselling" (unpublished outline, Toronto: OISE, 1990).
5. For good introductions to radical therapy and to feminist therapy, see Jerome Agel, *Rough Times* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1978) and Miriam Greenspan, *A New Approach to Women and Therapy* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983) respectively.
6. See David Webb, "Social Work and Critical Consciousness: Rebuilding Orthodoxy," *Issues in Social Work Education*, 5 (1985): 89-102 and Alfred Alschuler, "Creating a World Where it is Easier to Love: Counselling Applications of Paulo Freire's Theories," *Journal of Counselling and Development*, 64 (1986): 492-499.
7. Elaborations on each of the Freirian concepts discussed in this section may be found in Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, ed. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: The Seabury Press, 1970).
8. Radical therapy tended to emphasize class and gender over race. Note, in this regard, the paucity of references to race in *Rough Times*.
9. See Hogie Wyckoff, *Solving Problems Together* (New York: Grove Press, 1980): 14-19.
10. For Freire on false generosity, see *Pedagogy*, 28ff.