Cracks in the Culture of Silence – and Beyond
Adapted from Paulo Freire and others
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Introduction

The writings of Brazilian adult educator Paulo Freire (1921-1997) exert considerable influence on social development theory and practice. This is a brief and partial adaptation of some of his work, focusing on the transition from what he called "structures of domination" toward what some other authors, such as Riane Eisler, call "the partnership way" – a social structure which does not have a dominator-dominated relationship among its various groups. The work helps to understand the conditions of populations in societies that are at various points along this trajectory.

Freire thought that there were two types of education – that it was either for liberation or domestication, and that the former helped people critically analyze and change the power structures in which they lived, while the latter did not. In societies where Freire-influenced "conscientization" literacy campaigns took place (such as Chile before the election of the Allende regime) the masses learned about their structures of domination, and sought to become more fully involved in determining the direction of the society – they acquired voice and wanted to make changes in their social structures. This was one step in the process of changing the society's power structure.

There are several stages in this transition, which can be described as the "culture of silence," a complex "transitive" stage, and finally, "partnership" or integration.

Culture of Silence

In extreme dominator-dominated social structures, such as in some Latin American societies in which he lived, Freire says that the dominated – the poor and powerless – exist in a culture of silence. In these societies, there is an elite that determines the course of the system (they have voice), while there is a mass that does not. They do not have voice in terms of contributing to the society's direction, and hence live in a culture of silence. There is a one-way flow of influence across the boundary between the elite and the mass, with the elite exerting influence on the mass, but not vice-versa. This is termed "inauthentic" communication, in that it serves to maintain the distinction between the elite and the mass, rather than recognize their common humanity.

In the culture of silence the dominated cannot exercise their natural desire to exert influence on the direction of the society, and hence this energy is released within the mass itself, contributing to conflicts among the powerless. Examples are black-on-black violence in the ghetto, cattiness among women in the secretarial pool, or conflict among siblings in unhealthy over-controlled family contexts.

When members of the dominated class want to "get ahead" they tend to do so in terms of the culture of the elite: they adopt their modes of dress and speech, drive their kinds of cars, and acquire other trappings of success in the terms of the dominator

segment of society. However, as they do so they risk becoming alienated from other members of their home culture, who tend to reject them as having changed and become "too good" or "uppity" – perhaps as a defense mechanism to avoid recognizing the reality of their own ghetto-like situation. This rejection contributes to difficulties experienced by foreign-trained locals in developing countries who return home with a desire to serve their people and find themselves the target of abuse and facing barriers to becoming productively engaged in improving their society.

Achieving success in terms of attempting to enter the culture of the elite involves identity change, emerging from a dominated culture. The natural tendency to preserve the integrity of one's own culture, or structure of meaning, can provoke profound discomfort, in some case akin to the emotions linked to bereavement, where there is a deep sense of loss of what was once familiar. This resistance to identity change can in part account for puzzling phenomena such as the reluctance of women to leave abusive relationships: at some level, possibly unconsciously, they may think that is better to stay in the dominated trap they know than to leave and try to make their way in the freedom they have never before experienced. In other situations some members of the "underclass" who gain access to the elite sabotage their success so they "go back to where they belong." Examples abound in the military where the promotions of non-commissioned officers go wrong so they are demoted to their former rank where they are more comfortable.

One of the other characteristics of the culture of silence is that its artists tend to portray an idealized or mythological state of the society, rather than its reality – their paintings, for example, often are of a peaceful and noble past, not the poverty-stricken or violent present.

One of the more tragic elements of the culture of silence is that the dominated often internalize the oppressor – they become their own dominators, and behave toward themselves and each other much as the oppressor behaves toward them. This internalization is often created and maintained by the education system that is controlled by the elite which portrays the social stratification as the natural order of things. It is a convenient situation for the elite, in that the masses keep themselves imprisoned in a powerless structure with internal conflicts that they themselves help create and sustain.

Cracks in the Culture of Silence – Cultures in Transition

Freire uses the term "transitive" to describe social structures that are emerging from the culture of silence. He has two sub-categories, one being "naïve transitive" and the other being more solidly a transition toward a fundamental shift in the structure of relationships between an elite and a powerless mass.

One of the key elements of this transition is that the members of the mass begin to recognize their common situation and reduce the internal conflicts that keep them from progressing. Examples include the "black is beautiful" movement in the US, women's liberation, and the Solidarity movement in Eastern Europe. Rather than dissipating their energies on internal conflicts, the masses begin to speak with one

voice – their authentic voice, not the language of the elite that has served to maintain the structures of domination.

Because they are speaking with one voice their communication can penetrate the one-way boundary that separates the elite from the mass: the powerless begin to exert themselves, in their own ways, and demand to have their say in defining the direction of the society. A sign of this is that the artists begin portraying the society's reality rather than its mythology – they express what they see, and put it up for others to see as well, regardless of how it is likely to be received. Some pay a heavy price for their authentic artistic expression, but it is a signal that the society is in transition toward a new order.

