# The stark reality of the "White Savior" complex and the need for critical consciousness: A document analysis of the early journals of a Freirean educator

While the Anglophone academic literature has long engaged in analysis of the role of privilege in the work of educators in the global North, this article represents an initial foray into such analysis in non-formal educational settings in the global South. Through a cultural-textual document analysis of 12 months of personal journal entries written by the author while working as a Freirean adult educator in Mozambique, this article documents a lack of recognition of social privilege exhibited by the author in these entries, which is here referred to as the White Savior complex. This article also documents how the pursuit of what Freire calls critical consciousness can effectively problematize this privileged mindset.

Keywords: Paulo Freire; critical consciousness; privilege; document analysis; self-study

From a Freirean perspective, there is a great deal of personal transformation that must be undergone by socially privileged individuals who decide to join in progressive work towards radical social action alongside marginalized groups or peoples. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paulo Freire first identifies where such individuals are coming from in their upbringing, drawing a clear line between those who are benefitted by structural social inequalities and those who are the victims thereof, calling them (respectively) the oppressor and the oppressed. To Freire, "the oppressor consciousness tends to transform everything surrounding it into an object of its domination. The earth, property, production, the creations of people, people themselves, time—everything is reduced to the status of objects at its disposal" (1970a, 58).

Freire has often warned that such individuals can reinforce the violent dialectic between the oppressors and the oppressed if they insist on their own leadership and the

implementation of their own ideas within the revolutionary struggles of the oppressed, failing to trust the capacity of those who have not received access to the same education and resources that they have enjoyed. As he states,

> Our converts, on the other hand, truly desire to transform the unjust order; but because of their background they believe that they must be the executors of the transformation. They talk about the people, but they do not trust them; and trusting the people is the indispensable precondition for revolutionary change. A real humanist can be identified more by his trust in the people, which engages him in their struggle, than by a thousand actions in their favor without that trust (Freire 1970a, 60).

As will be seen in this article, at least in my own case, Freire could not have more aptly described my privileged oppressor convert's mentality as I, years ago, first began working in international educational development.

In this article, I present a cultural-textual document analysis of 12 months of my personal fieldnotes and journals from this experience, in this case working with a non-formal adult education nonprofit in central Mozambique. I will show that in many ways, my personal experiences (and interpretations thereof) are a clear illustration of an inherently problematic lack of recognition of social privilege, which I here call *the White Savior complex*. I further argue, building upon my own experience, that the educational philosophy of Paulo Freire can effectively problematize this privileged mindset. More specifically, I argue that Freirean theory itself outlines a process of reflection and action (or praxis) that, by promoting continual self-evaluation in the pursuit of what Freire (1970a; 1970b; 1973) would call *critical consciousness*, can be effectively used by individuals and organizations to try to counter and mitigate the effects of privilege in work conducted by development practitioners, especially those who experience intersections of privilege on the basis of nationality, race, gender, and so forth.

**Setting: Comunidades de Poder in Mozambique**

During the 12 month time period under analysis in this article, I worked for an American-led public health nonprofit with ground operations based in Central Mozambique which I shall call Comunidades de Poder (hereafter referred to as CDP). CDP runs a Freirean-oriented adult literacy program focused on using literacy as a vehicle for community-based social change. CDP has drawn extensively on Freirean pedagogical methods in its educational programming, albeit through instructional materials produced by American development organizations that use Freirean methods separately from Freirean philosophy.

**Methodology**

This article is based on a document analysis of primary sources, in this case 12 months of fieldnotes and journal entries written by myself while working as an ethnographic researcher for CDP. In this article I analyze these fieldnote entries using cultural-textual interpretation (Geertz 1973; Greenblatt 1999), a technique in which data sources are used as texts to be analyzed so as to further understanding of the language and discourse that makes up a given cultural world. Within this Geertzian framework texts can be formal textualized objects like books, plays or manuscripts, but also personal writings like fieldnotes and journals. Throughout this article I will treat my journal entries and fieldnotes as texts in this sense, and mine them for the distinctive expressions and tropes that seem to reflect the organizational culture of CDP in which I was situated and my own thinking regarding development work, as well as my increasingly dissonant reactions to elements of that thinking as I delved into the writings of Paulo Freire[1].

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[1]  Many education scholars have utilized similar methodological approaches, referred to alternatively as "self-study" (Berry and Russell 2012; Bullough and Pinnegar 2001) or autoethnography (Berger & Ellis 2007;

Through this document analysis process, I will draw on the literature in critical discourse analysis, which I here use to examine the implicit meanings and assumptions inherent in my fieldnote entries and thus reveal the larger ideologies and social structures that inform them (Fairclough 2001; Phillips and Jorgenson 2002). I am particularly interested in interdiscursivity, a term used by Fairclough (2003) to refer to *orders* of discourse: in this case, the way in which my written discourse relates to and reflects larger cultural discourses that associate elements of my identity with power. More specifically, in my analysis I focus on the implicit meanings that are communicated through my word choice and my descriptions of conversational interactions between myself and CDP staff and program participants. These interactions reveal both the relations of power between these actors and my own understandings of those same dynamics.

