

Conceptualizations of Praxis in Nursing Education: Marxian and Freireian Influences

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**Table of Contents**

Acknowledgements.....	4
Abstract.....	5
Part One: Marx's Philosophy of Praxis.....	8
Marxist Thought: Philosophical Influences.....	8
Hegel's Idealism.....	9
Hegel's Historicism.....	10
Hegel's Dialectic.....	11
The Influence of Feuerbach's Materialism.....	13
Marx and Engel's Materialist Theory of History.....	15
The Dialectic of Historical Materialism.....	15
Marx's View of Alienated Labor.....	18
The Communist Solution.....	20
Marx's Philosophy of Praxis.....	21
Part Two: Freirean Pedagogy and Praxis.....	27
Freire's Background and Early Experiences with Class Distinctions.....	27
Marxian Influences on Freire's Pedagogy.....	29
The Banking Concept of Education.....	31
Conscientization, Praxis, and Dialogue in Freirean Pedagogy.....	33
Critiques of Freirean Pedagogy.....	36
Post-Colonial Critiques of Marxian Theory Relevant to Freirean Pedagogy.....	38

Part Three: Freirean Praxis in Nursing Education.....43

    Implications of Hegelian, Marxian, and Freireian Ontology for the Discipline of  
    Nursing.....44

    Questions Concerning the Appropriation of Praxis into Nursing Education...50

    Nursing’s Appropriation of Freirean Praxis: Ontological In-Congruence?.....56

Conclusion.....59

References.....61

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**Abstract**

Praxis in nursing education is seen as both a process for emancipating nurses from oppressive practices within health care institutions, and as a pedagogical theory for freeing teachers and students from behaviorist methodologies in educational settings, and yet the meaning of this word is not clearly explicated. Most interpretations of praxis are based on education theorist Paulo Freire's conceptualization, which posits praxis as: "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire, 1970/2009, p. 51). The ontology that informs this view of praxis however, is not always well understood by nurse educators. Freire's work was greatly influenced by Georg Hegel and Karl Marx. In this paper, the ontologies of Hegel, Marx, and Freire are explored in order to reveal differences between each of the perspectives, thus enabling nurse educators to consider how these ontologies align with their own views of nursing.

*Keywords:* praxis, nursing, Freire, Marx, Hegel, ontology, education

### **Conceptualizations of Praxis in Nursing Education: Marxian and Freireian Influences**

Praxis in nursing education is seen as both a process for emancipating nurses from oppressive practices within health care institutions, and as a pedagogical theory for freeing teachers and students from behaviorist methodologies in educational settings (Bent, 1993; Bevis & Watson, 1989; Lyckhage & Pennbrant, 2014; Owen-Mills, 1994; Varcoe, 1997). Some nurse scholars extend the emancipatory context of praxis to include persons who are receiving nursing care, because of the paternalistic tendency of some health professionals to dis-count the person's knowledge and decision-making ability (Varcoe, 1997). The word praxis is endowed with diverse conceptualizations and various applications in nursing and nursing education, and yet the meaning of this word is not well understood.

In the nursing literature, definitions of praxis may be absent altogether or imprecisely associated with caring or feminism (Bevis & Watson, 1989; Owen-Mills, 1994; Ray & Turkel, 2014). More precisely, praxis is conceptualized as a model for closing the practice-theory gap through reflection-in-action (Penney & Warelow, 1999; Rolfe, 1993; Rolfe, 2006), or, as an "iterative circle of being/becoming (ontology), knowing (epistemology) and doing (actions with consequences)" (Longo & Lindsay, 2011, p. 704). The notion of praxis is alluring to nurse scholars who are concerned about bridging the perceived gap between practice and theory; ostensibly making theory more accessible to practitioners in clinical settings (Connor, 2004; Penney & Warelow, 1999; Rolfe, 1993; Rolfe, 2006). However, in much of the nursing literature it is not explicated which theory or theories ought to be linked with practice. The conceptual diversity and,

at times, lack of philosophical or theoretical grounding of praxis in the nursing literature presents unacknowledged and unrecognized challenges for nurse educators who seek to understand this concept and to discover why it is deemed so important in nursing education (Connor, 2004; Lyckhage & Pennbrant, 2014).

Most interpretations of praxis within the nursing literature are based on educational theorist Paulo Freire's emancipatory conceptualization: "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire, 1970/2009, p. 51), yet the philosophical foundations of this conceptualization are frequently not explicated by nurse scholars (Connor, 2004). The resulting separation of Freire's work from the philosophies that underpin it suggests that educators may lack the philosophical understanding of Freire's theory that would enable one to enact it in an informed or comprehensive manner (Allman, 2009; Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010; Taylor, 1993). Conversely, without such an understanding readers may dis-miss Freire's scholarship as jargon, thereby negating its usefulness for practice and education (Allman, 2009; Taylor, 1993).

Freire's *Pedagogy of the oppressed* was a synthesis of many philosophers, including Aristotle, Hegel, Marx, Sartre, Mao, and Habermas (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010; Freire, 2009; Taylor, 1993). While it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore all aspects of Freire's work, Marx's Philosophy of Praxis (Kitching, 1988; Kolakowski, 1978) is acknowledged as a particularly important influence (Allman, 2009; Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010; Freire, 2009; Taylor, 1993). Concepts that Marx associated with praxis and that Freire adopted include alienation, consciousness, and humanism (Freire, 2009; Taylor, 1994). The purpose of this paper is to explore and describe some of the philosophical influences of Marx's philosophy with a view to understanding how his

work informed Freire's conceptualization of praxis. Following this discussion will be a description of how nursing has taken up praxis, as well as an exploration of the relevance of Freire's work for teachers and students of nursing.