This penetration by the unified voices of the mass produces cracks in the culture of silence which threaten the integrity of the structure of domination. The elite respond by doing what they can to re-impose the culture of silence. They bring the tanks into Tiananmen Square, in Chile the Pinochet regime kills Allende, in Mexico demonstrating students are massacred before the 1968 Olympics, and in many societies civil society activists and union representatives are muzzled. The elite does what it can to keep the power structures in place.

However, once a mass becomes relatively unified and begins to have a sense of its common condition, its movement toward a new power structure is inexorable. The transition is no longer naïve. It may be slowed down, but cannot be stopped, and sooner or later new structures emerge. Chile elected as its President the daughter of a victim of Pinochet's torture machine, social media unified middle eastern youth to produce the Arab Spring and sweep away seemingly permanent regimes, and the Green and Orange revolutions in Iran and the Ukraine have demonstrated their determination to change their societies.

The transition can be chaotic and there may be reversals, and in some situations the process can be hijacked by groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Putin and his ex-KGB cohorts in Russia and Eastern Europe, who take advantage of the instability and fragility of the emerging order to install new structures of domination. However, once a powerless mass has had a taste of freedom and has glimpsed the reality of authentic participation in influencing the course of its social system, it is never the same. The women and men who collaborated in Tahrir Square in Egypt's Arab Spring are unlikely to forget that experience, even in the face of the rampant sexual violence that emerged following that golden time, and will demand the society addresses issues that were formerly not part of everyday social discourse. The culture of silence may be re-imposed, but its days are numbered.

Toward Authentic Partnership

Paulo Freire's analysis of power structures seems to stop somewhere in the transitive phase, perhaps because he saw few examples that extended beyond that point in transformation of social relationships. Riane Eisler's work on *The Partnership Way* points to social structures that do not have a dominator-dominated dynamic. Her historical research identified ancient societies, such as in Minoa, where there was equality between men and women, with a flourishing civilization as a result. Also,

there is evidence from the corporate world that collaboration rather than conflict between labour and business owners, such as in Germany, produces significant benefits. Norway's experience in forcing its corporations to balance gender on their boards of directors has proven the benefits of authentic partnerships in business. Societies that value diversity, and work teams that seek out the views of previously-silent members have proven to be more productive than systems controlled by elites who do not fully engage the marginalized in their affairs. Although it is difficult to achieve, authentic partnership, where all have voice, produces benefits at all levels.

Integration – the Challenge

One can say there are three kinds of power structures in inter-group relationships: accommodation, assimilation and integration, each with its own types of influences and changes in the groups involved.

In *accommodation* the groups coexist, often with some interaction at their boundaries, but there is relatively little intergroup influence or change required within each group. An example could be a relatively closed and self-sufficient ethnic or cultural enclave in a larger society, such as some Hutterite communities in North America.

In *assimilation* there is an interaction of two groups of unequal size or power. The weaker group changes or loses something to be part of the relationship, while the more powerful group is relatively unchanged. An example could be the so-called "melting pot" in the US, where minorities are expected to give up their distinctive characteristics to be part of the larger society. The weaker party loses something while the more powerful party is relatively unchanged and imposes its ways on the other. The unequal power relationship described earlier between the mass and the elite in the culture of silence is in this category.

Integration implies that both parties give up something to form a new third entity that combines the characteristics of both. This is the more equitable and sustainable arrangement, but it is also the most difficult to achieve, largely because it requires identity change on the part of the larger or stronger body, as well as in the weaker entity, to form a real partnership. Members of powerful groups are not accustomed to power being exercised by members of groups they previously dominated, and members of weaker groups sometimes have difficulty authentically expressing themselves in the presence of those to whom they traditionally gave way, and taking on the responsibility that comes with acquiring power. However, when they are put in a position where they are obliged to interact to achieve a common objective, such as the situation in Norway where the government imposed a 50-50 gender quota on corporations' boards of directors, they soon develop new protocols which can draw on the better characteristics of all parties. The key is realization that there is an interdependent relationship, that each group needs the other to accomplish their goals.

The model can be described as "unity in diversity" – where the varied characteristics of each group are valued and combined with the others to produce a better result than any could achieve on their own. This integration is the ultimate destiny of power relationships that start to change when there begin to be cracks in the culture of silence, as indicated in the following painting by a courageous Afghan woman.

Yammer
Farahnaz Bakhshi, Afghanistan
Cracks in the culture of silence, a sign of hope.

Purchased in 2011 at a showing of Afghan women's art at the Canadian embassy, Kabul.

Sources

The concepts in this paper are integrated from a number of sources as well as from my experience with management consulting, intercultural relations and international development. The sources include:

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