Following this methodology, I will quote sections from my fieldnote entries and then analyze them using cultural-textual interpretation. These fieldnote entries are coded by date, using the month and date of each entry, labeled chronologically from the first month of this study onward. For example, a fieldnote with the parenthetical referent (1/24) would refer to a fieldnote written on the 24th day of the first month of this research project.

**White Savior complex**

As Freire states, "Functionally, oppression is domesticating" (1970a, 51). This statement applies to both oppressor and oppressed, in that both receive myriad messages justifying

Chang 2008). The term self-study is typically associated in the literature with the use of various potential sources of data, including journals, ethnographic fieldnotes, correspondence, and other personal writings (Bullough and Pinnegar 2001; Graham 1989). Autoethnography is commonly defined as the use autobiographical stories (Berger & Ellis 2007) or vignettes (Humphreys 2005), though these are not necessarily based in pre-written data sources.

their unequal placement within social hierarchies, messages which can make our social positionalities seem natural, or even deserved. For those from oppressor classes, Freire astutely notes that "the oppressors do not perceive their monopoly on having more as a privilege which dehumanizes others and themselves" (1970a, 59). For those Western oppressor class folk that seek out employment in development, this privilege often exhibits itself as a sense that we as Westerners have the unique power to uplift, edify, and strengthen: what I here refer to as the White Savior complex.

This idea that it is the role of the White outsider to "lift" the poor and oppressed in developing countries seems universal in the Western world and its thinking, with a continual reflection in literature (Cornett 2010) and film (Hughey 2010; Vera and Gordon 2003) from the colonial-age British novel (McInelly 2003) to the 2009 film *Avatar* (Cammarota 2011; Ketchum, Emrick and Peck 2011). As scholars like Sandy Grande (2003), Gayatri Spivak (1988) and bell hooks (2006) have pointed out, even much feminist and postcolonial thought produced by White scholars is open to critique for not fully acknowledging the continued benefits such critics gain from existent social structures due to their Whiteness, while also undertheorizing the role of Whiteness in colonial history (Grande 2003) and patriarchy (hooks 2006).

In the teacher education literature in the Anglophone countries of the global North, the unchallenged privilege held by White individuals has been thoroughly problematized (Hannan 1983; Ladson-Billings 1994; Sleeter 1993; Titone 1998; Zeichner 1995), with an entire field developing around critical studies of Whiteness (Lee 2005; Leonardo 2002; MacMullan, 2009; McIntosh 2004). In North America, multicultural education courses utilizing this literature have become a staple of teacher education programs (Larkin and

Sleeter 1995; Sleeter 1992; Sleeter and McClaren 1995), with the intent of helping White

in-service teachers unpack their privilege. However, a similarly thorough discussion of

privilege (in all its social, racial and national intersections) as it relates to international

development, and especially to the work of international education professionals, has yet

to be systematically undertaken in the comparative education literature. This article

represents an initial entry into this dearly needed conversation.

Within the larger literature on international development, several scholars have begun

to problematize the role of privilege among practitioners in international development

(Escobar 2004; Heron 2007). However, criticism of this White Savior complex has come

most recently and memorably to nonprofit international development work from Teju

Cole, who describes the privileged mentality he sees among well-meaning but naive

voices in international development. In Cole's words,

> One song we hear too often is the one in which Africa serves as a
> backdrop for white fantasies of conquest and heroism…. Africa has
> provided a space onto which white egos can conveniently be projected. It
> is a liberated space in which the usual rules do not apply: a nobody from
> America or Europe can go to Africa and become a godlike savior or, at the
> very least, have his or her emotional needs satisfied. Many have done it
> under the banner of "making a difference" (2012, 2).

In short, Cole (2012) argues that White development practitioners can easily overstate

their own relevance to the improvement of developing-world living conditions, seeing

themselves as uniquely qualified to bring necessary information and change to the global

poor. In my particular case, my White privilege was compounded by several other facets

of my personal identity: namely, my status as an upper-middle class young man in his

mid-20s with advanced degrees, as well as my organizational status at CDP as the

in-house researcher and academic "expert." These various intersections of privilege only

further compounded my own sense of entitlement and lack of recognition of my privilege,

making the process of seeking critical consciousness that I will describe here all the more

difficult, complex and (as will be seen hereafter) incomplete and continuous.