### **Part One: Marx's Philosophy of Praxis**

#### **Marxist Thought: Philosophical Influences**

Central to Marx's work was an analysis of the socio-economic constructs of labor and capital. As Marx saw it, capitalism favored profits for the capitalists (the bourgeois), at the expense of a systematically alienated workforce (the proletariat) (Kitching, 1988; Stevenson & Haberman, 2009). Marx and his collaborator, Friedrich Engels, reformulated the works of two German philosophers, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Ludwig Feuerbach, to create their materialist conception (or theory) of history (Kitching, 1988; Stevenson & Haberman, 2009; Wood, 2004). Marx and Engels believed that economic relations between persons could not be understood in isolation from the historical context in which they lived (Kitching, 1988). In other words, it is not just the economic climate, but the particularities of each time period that must be understood before one can understand the experiences of people. The materialist theory of history culminated in a "philosophy of praxis" (Kitching, 1988, p.7): in Marx's view, the proletariat could only be emancipated once they realized, through their own consciousness (or self-awareness) that theory must be enacted as action to change their world (Dunayeskaya, 1973; Kolakowski, 1978; Kitching, 1988).

Karl Marx (1818--1883) was born in Trier, Germany. In 1836 he entered University, at the age of 17, to study law (Kitching, 1988; Stevenson & Haberman, 2009; Wood, 2004). As a student he was troubled by the working conditions of the lower

classes, and the seeds were planted for a life-long concern with social reform that became central to his later work (Kitching, 1988; Stevenson & Haberman, 2009; Wood, 2004).

Marx was drawn to a group of philosophers known as the *left* or *young* Hegelians (Kitching, 1988; Stevenson & Haberman, 2009; Wood, 2004). These followers of Hegel appealed to Marx, as they believed that radical changes to society were necessary in order for persons, such as the working class and the poor, to become more fully human, and nothing short of a revolution would achieve this result (Kitching, 1988; Stevenson & Haberman, 2009).

After a year Marx left law school to study with Hegel, whose philosophy was based on idealism and historicism (Bottomore, 1991; Kitching, 1988; Stevenson & Haberman, 2009). Some Hegelian concepts that Marx reformulated in significant ways were alienation, objectification, and the dialectic method (Bottomore, 1991; Kitching, 1988; Stevenson & Haberman, 2009). In order to understand Marx, it is necessary to gain a preliminary understanding of Hegelian philosophy.

### **Hegel's Idealism**

Idealism centers on how a person makes meaning of their world through mental activity and the construction of *ideas* about that world (Stevenson & Haberman, 2009; Kitching, 1988). Hegel's view was that the mind was the only way in which a person could understand the world, and it therefore seemed "logical that the way the mind interpreted the world is the way the world is" (Kitching, 1988, p. 13). In contrast, empiricists postulate that persons can only know the world through that which can be verified with the senses, and scientifically tested (Kitching, 1988; Tucker, 1972). Hegel believed that the mind and world were one; in-separable from one another (Kitching,

1988). Empiricists believe that the mind is separate from the world, and the world cannot be studied through the mind (Kitching, 1988; Stevenson & Haberman, 2009).

Hegel was a Christian and his philosophy had a theological basis. Not only did he believe that mind and world were one, but also that man and God were one (Tucker, 1972). This notion was a departure from Judeo-Christian beliefs wherein persons who believed they were one with God were deemed to have committed the sin of pride (Tucker, 1972). Marx and other left Hegelians believed that this aspect of Hegelian philosophy was consistent with Atheism; however Hegel was adamant that his philosophy was compatible with his Christian faith (Tucker, 1972). Although this represented a fundamental difference in Hegelian and Marxian thought, Marx retained much of his Hegelian beliefs; this will be discussed later in the paper. Hegel conceived of man and the divine, idea and spirit, as dialectically related, and he developed a method, known as the dialectic method, to address these concepts (Kitching, 1988; Tucker, 1972). As will be shown later, Marx appropriated Hegel's dialectic method and applied it to his conceptualization of praxis (Dunayevskaya, 1973; Kitching, 1988; Marx).

### **Hegel's Historicism**

Hegel conceived a philosophy of historicism that he applied to his idealism (Kitching, 1988; Stevenson & Haberman, 2009). "Hegel's main inspiring idea was progress in human history through stages of mental and cultural development" (Stevenson & Haberman, 2009, p. 164). As time unfolds, persons are changed by the ideas they perceive and the societies within which they live (Kitching, 1988; Stevenson & Haberman, 2009; Tucker, 1972). Hegel believed that men are continually evolving into higher states of understanding themselves as God (Kitching, 1988; Stevenson &

Haberman, 2009; Tucker, 1972). *Geist* is the word Hegel uses to describe God-man as one with the world, but also as mind (or the idea) and spirit joined (Tucker, 1972). “The whole sweep of human history was seen as the progressive self-realization of Geist, i.e., Mind or Spirit in the world as a whole...with increasing consciousness or self-awareness” (Stevenson & Haberman, 2009, p. 164). And, Hegel believed that his current time represented the apex of man realizing himself as God (Kitching, 1988; Stevenson & Haberman, 2009; Tucker, 1972).

The analysis of the subject-object relationship and the notion of alienation were aspects of Hegelian philosophy that Marx adapted in his critique of the workers’ plight as bound to the employ of the capitalists (Kitching, 1988; Stevenson & Haberman, 2009; Tucker, 1972). According to Hegel, man as a subject is confronted with myriad objects that are unknown (or alien) to him (Kitching, 1988; Stevenson & Haberman, 2009). “... (A)ll human history is a process whereby ideas objectify themselves in material reality” (Kitching, 1988, p. 17). Hence, human beings, although they may be the creators of objects, such as transportation systems or modes of communication, fail to see themselves as the creators; tending to view objects as separate from themselves. This inability to see themselves as creators results in people experiencing their world as alien to them (Kitching, 1988; Tucker, 1972).

### **Hegel’s Dialectic**

Dialectics is often described as an analysis of contradictions: a thesis is proposed, its’ opposite (anti-thesis) is presented; conflicting ideas are logically re-unified into synthesis, resulting in a new thesis (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Dunayevskaya, 1973). Dunayevskaya (1973) and Tucker (1972) assert that the Hegelian dialectic is more

complex, and can best be understood as a historically situated psychological process of “Hegelian spirit in its quest to know itself as the Absolute” (Tucker, p. 58). Hegel’s dialectic method conceives idealism as a process of recognizing one’s alienation; Self and God, or “Spirit in Self-Estrangement” (Dunayevskaya, 1973, p. 9), and becoming more conscious, resulting in reification of one’s relationship (as a subject), to the object (Dunayevskaya, 1973; Tucker, 1972). This process culminates in absolute self-knowledge and “mind’s total understanding of the world” (Kitching, 1988, p. 17). Hegel conceptualized the alienation of object and subject as evolving in a continuous (or infinite) process of reification, over the course of history (Tucker, 1972; Dunayevskaya, 1973).

