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## ARTS THERAPIES PRACTICE IN INNER-CITY SLUMS: BEYOND THE INSTALLATION OF HOPE

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As fellow human beings, arts therapists and clients are seemingly on the same level: namely people who experience life, including its suffering and blessings. However, in therapeutic settings located in deprived urban environments, the distribution of sadness and economic injustice is not necessarily fairly balanced between these participants as equals. To the contrary, exposure to poverty and racism is often alien to professionals who aim to facilitate change in slum environments. I propose that the effect of these differences in socio-economic background between arts therapists and clients upon their respective understanding of what change means and how it can be brought must be made explicit, particularly when the therapeutic work aims to facilitate "conscientization" in Paolo Freire's terms (1992).<sup>1</sup>

### The Situation

Urban slums speak a sorrowful tale of poverty, deprivation and violence. In recognition of the fear and rage that dominate their life, many teenage boys in the USA wear a CTD (Close To Death) patch. As one former gang member noted, violence is causally connected with slum life. He said, "The key is that you feel within yourself that you don't have anything to live for. And pretty soon your own dehumanized

worth is what allows you not to connect with the humanity of others. The reason I could hurt somebody is that I hated myself so much." (Rodriguez, 1993)

Similar levels of dehumanized self-hatred dominate the life of children and adults with whom I have worked in inner-city areas in Britain, the USA and elsewhere. They allowed me to hear what it feels like to be used as a drugs-courier and young prostitute from the age of seven, about involvement in gang warfare because you could see no other way through, about the hopelessness of waking up after yet another suicide attempt and, above all, about the pervasive sense of powerlessness that paralyzes dreams of betterment before they are even born. I vividly remember the 10-year-old girl who said, "When I grow up I wanna be a princess." With a worn smile on her thin, little face, she added, "Not because I want to have jewels or anything like that. But because then I'll have the money to buy all the guns and pay off the pushers." Her glimpse of a possible future without addiction and violence was rapidly followed by, "But it'll never happen. I'll never be a princess, you know." I shall also not forget the quiet dignity of people like Mrs. W. or Mr. B., both single parents in their late thirties, who tried extremely hard and yet failed to protect their fragile families against the corrosive corruption of the streets. Like everyone else on

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<sup>1</sup>Conscientization is a term coined by Paolo Freire. It is based on a phenomenological approach to understanding the way we are shaped by our sociocultural reality. Facilitators and community members formulate a joint understanding of the problematics of their situation. In this process of "problematization," all involved explore both *what* is troubling them and *how* their understanding of *what* is troubling them in their reality contributes to the co-construction of that reality. The gradual unveiling of what might be called agency-in-context generates the energy necessary to support the change-effort.

their grim housing estate, they lived in an environment they would never have chosen and against which they felt powerless to prevail.

For reasons of intellectual curiosity and emotional commitment, I decided during the 1970s to seek work in a deprived inner-city area to explore how the concept of managed change in the intricate, volatile system of an inner-city slum might be translated into transformative action.<sup>2</sup> I applied for the post of director of a community development project on an extremely tough, broken-up council housing estate in the heart of a large metropolitan city. My job interview included a meeting with several residents. They described in vivid terms the extent of their despair and the depth of their rage. The desired change was formulated as follows, "Please help us to turn a 'no-go' housing estate into a place where we can wake up in the morning without having to feel terrified of what the day might bring and without having to feel ashamed of where we live."

When I was appointed to the job we (those members of the community who were attracted to the project, either due to opposition or support, and myself) had to find effective answers to the question, "What is the most efficacious way to bring about such change in the briefest possible period of time and what are the best possible predictors of successful outcome." The following are some of my reflections. They are based on what the community of people involved in the Center learned together during the four years that it took to achieve the above-mentioned

goal. We arrived there thanks to the commitment, courage and curiosity of individuals, face-to-face groups, various organizations and the community at large.<sup>3</sup> One of the first questions that has to be addressed in such a concerted change effort is how to engage people in the process and how to elicit a description of the strengths and problematics of the current situation as experienced by those individuals or groups who are most interested in bringing about change.

#### "How Have You Coped So Far?"

During the 1970s it became quite commonplace to observe that psychotherapy is a culture-bound practice, or, as Szasz (1972) pointed out, a game with certain rules, that controls the conduct of the participants. Szasz drew attention to the fact that most psychotherapists help people to recognize that they are the locus of their own foolhardiness and the agent of their own distress. However important Szasz' anti-psychotherapy stance may have been at the time, it is questionable to what extent his world-view of ethical individualism is helpful to people who presently live in inner-city slums, other than for the few individuals who, due to circumstance or endowment, are able to escape its downward sucking pull.

In this environment, power often equals the use of violence, and being an agent of one's own distress means ignoring the impact of inadequate housing,

<sup>2</sup>During my training in drama therapy and cultural pedagogy I encountered two assumptions that hold my interest to this day. The first of these was the assumption of the existence of a dynamic interrelationship among the individual, the face-to-face group, the organizations to which we belong and the community that is our dominant environment. The idea that any of these might be thought about as more or less "closed systems" for the purpose of either education or psychotherapeutic treatment seemed and seems untenable to me, as help offered to any one of these so-called "independent" systems involves dynamic responses in the others. Secondly, I already knew that people, including myself, and organizations, such as the ones I worked in, inevitably encounter difficulties and that we have a tendency in our problem-solving efforts to arrive at certain patterns of process and structure that are relatively resistant to change. I understood experientially and theoretically that the solutions themselves can become the problem. How to bring about changes in systems' relationships with the solutions became a further challenging quest. To this day these two basic assumptions inspire my thinking, practice, and learning. In this context, I owe a profound debt of gratitude to my teachers, who introduced me on day one of my academic studies to a series of books. One of these books was entitled *The Dynamics of Planned Change* (1958) by Lippitt, Watson and Westley. Reading this text proved to be a transformative experience as it first inspired me to formulate my thoughts in the above mentioned way.

<sup>3</sup>Though it is not addressed in what follows, I do not underestimate the impact of the financial support we received from some charitable foundations, the local authority concerned and from the national government on what we were ultimately able to achieve, nor do I underestimate the extraordinary care and commitment given to us by numerous people in Britain and abroad. They enabled the Center to offer a wide range of exciting programs both on the estate and away from its initial misery. Their involvement mattered a great deal. However, without denying one iota of the value of these contributions, they were also simply part of the story of how change was brought about. The sheer fact that these opportunities were sought, invited and usefully integrated once received was a confirmation of conscientization-in-practice.

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