**Findings**

***Documenting the White Savior complex***

As much as I am embarrassed to admit it, this White Savior mentality was quite evident

early on in my personal writings as a development worker with CDP, as evidenced by the

following quotes:

> Tonight…[I felt] that same rush of optimism [I often feel] about … our
> ability, when mobilized and inspired, to defeat evil and empower the meek.
> (1/24)

> Today… it struck me how I've felt … about development principles and
> about sustainable ways to help….I wish that I could spread these truths
> and principles to everyone I know, and everyone I don't. (2/3)

In the first quote, my word choice leaves room for a number of questions. When I speak

about "our ability" to do these things, am I talking about employees of CDP, development

workers in general, Westerners as a group? The context of the post does not make clear

who the "we" is in this context, but it does seem clear that this "we" that includes myself

and others like me is separate from those that are receiving development assistance, or the

"meek" I refer to at the end of the sentence. The words used here set a clear power

differential between those who have power ("we" as Western development practitioners,

with the power to empower others) and those who don't (the "meek" that are in need of

empowerment). The implication is that the "we" in this quote, White Saviors like myself,

are uniquely positioned to defeat evil and empower the disempowered. Such reasoning

justifies our presence in development work.

As this second quote reveals, in my own mind I felt a drive to spread the "development principles" I had learned through my undergraduate studies and several months working in northeastern Brazil, which in my mind had the status of "truths." This level of surety in "truth" has a very religious quality to it, in that these truths seemed universal and absolute—I had learned them, and it was my responsibility to share them with people who had not yet heard them in this particular rural Mozambican context. This was hardly a unique position I found myself in—Manji and O'Coill (2002) provide compelling evidence that particularly in Sub-Saharan contexts, development-oriented nonprofits have come to occupy the same cultural niche previously occupied by Christian missionaries, sharing internationally-accepted principles of "good" development with the same religious zeal with which missionaries shared the tenets of Christianity. You can see this almost missionary flavor applied to development work in the second quote from my fieldnotes above—like thousands of development workers before me, it seems that I felt in part that I was in Mozambique to spread the Development Gospel, the absolute truths that apply as effective best practices throughout the world.

This positivist understanding that there is such a thing as absolute truth is nearly as prevalent in development thought as it is in religious philosophy, due to the heavy influence of modernization theory. In its beginnings in the mid-20th century, the development industry was inherently based upon modernization theory, or the notion that development at the national level is linear (Feinberg and Soltis 2004) and evolutionary (Scott 2011), with "the West [providing] the one and only rational model" of how development occurs (Harding 2011, 266). While competing theories of development have gained prominence throughout the latter half of the 20th century, such as dependency

theory and world systems theory, these competing theoretical orientations retain the same "basic language and assumptions" of modernization theory (Rust 1991), making their universal application equally problematic.

In the end, while explicit defenders of modernization theory are becoming fewer and fewer in number over time, "early modernization theory's conceptual foundations continue to have pervasive power" in how policy is formulated and projects are enacted (Scott 2011, 305). In the words of Escobar, the overlying "discourse of development" remains the same, with the need for and inevitability of development itself having "achieved the status of a certainty in the social imaginary" (1995, 271). While post-modern theorists like Freire continue to problematize such dogmatic linear thinking (Freire 2001), it is clear from my fieldnotes that such thinking was alive and well in my own work with CDP.

### Power dynamics between outsider development workers and locals

Early on in my time with CDP, I began to notice power dynamics between myself and local Mozambicans that I would often catch myself using to my advantage. This vignette gives an example from an experience I had with one of CDP's guards, who I'll refer to as Ricardo:

> Ricardo is the guard on duty tonight, and a few days ago he asked me if I could look up something for him on the internet, specifically to see if there were any diagrams he could look at about how radios work ... I had tried to look up what he'd asked and not had much success, in part because I don't think I'd understood exactly what he was looking for, as I'm hardly an electrician and his request was rather technical. So I asked him to explain for me again exactly what I should look up, but did it pretty brusquely, adding at the end "remember that this is a favor, I'm taking my time to do this."... As soon as I started talking like that, though, I regretted it, because I could how Ricardo closed himself when I did, apologizing, saying that he must've gotten a bit too used to our friendly, casual relationship, and had started asking things he shouldn't have—basically,

>he was apologizing for having forgotten his place, for having asked me for personal favors despite being just a guard. At that moment, I realized that … I still only was willing to be friendly and hang out with the guards as equals when I wanted to, when it was convenient, when I wasn't tired and wishing I could be doing something else. Inside, I still wanted (and want) to be able to maintain a bit of that status, in that I want to be able to pull into myself and be selfish when I feel like it, ... leaving the guard to tend to his "place." (4/23)