Therefore, the process of becoming more conscious is continuous and results in absolute freedom. In this way, Hegel’s dialectic process reifies the alienated Self-God and Mind-World contradictions, so that men know themselves as God, and recognize that they are the creators of their world (Kitching, 1988; Tucker, 1972). The key to becoming more conscious is in man’s ability to reflect on his relationship to the world (Sherratt, 2006), and, man’s development as a conscious being evolves through and is impacted by the events of history (Kitching, 1988; Stevenson & Haberman, 2009). “The breakthrough, indeed liberation, to (Hegel’s) philosophy occurs with the awareness of agency, with the self-consciousness of existing as a being-in-history” (Duarte, 2006, p. 109). Cultural progress over time influences one’s development as a person; hence Hegel coined the word *Zeitgeist*, to denote the self-idea as engaged in a particular historical-cultural period (Kitching, 1988).

### **The Influence of Feuerbach's Materialism**

Ludwig Feuerbach was a left Hegelian who published a critique of Hegelian philosophy, in 1841, titled, *The Essence of Christianity*. Feuerbach rejected the Hegelian notion that reality consisted of ideas constructed by the mind and argued for a materialist view of human nature (Bottomore, 1991; Kitching, 1988; Stevenson & Haberman, 2009). Materialism is somewhat similar to empiricism, in that human beings are believed to perceive reality as passive recipients of information about the world through their senses (Bottomore, 1991; Kitching, 1988). Feuerbach claimed that the difference between empiricism and materialism is that what men perceive (or receive) are not ideas, but earthly, natural, material objects, and these *sense objects* are received only in a passive way (Bottomore, 1991; Kitching, 1988). As will be discussed later, Marx criticized both Hegel and Feuerbach for their conceptualizations of consciousness as a passive process (Bottomore, 1991; Kitching, 1988). However, Feuerbach's materialist analysis of Hegelian philosophy represented a significant turning point for Marx (Bottomore, 1991; Kitching, 1988).

Feuerbach criticized the theological basis of Hegel's dialectic, arguing that the relationship of man to God is one of self-alienation that can never be reified (Kitching, 1988). Men are not created by God, but have evolved through a natural progression on Earth. Religion, as a creation of man, envisions God as a supreme being who is placed above humanity (Bottomore, 1991; Tucker, 1972). Man can never become one with God because he is continually comparing himself to the divine and coming up short (Kitching, 1988; Stevenson & Haberman, 2009; Tucker, 1972). Pre-occupation with achieving Geist results in people "under-(valuing) their actual lives" (Stevenson & Haberman, 2009, p.

165), and inhibits man's ability to live as himself in the real, materialist (or natural) world (Kitching, 1988; Tucker, 1972). It is therefore necessary to free oneself from the illusion of religion in order to achieve one's potential in real life (Kitching, 1988; Tucker, 1972). This analysis appealed to Marx, who was an atheist; however Marx re-constructed Feuerbachian materialism in significant ways (Kitching, 1988; Stevenson & Haberman, 2009; Tucker, 1972).

Marx employed Feuerbach's analysis of religion in his critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*, written by Marx in 1842-43 (Stevenson & Haberman, 2009). Marx took Feuerbach's analysis further, asserting, "the immediate *task of philosophy*, which is at the service of history, once the *saintly form* of human self-alienation has been unmasked, is to unmask self-alienation in its *unholy forms* (emphasis in original)" (Marx, 1844/1989, p. 263). In other words, Marx believed that the purpose of philosophy was to reveal the ways in which social relations lead to oppression throughout history (Kitching, 1988; Tucker, 1972). As such, the point of philosophy is to critique the circumstances of class struggle and provide a solution to these problems; at this point philosophy will have served its purpose and will no longer be needed (Bottomore, 1991). The unholy, or secular purpose of philosophy, and the most pressing need of society, is to address human self-alienation through a political-economic critique of the conditions that result in the exploitation of workers (Dunayeskaya, 1973; Tucker, 1972). Therefore, man's self-alienation is not a religious or mystical one, but an economic, material one (Dunayeskaya, 1973; Stevenson & Haberman, 2009). In order to address this problem, Marx and Engels developed their materialist theory of history.

### **Marx and Engels' Materialist Theory of History**

Marx was influenced by Feuerbach's analysis of man, as one who is shaped, not by mental activity or ideas, and not by an illusory and unattainable relationship to the divine, but by his experiences as a being in the real, material world (Kitching, 1988; Stevenson & Haberman, 2009). However, Marx did not abandon his Hegelian beliefs, but worked with Engels to adapt Feuerbachian and Hegelian philosophy into a distinct world view: a materialist theory of history (Bottomore, 1991; Kitching, 1988; Stevenson & Haberman, 2009). This theory was further informed by Marx's analysis of English political economy (Kitching, 1988; Stevenson & Haberman, 2009). According to this view, historical progress is marked by economic phases, wherein the production of goods or material objects, and the social relationships of men in producing material goods, shapes men's consciousness (Bottomore, 1991; Kitching, 1988; Stevenson & Haberman, 2009; Marx, 1844). Marx described their work as a scientific theory that conceptualizes human progress through history as an evolution, governed by the *laws of motion*, and compared the work to Darwin's theory of evolution (Bottomore, 1991; Stevenson & Haberman, 2009). For Marx, scientific means theory or knowledge that is derived from real world (materialist) observations and inferences (Bender, 1986). Use of language such as *movement* or *evolution* is also dialectical (Dunayevskaya, 1973; Kolakowski, 1978).