Soon after I had arrived in Mozambique, I noticed that many CDP personnel and others did not talk with the guards, and as this anecdote shows, I had begun to pride myself on my level of sociality with them, as if that proved my willingness to cede my privilege as a White, educated outsider. As I noted at the time of this fieldnote, that belief was quite naive, and I had hardly begun to analyze all the ways in which I took advantage of privilege that I was reluctant to give up. I am not sure I would have taken note of this particular dynamic so quickly if Ricardo's reaction to my curtness hadn't shown how quickly he understood the message I was sending—this was a familiar message, reflecting a power dynamic he knew all too well. That is, he knew from experience when he was being shown his place. I, a person of privilege whose privilege had heretofore largely remained invisible, was the one who was noting for the first time the status I held that was so obvious to those around me.

In another case of this same phenomenon, I was much less self-aware. In my second month with CDP, I had an opportunity to interview the *Regulu* (or spiritual leader) of Oshossi, one of the rural communities in which CDP was operating. As someone with training in anthropology and ethnography, I was delighted with the opportunity to better understand the religious worldview of the people with whom I worked.

For his part, the *Regulu* seemed almost overly willing to share information, regarding ceremonies he performed regularly, the beliefs undergirding those ceremonies, and so on.

At one point he volunteered to show me how one particular ceremony works, explaining that I could film the demonstration if I desired. Above all, he took pains to make clear that he was extremely grateful to CDP "for everything it had done," and he wanted to help "with anything I might want" to show his appreciation (2/22).

My delight in this fieldnote was palpable as I talked about how open the local *Regulu* was in sharing his practices with me. The still-young anthropologist in me was delighted to be privy to so much insider knowledge—only later, as I thought again about the experience, did I find anything problematic in this openness, recognizing that the *Regulu* might have felt coerced to oblige me due to the fact that I stood in a position of power as a representative of CDP. As I represented an organization offering this man crucial services, he was likely afraid of potential repercussions should he not acquiesce to my demands. While he was likely feeling anxiety due to implied coercion, I as the privileged outsider was blissfully unaware, instead thinking only of the quality of the data I was being offered.

### *Deference to power*

These societal power dynamics were also reflected in how my co-workers often felt the need to have their potential actions approved by a higher authority before moving forward. In one instance, an experienced Mozambican staff member who was by no means my organizational subordinate felt the need to check with me before moving forward with his own work. In this particular case, Adriano, the CDP staff member responsible for all literacy instruction in CDP communities, approached me seeking validation for an idea he had regarding his literacy facilitators:

> I … thought it was interesting how Adriano came up to me to ask me my opinion about an idea of his, a great idea for giving the [literacy]

> facilitators the chance to earn prizes just like group and zone leaders (in order to give them some incentive to do their job well). It seemed like he was looking to me for validation, and also for recommendations on how to improve the idea—it was flattering, but I was also a bit surprised by it, considering the training that Adriano has received. Part of me hoped that my educated White outsider-ness didn't validate me more as a resource than it should. (1/21)

It seems from this anecdote that I was somewhat ambivalent about being seen as an authoritative outsider: I was surprised, feeling it was not necessarily my area of expertise or my jurisdiction to determine the validity of Adriano's idea, yet at the same time I was flattered. While I felt to a degree that I was being given a status I did not deserve simply due to my "educated White outsider-ness," I nonetheless enjoyed this status and was hesitant to give it up (after all, I did still give Adriano my opinion). While part of me is glad that this struck me as slightly problematic at the time, it is clear that my White Savior worldview was only slightly jarred, remaining largely intact for a while thereafter.

Organizationally, CDP was organized like most international development organizations with headquarters in the Western world. As a result, given the organization of the international development industry as a whole, with power (especially with regards to funding) and organizational headquarters commonly concentrated in the developed West, with visits from Western practitioners and "experts" common and familiar to local staff in developing countries, the deference shown by Adriano was understandable, as in development work as a whole Western, outsider "expert" knowledge is commonly seen as more valuable than the ideas of local staff. While privilege often kept Western outsiders like myself from recognizing the problems with this situation, Freire clearly states that outsider teachers, trained and brought up within colonial ideologies, need to be willing and able to give up their unique "expert" status and "commit class suicide" (1978, 15), or

give up the privileges associated with one's previous status and upbringing. Only by so

doing can outsiders become "completely committed to the deepest aspirations of the

people to which they belong" (Freire 1978, 16)—that is, those they intend to work with in

one's efforts towards social change. In a later text, Freire makes this same argument using

a powerful religious image, stating that in order to be effective, educators must "live the

profound meaning of Easter" (1985, 105), dying relative to their previous lives of

privilege and beginning new lives in which they are equals to oppressed peoples rather

than superiors.