### **The Dialectic of Historical Materialism**

Marx argued that Hegel had got things *upside down* in positing that God-man or the idea-spirit (idealist consciousness) shapes history. Marx inverted Hegel's dialectical analysis *right-side up* by asserting that it is the material forces of production, over the

course of history, that shape men's consciousness (Dunayevskaya, 1973; Kitching, 1988; Stevenson & Haberman, 2009; Tucker, 1972).

Marx employed dialectics to analyze conceptual relationships in his philosophy that people might consider as separate or contradictory: historicism-materialism; capitalist-worker; theory-practice (praxis); alienation-consciousness (Allman, 2009; Allman & Wallis, 1990; Kolakowski, 1978). According to Marx, studying such concepts in isolation from one another is not possible because it is in the relationship between the concepts that full understanding is revealed (Allman & Wallis, 1990; Kolakowski, 1978). Further, such relationships should not be miss-construed as cause-and-effect, or as only occurring in one direction, but to be thought of as moving in a continuous unity-separation-reunification process (Allman, 2009; Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Dunayevskaya, 1973; Kolakowski, 1978; Sherratt, 2006).

In *The German Ideology*, the dialectic analysis of Marx and Engels begins with the unity of early tribal societies, wherein people were dependent upon one another for survival, through the human act of making items from the natural world (Sherratt, 2009). These items included shelter, food, and clothing, but also the provision of support in daily life, such as care of children or the sick. In this setting, human beings are equal, at least in terms of who produces and who benefits from material goods (Sherratt, 2009).

Once people began to trade in material goods, and to set up structures to support such trade, men became more and more separated (alienated) from one another. According to Marx, the feudal system and the industrial system are examples of processes of commercialization that lead to alienation of men from one another and to alienation of men from their innate human nature (Bender, 1986; Sherratt, 2009). The

economic structure of society creates dis-separate, dialectically opposed classes: royalty, the nobility, the middle classes, skilled and unskilled labor, and so on, leading to a struggle between those classes (Bottomore, 1991; Sherratt, 2009). In the capitalist system, capitalists oppress the workers by controlling the work they do and the products that workers make. Capitalists are the beneficiaries of material production through profit, paying the workers only enough to survive (Kitching, 1988; Stevenson & Haberman, 2009).

The next stage in this process is characterized by the workers' realization that they are oppressed, and that the structure of capitalism so constrains their lives that they are unable to live and work to their full human potential. According to Marx, the workers must revolt and over-throw the capitalists. However, the intent of this revolution is not for the workers to now oppress the capitalists, but for human beings to be united in an equalized utopia, in the form of communism (Kolakowski, 1978). The dialectic of historical materialism is a method for demonstrating to people that they are not separate from one another, or from their innate human nature, or from the material goods that they produce (Allman & Wallis, 1990).

Marx described historical materialism in his *Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859) in this way:

In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitute the economic structure of society—the real basis, on which rises [sic] a legal and political superstructure,

and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political, and intellectual life process in general. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that determines their consciousness. (Marx, 1859/1968, p. 182)

A question that arises concerning this passage is whether Marx was a determinist thinker (Kitching, 1988). Was Marx (1859/1968) suggesting that the “mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process...” (p. 182) to such an extent that men were not free to choose their work, or to change their circumstances (Kitching, 1988; Tucker, 1972)? Were men, as objects, experiencing unalterable stages of historical-economic development (Bottomore, 1991; Tucker, 1972; Kitching, 1988)? Marx (1848/1989) asserted that “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggle” (p.7) and capitalism results inevitably in alienation of the worker. The notion that Marx was a determinist can be countered by examining his view of praxis, which conceptualizes men as “conscious, creative, active beings” (Kitching, 1988, p. 26) and assumes that men can change their circumstances through radical actions (Bender, 1986; Dunayeskaya, 1973; Kitching, 1988; Tucker, 1972). This conceptualization re-visioned men as subjects who can therefore create history (Dunayeskaya, 1971).

### **Marx’s View of Alienated Labour**

Marx described alienated (or estranged) labour in the *Economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844* in this way:

What, then, constitutes the alienation of labour? First, in the fact that labour is *external* to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his intrinsic nature; that in his work, therefore, he does affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not freely develop his physical and mental energy, but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. ...His labour therefore is not voluntary but coerced: it is *forced labour*. Lastly, the external character of labour for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his own, but someone else's...It belongs to another; it is the loss of his self. A direct consequence of man's alienation from the product of his labour, from his life activity, from his species being, is the *alienation of man from man*. (Marx, 1844/1974, p. 66, emphasis in original)

When the products that a man makes are not his own, but are appropriated and sold by someone else, that man becomes self-alienated (loss of self). As a result of unequal economic relations, men become alienated from one another (Kitching, 1988; Stevenson & Haberman, 2009). According to Marx, "alienation and objectification are products of human *activity*" (emphasis in original) (Kitching, 1988, p. 19) and he argued therefore that men could change their circumstances by changing how they acted in relation to one another (Kitching, 1988). In this way Marx began to distinguish his philosophy from that of Hegel and Feuerbach, by linking thought to action (Bender, 1988; Wood, 2004).

Marx argued that what makes men conscious (their *species being*) is their ability for practical activity (Dunayeskaya, 1973; Kitching, 1988). When Marx states that "the social relations of men determine(s) [sic] their consciousness", he is saying that any relationship between men is one of either, alienation, or freedom. The activity of the

worker, as bound to the employ of the capitalist, is one of alienation. But the capitalist is also trapped in this dialectic of unconsciousness and alienation, because he believes his actions are necessary in order to control the workers and he is unaware that it could be otherwise (Kolakowski, 1978). Marx's theory is a way to demonstrate that "capital accumulation occurs solely through the exploitation of the working class" (Kitching, 1988, p. 33), but also he believed that once men recognized this idea, they could change their circumstances. Man is able to express his human nature when he is engaged in free, conscious, creative activity, informed by theory. This is praxis (Dunayeskaya, 1973; Kitching, 1988).

### **The Communist Solution**

Marx conceived of communism as dialectically united naturalism and humanism (Marx, 1844/1974; Wood, 2004). Naturalism shares some commonality with materialism, as naturalists believe that the "sole reality is the natural world, and this world is made up solely of matter" (Wood, 2004, p. 166). Humanism emphasizes human beings as creators of their world, not God. According to Marxist Humanism, men are creators of meaning "through generations of human creativity" (Sherratt, p. 10, 2006). Capitalism is de-humanizing, because such a structure can only result in un-equal power relations between people, and therefore people can never be free. The solution is to abolish private property and create a system of human equality, based on communism (Kitching, 1988).

Kolakowski (1978) states that Marx's Communism is not to be miss-construed as absolute egalitarianism wherein anything that cannot be shared is abolished, but rather a communism that allows for the development of individual creativity and recognition of men as social beings. As such, Marx's communism is similar to what some authors might

call socialism (Bender, 1986; Kolakowski, 1978; Allman & Wallis, 1990). Human creativity, or the material productive forces, as Marx referred to them, does not only entail items that are made for sale or profit, but also includes “ideas, social institutions, and values and indeed language” (Kitching, 1988, p. 21). Therefore, Marx’s theory should not be thought of as economic reductionism, but as a broad interpretation of activity that encompasses all facets of human creativity (Kitching, 1988). Such creative-practical activity forms the basis for Marx’s view of consciousness that in turn shapes his conceptualization of praxis (Kitching, 1988).

### **Marx’s Philosophy of Praxis**

Thus far, it may be possible to see that the crux of Marx’s philosophy was concerned with what it means to be human. Alienation is human activity that separates men from each other and from their innate human nature. Conversely, praxis conceptualizes persons as “creative, conscious active beings” (Kitching, 1988, p. 26), that, when properly understood, can return men to social relations with one another. For Marx, praxis is essential to realizing the solution to man’s oppression via communism (Bottomore, 1991; Kitching, 1998). Freire appropriated this view of consciousness as an active process in developing what he called conscientization (Freire, 1970/2009; Taylor, 1993).

Dunayeskaya (1973) argues that the concept of praxis cannot be understood if “the dialectic scaffolding of Marx’s philosophy of liberation” is removed (p. 265). Marx’s conceptualization of praxis consisted of dual dialectics: thought and action, and also, theory and practice intertwined, and as such represented a synthesis of his analyses of Hegel and Feuerbach, with his own more radical philosophy (Bender, 1986;

Dunayeskaya, 1973; Kitching, 19988; Kolakowski, 1978). Radical in the sense that he believed that the purpose of philosophy is to change men's lives, and it is from this stance that he criticized both Hegel and Feuerbach because of their different, yet essentially passive, conceptualizations of human consciousness (Kitching, 1988; Kolakowski, 1978). In Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*, he reveals a revolutionary or radical view of praxis as a theoretical-practical construct:

*Thesis I*

The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism—that of Feuerbach included—is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object* or of *contemplation*, but not as *human sensuous activity, practice*, not subjectively. Hence it happened that the *active* side, in contradistinction to materialism, was developed by idealism—but only abstractly, since, of course, idealism does not know real, sensuous activity as such. Feuerbach wants sensuous objects really differentiated from the thought objects, but he does not conceive human activity itself as *objective* activity. Hence, in the *Essence of Christianity*, he regards the theoretical attitude as the only genuinely human attitude, while practice is conceived and fixed only in its dirty-judaical [sic] form of appearance. Hence he does not grasp the significance of “revolutionary”, of “practical-critical,” activity. (Marx, 1845/1989, p. 243, emphasis in original).

Marx argued that representations of consciousness in Hegelian Idealism and Feuerbachian Materialism were inadequate, because neither of these philosophies captured the essential quality of men: that while they do think, they also act (Kitching, 1988). Indeed, according to Marx, men do not merely think, but think synergistically with

action (Kitching, 1988; Kolakowski, 1978). “In Marx’s view, ‘thought’ and ‘world’, ‘thought’ and ‘reality’ are ‘already and ‘always’ connected *through human activity*. It is human activity which, [*sic*] as it were, [*sic*] ‘joins’ thought to the world” (Kitching, 1988, p. 29, emphasis in original). Kitching’s analysis is significant because it highlights how Marx conceived of praxis as thought and action intertwined. According to Kitching (1988) it was Marx’s view that a focus on contemplation of philosophical problems leads to more “philosophical puzzles” (p. 29); however philosophically informed action could help solve those puzzles.

Hence, Marx’s most often quoted statement concerning praxis, from his *Theses on Feuerbach* reads: “Philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways, the point is to change it” (Marx, 1845/1983, p. 158, emphasis in original). Hegel, as an idealist, would have asserted that his interpretation of the world was enough to change it, because as man comes to know himself as God, he experiences absolute freedom; therefore if he knows himself as free, he is free (Kitching, 1988; Tucker, 1972). For Marx, such an interpretation is not enough; one cannot be free *in his mind*, as it were, if, in the real world he is still bound to the employ of capitalists (Kitching, 1988). Action is the only way to achieve change in a materialist (Marxian) conception of reality (Kitching, 1988; Tucker, 1972; Wood, 2004). For Marx, the purpose of philosophy, or theory, is to provide a structure for men to not only understand their circumstances, but to inform any action that is taken to change those circumstances (Kitching, 1988).

The question as to whether Marx equated philosophy with theory is difficult to answer. In one of his early writings, Marx stated, “the practice of philosophy...is itself *theoretical*” (Marx, 1841, cited in Bender, 1986, p. 15, emphasis in original). Marx

believed that philosophy's purpose was to reflect the world as it is, and philosophy would achieve its object once it had produced a comprehensive critique of that world (Bender, 1986; Bottomore, 1991). Marx's appropriation and re-configuration of Hegel's dialectic and historicism, along with Marx's own conception of humanism is distinctly philosophical (Bottomore, 1991). However, Marx was critical of philosophers' tendency to only interpret the world, and he was drawn to science (empirics) as a theory for explaining his materialist views (Bottomore, 1991). Science, Marx asserted, could prove what was real through objective observation. This desire to demonstrate historical materialism as a scientific theory is consistent with the empirical view that was espoused by some of the thinkers of the post-enlightenment age in which Marx and Engels lived (Bottomore, 1991; Stevenson & Haberman, 2009). Therefore it could be said that Marx was both a philosopher and a theorist, and his thought is a combination or synthesis of philosophies and theories, which he weaved into a cohesive whole (Bottomore, 1991).