This type of direct refutation of the power dynamics inherent in the status quo

requires serious mental gymnastics—it requires problematizing the social structures we

have been raised in and in which we've come to function socially. Any Western

practitioner that works in development has built their experience within a system that

prizes their training and status as their qualifications for doing the work that they do—to

problematize that and try to see local participants as one's complete equals goes contrary

to one's training and lived experience. However, it is precisely this process of

problematization which such practitioners must engage in to reach *critical consciousness*.

For Freire, critical consciousness "refers to the process in which men, not as recipients,

but as knowing subjects, achieve a deepening awareness both of the socio-cultural reality

which shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality" (1970b, 27).

Freire is purposeful in identifying *critical consciousness* as a "process," rather than a

one-time occurrence. Indeed, Freire saw this process as a constant struggle:

> Those who authentically commit themselves to the people must
> re-examine themselves constantly. This conversion is so radical as not to
> allow of ambiguous behavior. To affirm this commitment but to consider
> oneself the proprietor of revolutionary wisdom—which must then be

given to (or imposed on) the people—is to retain the old ways. The man or woman who proclaims devotion to the cause of liberation yet is unable to enter into communion with the people, whom he or she continues to regard as totally ignorant, is grievously self-deceived. The convert who approaches the people but feels alarm at each step they take, each doubt they express, and each suggestion they offer, and attempts to impose his 'status,' remains nostalgic towards his origins. (Freire 1970a, 60-61)

While the beginnings of this process of *critical consciousness* will be visible later in my fieldnotes, unfortunately this "nostalgia for [my] origins" is quite evident throughout many of my fieldnote entries before my serious encounters with Freire.

### *Building program and writing curriculum*

In my descriptions of the process of writing a curriculum for a program I was asked to develop, my latent White Savior mentality is still well-established. Particularly, there is little description of solicitation of local knowledge—rather, I describe at length how I thought through the process myself:

I started making a list of all the commitments which I had included in the lessons, commitments that participants would be asked to take on, and I started listing them in order of priority, or in order of which I think should be addressed first (i.e., which are the biggest problems, according to a database of the baseline assessment facts from Oshossi that a CDP employee has mapped out on a really cool site online). That seems like a good way to start planning what order the classes should be taught in, addressing the largest needs first, whereas right now the order they've been put in is kinda haphazard. (1/30)

As can be seen here, each step in planning was made by me individually—brainstorming potential commitments, prioritizing them according to perceived local needs—in each step I took careful thought of how to move forward, but did so without any solicitation of local input. The second step described here, the prioritization of learning goals according to local needs, seems like a step at which the solicitation of participant input would have been particularly prudent and useful—however, instead of asking those who would participate in this program what they feel is most urgent to their needs, I based my

thinking on a database of information collected by a previous CDP consultant, trusting

the insight of another Western outsider "expert" over that of those that would be directly

affected by my decisions. The implicit assumption that undergirds this line of thinking is

that trained, "expert" outsider input is more valuable than listening to the voices of local

participants.

This same thinking is reflected in another anecdote in which I describe the process of

soliciting "buy-in" to this pre-determined agenda in a meeting with the leaders of a

particular CDP-participating community:

> This morning in our morning meeting I presented the curriculum to
> everyone, and explained how it is organized and how to use it as a
> reference. It was a pretty satisfying moment, to see everyone leafing
> through the curriculum, and at least to a certain extent, "getting it" in
> terms of what it could be used for. (12/4)

My pride in my own work at this moment is palpable—I had spent around six months

writing this curriculum, and to see locals leaf through it and "get it" (that is, accept it as

the correct way in which business should be conducted in the program from here on out)

was quite validating. The flawed assumptions underlying my White Savior status had

been legitimated—I had been brought in because of my curricular "expertise" (which

consisted of several short trainings on a particular facilitation method), and the

acceptance of my work based in those shallow credentials was validated by the work's

acceptance. In many ways, I personified the "naive consciousness" described by Freire as

preceding critical consciousness, relying on gross over-simplifications and

generalizations of social problems, lacking interest in critical investigation into whether

what I taught was really "working," and relying on emotional feelings of validation rather

than empirical evidence of success (1973, 18).

*Generating buy-in rather than asking for input*

This process of seeking "buy-in" to my own work and my own imposed norms, rather than asking participants what they would like to see in the program or exploring other options through dialogue, continued beyond the curriculum writing process to implementation, as seen here:

> This morning was awesome, too—I dropped by Oshossi with Peter while the zone leaders were building the community center, and there were around 25 of them involved. It was really gratifying to see them all so involved in it..... It made me really happy to see the leaders taking ownership of that. (2/15)

> Today we had the first meeting with the community in Inyaya, where we describe all that CDP does and basically try to make sure that the community's on board with us and will support our work. Overall, it went really well, with the people that were there—the main problem was that there weren't many people there, and so a lot of people didn't even hear what we had to say and are still relatively clueless on the subject. (3/24)

In the weeks before this first quotation, we had asked Oshossi's community leaders to build a community center in which CDP could offer its classes. In this documented visit, I show that I am clearly gratified that they did what we'd asked: we as outside experts had told them what we would like them to do, and we reinforced this cycle of behavior by displaying our approval of their acquiescence. Though this request was done only with the best of intentions, the fact that CDP in this case was the actor making requests and local communities were the actors fulfilling them remains inherently problematic. The same dynamic plays out in the second quotation, in which I talk about "our work" as being something with which the community should be "on board," "supporting" us. In short, I was giving directions much more than I was asking questions. I had as of yet failed to understand this teaching of Freire's:

> We can learn a great deal from the very students we teach. For this to happen it is necessary that we transcend the monotonous, arrogant and elitist

traditionalism where the teacher knows all and the student does not know anything. (1985, 177)

In both of these documented instances, I and my co-workers at CDP were acting as full Subjects, able to act for ourselves and provide instructions, while local participants acted as Objects to be told what to do and what to accept. Such a process, however well-meaning, dehumanizes rather than benefits participants. As Freire states,

> A revolutionary leadership must accordingly practice co-intentional education. Teachers and students (leadership and people), co-intent on reality, are both Subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge. As they attain this knowledge of reality through common reflection and action, they discover themselves as its permanent re-creators. In this way, the presence of the oppressed in the struggle for their liberation will be what it should be: not pseudo-participation, but committed involvement. (1970a, 69)

Unfortunately, at this point in my personal development, my fieldnote entries show that what I most desired from participants was not "committed involvement," together with the voice and participation that that entails, but rather "pseudo-participation," or buy-in to my previously established agenda.

### *Beginnings of reflection*

Interestingly, my first forays into Freirean reflection were triggered by instances of community innovation that caught me off guard. Several times, I documented myself having this type of reaction to seeing coordinators or facilitators implementing well the techniques I had taught them (specifically, I had done trainings on a facilitation technique called FAMA):

> This morning I stayed with the coordinators in the office and did a training with them on FAMA teaching techniques….They did really well, though, especially when we went to Oshossi for them to teach their classes. (3/1)

> Fernanda, the girl who gave the class today, did a really good job of leading a FAMA discussion, I was really impressed. (3/3)

> This training today went wonderfully. I don't know if it's because they've already had a few weeks to try to work with the technique, or because today the practices just went more smoothly, or probably a combination of all of the above, but really today was just hitting on all cylinders. (4/15)

In each of these instances, I was caught off-guard when I saw people I had trained doing their job well. In the first instance, I state "They did really well, though," as if I expected them not to do so. In the second, I lay effuse praise on a particular facilitator, saying she "did a really good job" and that "I was really impressed." In the third, I express my feeling that the people I was training were "hitting on all cylinders," and have trouble trying to identify why. What is problematic about these reactions can be summed up in a rather simple question: Why was I so surprised? Again, Freire provides some explanation:

> Functionally, oppression is domesticating. To no longer be prey to its force, one must emerge from it and turn upon it. This can be done only by means of the praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it (1970a, 51).

In other words, I had been domesticated by the status quo, in which I as the experienced White outsider should be expected to be knowledgeable and capable, and in which the same assumptions shouldn't be automatically made about local participants. I had heard this stereotype, part of the dominant oppressive paradigm, enough that I had accepted it as natural, and the occurrence of the opposite (that is, the display of skill and capacity by Mozambican locals) caught me off guard. Said another way, in another instance Freire asserted that "there are innumerable well-intentioned bank-clerk teachers who do not realize that they are serving only to dehumanize" (1970a, 75). Over time, I began to realize more and more that I was one such well-intentioned bank clerk.