In the following quote, also from Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx points out that to merely contemplate theory, to study it in isolation neglects to acknowledge the dialectical relationship that must exist between theory and practice. As such, theory could be said to be an essential component, or pre-requisite of thought and action (Kitching, 1988):

*Thesis II*

The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a *practical question*. Man must prove the truth, i.e. the reality and power, the this-sidedness [sic] of his thinking in practice. The dispute

over the reality or non-reality of thinking that is isolated from practice is a purely *scholastic* question (Marx, 1845/1989, p. 243, emphasis in original).

Thus for Marx, theory must be actualized within, or through practice, and not simply pondered as a separate intellectual exercise. There is no way to prove the truth of a theory without testing it, or to verify that a theory works without putting it to use in practice. Practice, for Marx, takes the form of a revolution, as “a practical movement” (Marx & Engels, 1940, p. 69). However Marx’s dialectic of theory and practice implies that there can be no theory-practice *gap*, because the theory and the practice are (or should be) always happening continuously. Further, “The real, practical dissolution of these phrases, the removal of these notions from the consciousness of men, will...be effected [*sic*] by altered circumstances, not by theoretical deductions” (Marx & Engels, 1940, p. 32).

Marx states that creativity is an essential quality of man’s species-being, which sets human beings apart from animals, and it is this distinction between the thinking of human beings versus the consciousness of animals that is embedded in his notion of praxis, as the following quote illustrates (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010; Kitching, 1988):

A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst of architects from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure from imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour process we get the result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at the commencement. He not only effects a change in form in the material on which

he works, but also he realizes a purpose of his own (Marx, cited in Kitching, 1988, p. 27).

This interpretation of consciousness as an idea formed in the imagination and then constructed in reality is part of what Aristotle called *logos* (Dunne, 1993; Taylor, 1994). This idea will be re-visited later in the paper, as Freire also incorporated logos into his conceptualization of conscientization (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010; Taylor, 1993)

Praxis for Marx is an analytic method for applying theory to practice, and for practice to again inform theory, as a dialectical relation, not as linear cause and effect (Allman & Wallis, 1990; Kolakowski, 1978). Exactly how dialectically united theory-practice is to be achieved without emphasizing one before the other is not made entirely clear by Marx (Kitching, 1988; Taylor, 1993). For Marx, theory without practice is “mere contemplation”, and practice without theory is “un-informed radicalism” (Dunayeskaya, 1973; Kitching, 1988). This is why Marx and Engels were asked to write *The Communist Manifesto*, because the leaders of the Communist Party believed that in order for people to act (revolt) they required a comprehensive theoretical basis (Bender, 1986). Thought and action, or practice, conceived dialectically, enables “man to contemplate himself in a world he has created” (Marx & Engels, 1844, cited in Bender, 1986, p. 168). Thus Marx’s theory becomes a way to know the world, and if one can change their view of the world, one can change the world (Kolakowski, 1978). As will be shown later, Freire echoes Marx’s view of praxis as path to action/revolution in the project of emancipating illiterate peasants in Brazil (Freire, 1970/2009; Taylor, 1993).

### **Part two: Freireian Pedagogy and Praxis**

As stated at the outset of this paper, praxis is viewed as a central concept of Paulo Freire's emancipatory pedagogy, and the discussion now focuses on his work. Many authors consider Freire to be one of the most influential education theorists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Allman, 2009; Allman & Wallis, Dale & Hyslop-Margison, Taylor, 1993) and his work has been taken up by teachers from diverse disciplines, including nursing (Bevis & Watson, 1989; Owen-Mills, 1995; Varcoe, 1997). The reasons why Freire's pedagogy and specifically the concept of praxis are considered relevant to nursing and nursing education will be explored later in the paper.

In order to understand Freireian pedagogy, an introduction to Karl Marx's philosophy of praxis has been presented. However, it should be noted that the word praxis has been the subject of diverse conceptualizations, before and after Marx, by such philosophers as Aristotle, Arndt, Gadamer, Habermas, and scholars associated with the Frankfurt School (Connor, 2004; Dunne, 1993; Held, 1986). In addition, Marx's historical-economic theory has been studied extensively: for example, members of the Frankfurt School developed Marxist thought into a range of philosophies that were placed under the umbrella term *critical theory* (Connor, 2004; Held, 1986). However, further discussion of the various permutations of praxis or Marxian theory is beyond the scope of this paper.

#### **Freire's Background and Early Experiences with Class Distinctions**

Paulo Freire was born in Recife, Brazil in 1921, the youngest child in a middle class Catholic family (Bhattacharya, 2011; Taylor, 1993). As a result of the economic collapse of 1929 Freire's family experienced profound, yet temporary, poverty for several

years (Bhattacharya, 2011; Taylor, 1993). Hunger interfered with Freire's ability to learn and he was required to repeat two years of school (Taylor, 1993).

Freire played with children who were better off than he, and also children who were more desperately poor (Bhattacharya, 2011; Taylor, 1993). Freire states: "in spite of the hunger that gave us solidarity with the children from the poor outskirts of the town, in spite of the bond that united us in our search for ways to survive – our playtime, as far as the poor children were concerned, marked us as people from another world who happened to fall accidentally into their world" (Freire, cited in Bhattacharya, 2011, p. 97). Thus while Freire understood that he shared the experience of hunger with these children, his middle class status designated him as an outsider (Bhattacharya, 2011; Taylor, 1993). Freire realized that his class afforded him privileges, such as education and employment that many of his childhood comrades would not accrue.

The Freire family's finances improved by the time he entered university in 1943, to study law (Bhattacharya, 2011; Taylor, 1993). Freire worked briefly as a trade union lawyer, but was soon drawn to teaching. He tutored privately for those who could afford it, and taught people who lived in the slums and shanty towns of Recife (Bhattacharya, 2011; Taylor, 1993). Later Freire was invited to chair a literacy programme sponsored by the Brazilian government (Bhattacharya, 2011; Taylor, 1993). It was in this role and in other subsequent educational-leadership positions, that he met large numbers of "fishermen, labourers, and peasants" (Freire, 1987, cited in Taylor, 1993, p. 22), and he was angered by the dual injustices of poverty and illiteracy that were consequences of class inequality (Taylor, 1993). Further, only people who could read and write Portuguese were permitted to vote, thus enculturating people into a *culture of silence*:

denied a voice for political change (Taylor, 1993). Freire realized that literacy education must encompass an understanding of the broader social, political, and economic conditions that determined how people lived, and it was within this context that he began to develop his pedagogy (Freire, 1970/2009; Taylor, 1993; Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2011).

### **Marxian Influences on Freire's Pedagogy**

Freire culled from Marx's philosophy a language for articulating that poverty was not inevitable, but was the result of human behaviors and a human-created discourse that reinforced the dominant role of the oppressors' vis-à-vis the submissive role of the oppressed (Freire, 1970; Taylor, 1993). Referring to fishermen, labourers, and peasants in some of his writings, Freire seems to imply that these are the people he denotes as oppressed (Taylor, 1993). However, in a lot of his other work, Freire does not name the oppressed or the oppressors (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010; Taylor, 1993). Caution is therefore recommended in inferring that the oppressors may be the land owners who employed the peasants, or perhaps legislators, or teachers, because Freire is not specific, and he has been criticized for this (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010; Taylor, 1993).

Freire employed Marx's dialectic of historical materialism to analyze the multiple systematic conditions that kept illiterate persons of Brazil in poverty and submission, long after the end of the Great Depression (Allman & Wallis, 1990; Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010; Taylor, 1993). Informed by his reading of Marx, Freire recognized that most literacy projects in Brazil were situated in the discourse of market economics: designed with the intent to produce qualified persons *as objects*, who could read and write well enough to be employable, but who were nonetheless not equipped to *act as*

*subjects*, that is, to critique the way that dominant elites controlled the economy, politics, and education (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010; Freire, 1970/2009). Freire agreed with Marx that oppression was a consequence of human thought and action, and Freire concluded that people could change their circumstances via a directed education programme (Bhattacharya, 2011; Freire, 1970/2009; Taylor, 1993).

Marx's analysis of human consciousness and human relations as situated within a materialist, historical reality comes through very clearly in the following quote, as Freire states that people have become de-humanized and alienated as a result of un-equal power relations. When Freire states that "dehumanization is not...destiny...but the result of an unjust order", he is suggesting that since people have created this unjust order, people can change it (Freire, 1970/2009; Taylor, 1993):

Dehumanization, which marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen, but also (though in a different way) those who have stolen it, is a *distortion* of the vocation of becoming more fully human. This distortion occurs within history, but it is not an historical vocation. Indeed, to admit of dehumanization as an historical vocation would lead either to cynicism or total despair. The struggle for humanization, for the emancipation of labor, for the overcoming of alienation, for the affirmation of men and women as persons would be meaningless. This struggle is possible only because dehumanization, although a concrete historical fact, is *not* a given destiny but the result of an unjust order that engenders violence in the oppressors, which in turn dehumanizes the oppressed (Freire, 1970/2009, p. 44, emphasis in original).

In Marx's analysis of alienated labour, the capitalist and the workers are bound in a dialectical contradiction (Kitching, 1988; Kolakowski). Freire (1970/2009) identified what he called oppressed group behavior: persons identify with the oppressor and equate freedom with the status of higher employment. According to Freire, identifying with the oppressor in this way would only re-produce oppressor-oppressed domination.

Oppression can only be overcome once the oppressed understand themselves as agents: "...the oppressed must not, in seeking to regain their humanity (which is a way to create it), become in turn oppressors of the oppressors, but rather restorers of the humanity of both" (Freire, 1970/2009, p. 44). In this way Freire echoes Marx's Communism, in that once the workers recognize their oppression the goal is to free both themselves and the capitalists (Freire, 1970/2009; Taylor, 1993).

### **The Banking Concept of Education**

Freire (1970/2009) criticized traditional models of education wherein students are expected to passively record content that is "narrated" (p. 71) by the teacher, followed by memorization and reproduction of content on examinations. In this "banking concept of education" students are the objects who know little and teachers are the subjects who "deposit" all their knowledge into the students' minds (Freire, 1970/2009).

Freire is speaking dialectically when he writes of a movement between contradictory relations: in the Banking concept of education teachers and students are bound in an oppressor-oppressed contradiction that is de-humanizing, and neither party is free (Allman, 2009; Allman & Wallis, 1990; Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010; Freire, 1970/2009; Taylor, 1993). The purpose of Freire's pedagogy is to show the oppressed that through their own thought and actions, this contradictory relation can be overcome:

“the solution of this contradiction is born in the labor which brings into the world this new being: no longer oppressor nor [*sic*] longer oppressed, but human in the process of achieving freedom” (Freire, p. 49).

Freire argued that traditional education is oppressive in at least two ways: by promoting the idea that all knowledge is value-free, absolute and static; and by reproducing a discourse that privileges the epistemological authority of the teacher, whilst simultaneously treating students as empty vessels to be filled (Allman & Wallis, 1990; Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010; Freire, 1970/2009; Taylor, 1993). It is therefore the educator’s task to recognize how their own behaviors reinforce this oppressive paradigm and adopt a pedagogy that will transform teachers’ and students’ relationship to knowledge, as well as, transform the contradictory relation between teacher and student (Allman & Wallis, 1990; Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010; Freire, 1970/2009; Taylor, 1993). To achieve this, the teacher does not give power to the students, but facilitates the educational experience in such a way that students know themselves as equals to the teacher in the knowledge production process. Education must foster in students an understanding that there are multiple interpretations of knowledge and that any claims to truth must be investigated. This is a *knowledge as inquiry* process that is approached via dialogue and what Freire called problem posing (Allman, 2009; Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010; Freire, 1970/2009; Taylor, 1993)

Many authors argue that attempting to equalize the student-teacher relation presents problems for any teacher who wants to adapt Freire’s pedagogy to an academic setting, because the teacher is required to evaluate the students (Mooney & Nolan. 2005; Taylor, 1993). Indeed, evaluative requirements such as grades provide some assurance

that students will be assessed equally (Taylor, 1993). Further, Freire is not specific as to how a teacher may achieve a democratic classroom process (Taylor, 1993). Freire (1970/2009) designed his pedagogy for a specific purpose, and insists that transcending the teacher-student contradiction is possible and essential to the project of emancipating illiterate persons. Freire emphasizes that the way to achieve this dual transformation of knowledge and power is through conscientization, dialogue, and praxis (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010; Freire, 1970/2009; Taylor, 1993). Each of these concepts must be enacted with intention, and cannot be reduced to a method or a confluence of strategies (Allman, 2009; Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010; Taylor, 1993).