### *Problematizing positionality*

In the process of seeking critical consciousness, Freire (1970a; 1970b; 1985) talks first

about being able to "name the word and the world"—that is, being able to give a name

and a face to the structural inequalities that prevent our full humanization. Over time, this

became evident in my writing:

> Sometimes I wonder about the negative attitudes that are common among
> development workers I've met here, from all sorts of organizations, the
> catch-all explanation that "It's Mozambique" when things don't go your
> way.… It seems like so much more good could happen if our first impulse
> here were to look for that which is good and admirable about Mozambique
> and Mozambicans, rather than having a mindset that expects everything to
> go wrong. (2/3)

In this relatively early entry, I had already noted the deficit thinking that seemed to orient

much of the conversation among expatriate development professionals regarding work

conditions in Mozambique. While this troubled me, weeks later I caught myself referring

back to the same assumptions:

> It's been really bothering me to think that I think myself superior to
> people…as I've thought about it, I've realized how much I do that.
> Granted, I think most people do, but that still feels like a pretty weak
> justification. It's really been bothering me to think that I hold myself so
> highly that so many people fall "below" me in my own ranking of the
> world. (3/1)

In this entry, I began to notice the inherent power dynamic that undergirded my own daily

thinking—without realizing it, many (if not most) of my quotidian decisions were

oriented by an assumption that my own thinking and my own ideas were better than those

of my local co-workers, simply because of inherited demographic characteristics.

Similarly, in a slightly later entry, I state:

> So many times there are little moments where I'm granted privilege
> because of my social status here, and I don't give it a second thought,
> which is in effect saying I'm okay with these social differences. As much
> as it drives me crazy to admit it, I seem to have no issues with class
> difference at times. (3/25)

In all of these entries, I caught myself in quiet evening moments realizing that during the

course of the day's events I had been treated differently by others, or had treated myself

differently. In these quiet moments of reflection, this bothered me—not enough that my

regular daily actions changed drastically, but enough that my privilege began to seem less

and less based in the natural order of things and seem more and more inherently

problematic, part of a system that needed to be challenged.

### *White Savior of the White Saviors*

These descriptions of such realizations should not be taken to imply that I had worked

through my privilege—or that I have now, for that matter. My personal thoughts on the

unequal structures supported by my work were still problematic—in short, I still wanted

to be and enjoyed being a White Savior, as the citations above indicate. However,

increasingly over time I began to see myself as an "enlightened" person who can help less

thoughtful development workers to change their practice—in short, I still saw myself as a

White Savior, but a White Savior of the White Saviors. Note this anecdote:

> Tonight I also had a good long talk with Peter about the direction of a
> particular program and the different principles that should guide it. More
> and more, I feel like my role here will be at least 50% talking things out
> and trying to persuade higher-ups regarding good principles, rather than all
> community work. It seems more and more clear to me that half the battle
> is in organizations themselves, trying to make sure that through all the
> power struggles and politics, programs are built on good, solid principles.
> I'm kinda excited to get a chance to try to help the organizations I work
> with do that, on whatever small scale I can. (2/12)

In this quotation, the assumption of my own superior status remains—I talk about "good,

solid principles" of development work as if they are a private stash of knowledge to

which I alone am privy, even among other development workers. I see myself as uniquely

positioned to do good, to "help those that can't help themselves"—I've simply replaced

those that "need my help," swapping out local Mozambican participants for well-meaning

(but in my opinion flawed) development workers.

### *Pushing against the grain*

Over time, after further reflection and thought, I began to see the way in which the problems in several programs were more structural than I had previously recognized. While still implicitly maintaining my own status as an empowered White Savior outsider with inherent worth and skills, I began to note that some of the problems I faced in my work were beyond my capacity to fix, and that local workers had a capacity similar to my own:

> This afternoon…I recognized something important that I need to work on—helping all the workers [in one particular program] use their critical thinking abilities. One thing I've noticed a lot...is the extreme deference to authority and desire to fulfill orders that are given that exists here in [this program]. On one side it shows humility, but it's also a butcher of critical thinking, as employees always look to their superior to see what he/she wants them to do instead of using their good sense and critical thinking....As things have gone by, I've seemed to have acquired a status of authority, so everyone always defers to me and looks to me for guidance and direction. The thing is, as I've thought about it, I haven't fought this that much yet, and in fact I've encouraged it by at times taking over the position of order-giver, mainly because it's a nice stroke to my pride. I really need to kill that, though, as these folks need to feel more comfortable to use their own (vast) powers of critical thinking within their areas. I'll need to look out, in order to guarantee that these guys are able to gain and use more autonomy in their different spheres. (3/29)

While in my everyday practice I continued to enjoy my status, I began to recognize that local workers had the same capacity that I did. That is, my White Savior status, while enjoyable, was based on a falsehood—that I had some inherent worth or skill simply due to my educated, White outsider-ness. This gradual change in worldview continued as, during my time with CDP, I revisited a seminal text I'd come to love as an undergraduate:

> I've been thinking lately about some of the ideas that struck me most strongly when reading Paulo Freire's *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*—most of all the principle that those who would help to liberate

the oppressed must work with and trust in the ability of those they are trying to help….In the time I've been here in Mozambique working with CDP, it's been easy to note tons of examples of me as an outsider both trusting and not trusting locals—and it's struck me how I'm the same person, trusting in one moment and not trusting in the next. When working through an NGO or other development organization, … it's easy to be schizophrenic with how much you're willing to trust and put power in locals' hands. I've always kind of prided myself on being a big believer in the capacity and ability of all, but then I've found myself in a lot of moments where it's a lot easier to make an executive decision, or where, for whatever reason, despite all I've said about letting locals make the decisions, I don't, often in situations where in retrospect it would've made all the sense in the world to have done so. And I see the same thing all the time in others, too (it tends to be easier to notice in others). As I've thought about that, I think that's why this theme is one that Freire returns to again and again in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*—because it is a principle that, to be effective, must be implemented completely. In helping people to liberate themselves, there is no halfway point of trust—there is either trust (in their ideas, in their reasoning, in their ability to raise themselves) or there is lack of trust. The more I think about it, the more and more I realize that I have a lot of trusting to do. (10/18)

Through reflection, I'd come to see how I needed to change—I needed to not only recognize my privileged status, but be willing to abandon it, granting my local co-workers the same trust that they placed in me. I had learned to "name the world" (Freire, 1970a; 1970b; 1985), or identify what about my social context needed changing—all that was left was the hard work of trying to do it. I had begun to ask questions—not questions that had simple answers, but questions that led to critical thinking and reflection. As Freire and Faundez state, "thinking about questions that may not always or immediately arrive to an answer are the roots of change" (1989, 37). That process of change, that first step towards *critical consciousness*, had now been taken.

**Conclusion and Final Thoughts**

So, where do we go from here? It is now a number of years since the time of these

writings—after spending several more years with CDP (an organization I still consult with), as well as time teaching and working in other settings, the process of developing critical consciousness which I have begun to describe here is still not over. In the time since the year these fieldnotes document, I have continued to work with Freirean organizations of various types, and my own interpretations of Freire and his work have changed drastically numerous times over. I do not know yet if I feel I have come to a place where I fully "understand" Freirean theory and methods, or if I ever will. As Freire (2001) has put it, we are unfinished beings, "unfinished yet conscious of our unfinished state" (p. 11), always subject to change in how we think and feel.

This is part of what is easiest to love about Freire's thought—the notion that it is part of my unfinished nature to continue to ask questions, challenge my preconceived notions of "truth," and recalibrate my understanding accordingly. As Freire states, "I like being human because I am involved with others in making history out of possibility, not simply resigned to fatalistic stagnation" (2000, 33). Freire beautifully personified this flexibility and reflexivity, taking strong challenges from other theorists and educators very seriously and, at times, completely re-thinking various aspects of his own work (For a very beautiful example, see hooks 1994, 56).

I do not pretend to imply that I have here fully presented my thinking in these fieldnotes as it existed at the time—indeed, it is impossible to fully separate my thinking "then" from "now" as of his writing, as the re-reading of these fieldnotes years later is inherently informed by my experiences since that time. The re-reading and analysis of these fieldnotes, more so than provide a clear, exact picture of my thinking at the time they were first written, has instead served as another instrument of reflection, another

opportunity to reconsider what I think now, rather than reconstruct perfectly what I thought then. As Freire (1997) notes in his later work, there is no way to separate myself from the temporal and spatial context of this current writing. As Freire states, "my homeland is, above all, a space in time that involves geography, history, culture" (1997, 40), a reservoir of past experiences that continue to inform and shape the present. Reflecting upon those previous experiences and how they relate to the present is an inherent part of the process of working towards critical consciousness (Freire, 1970a; 1970b; 1985).

In an ideal world, this is how education should always work, pushing us to constantly reconsider our sureties and consider new information that could change the way we think, teach and act. Indeed, this seems to be one of the central themes of Freire's legacy, his call for us to push forward, continuing to reflect and reconsider our pedagogy and our practice through daily praxis, and in so doing become more and more "fully human" (Freire 1970a, 32). While the fieldnotes analyzed in this article have an end point, this process of reflection and change does not—as I and other Freireans constantly seek to re-examine ourselves to reach and maintain our critical consciousness, reinvention and recommitment is a constant. I do not claim to have completely left behind the White Savior complex—my hope and belief is that in constantly pushing against this ingrained preconception, I can mitigate its damaging effects. I also hope that others may join this conversation, and that with time we as comparative educators may build our own subfield within Critical Whiteness Studies in which the role of privilege in comparative and international education continues to be interrogated. As Freire has stated, "Those who authentically commit themselves to the people must re-examine themselves constantly"

(1970a, 60). I look forward to reading the contributions of other comparative scholars of privilege to this process of self-examination, as well as critical interrogations of the role of Whiteness and privilege in international education development written from other social positionalities.

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