### **Conscientization, Praxis, and Dialogue in Freirean Pedagogy**

Freire (1970/2009) agreed with Aristotle and Marx that human beings' consciousness is different from that of animals, as this quote illustrates: "I shall start by reaffirming that humankind, as beings of the *praxis*, differ from animals, which are beings of pure activity. Animals do not consider the world; they are immersed in it. In contrast human beings emerge from the world, objectify it, and in so doing can understand it and transform it with their labor" (p. 123, emphasis in original). Freire evokes a Marxian interpretation of human consciousness as intimately, dialectically related with the world; if education can foster in people an understanding (via their thought) that they live in and create their world, they can therefore see that through their *labor* (their action or practice) they can change their world (Allman, 2009; Taylor, 1993). Freire believed that the critical reflection that occurred via conscientization and dialogue would result in a changed perception, or transformation for each individual, and then each *transformed* individual would join with others to effect social change (Freire,

1979/2000; Taylor, 1993; Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010). As such, conscientization appears to be best or properly enacted *with others*, to recognize and critique social inequalities and could be thought of as consciousness-raising (Roberts, 2000).

Additionally, Freire appropriated Aristotelian *logos* as a kind of self-awareness that is essential to praxis (Freire, 1970/2009; Taylor, 1993). Taylor (1993) describes logos as “reason characterized by intentionality and a capacity to deliberate” (p. 46), and also logos means that people have the ability to express themselves through language (Dunne, 1993) and to “name one’s world” (Taylor, p. 47). According to Aristotle, only human beings have the ability to reason and to articulate that reason through speech (Dunne, 1993); as such, *logos* informs what Freire calls conscientization (in Portuguese conscientização), that in turn is the basis for praxis (Freire, 1970/2009; Taylor, 1993).

Freire married the concept of logos with Aristotle’s view of theory, as an ability to stand back and objectively examine the world, or reality (Taylor, 1993). According to Dunne (1993), Aristotle conceived *theoria* (Greek for theory) as a human process that is engaged in for its own sake; as a critical contemplation of the world. Therefore the purpose of *theoria* is to cultivate new knowledge, not to inform any other area of human endeavor, including practice (Dunne, 1993). Taylor (1993) reads Aristotle differently, stating that theory cannot occur separately from a person’s context or experience; it must exist *in the world*; as such, theory and practice are dialectically united as praxis. Perhaps the most important idea to glean from Freire’s appropriation of Aristotelian *theoria* is that it becomes a way to *read the world and the word*, and therefore theory is a pre-requisite to true knowledge (logos) (Taylor, 1993). Theory informed knowledge is an idea, with which Marx would agree (Dunayeskaya, 1973; Kitching, 1988)

Logos is an important part of Freire's literacy project, because he did not want people to simply recite what they read, but to critically engage with the text (Taylor, 1993). Freire believed that education must endow persons with an ability to understand and critique what they were reading; he called this *speaking the word* (logos), and therefore education is a way for people to understand their relationship to the world dialectically: to read the world/word and speak the word (Taylor, 1993). Freire believed that to speak the word was a basic human right (Taylor, 1993). Freire states that logos can be achieved via dialogue that occurs between teachers and students: "learning to read and write ought to be an opportunity for us to discover what *speaking the word* really means: a human act implying reflection and action" (Freire, 1970, p. 213, emphasis in original).

In Freire's view, literacy must include a critical awareness of what was being said (and not said) and by whom. Without a critical awareness, reading potentially reinforces dominant discourses and power relations that keep people oppressed (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, Freire, 1970/2009; Taylor, 1993). For example, requiring students to read so-called *classics*, written by Caucasian European or North American men, portrays specific interpretations of first world persons, culture, and history (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010). Emphasizing such works reflects a lack of awareness of alternative narrative understandings of the world that may be relevant to the lived experience of people in different circumstances (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010).

Marx employs dialectic analysis as multi-layered, multi-directional, multi-conceptual scaffolding in his philosophy (Dunayeskaya, 1973; Kolakowski, 1978). Freire's writings demonstrate similar critique, language, and structure, as he reveals, in different passages, that dialogue achieves praxis as a dialectic of reflection and action,

theory and practice (Allman, 2009; Allman & Wallis, 1990; Taylor, 1993), for example: “But human activity consists of action and reflection: it is praxis; it is the transformation of the world. And as praxis, it requires theory to illuminate it. Human activity is theory and practice; it is reflection and action. It cannot...be reduced to either verbalism or activism” (Freire, p. 125). “Human activity...is not verbalism or activism”, is a direct acknowledgement of Marxian thought: “theory without practice is mere contemplation...practice without theory...is un-informed radicalism” (Dunayeskaya, 1973; Kitching, 1988). Theory, for Marx and Freire is not meant to be pondered in the ivory towers of academia, but to be put to use in practice (Taylor, 1993).

Freire states that problem posing and dialogue are strategies that can be employed by teachers to engage students in a *knowledge as inquiry* process, to read the world and the word (Allman, 2009; Allman & Wallis, 1990; Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010; Taylor, 1993). Through dialogue, students and teachers problematize, or uncover, the way that written texts portray social relations or political-economic discourses that perpetuate oppressive situations (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010; Taylor, 1993). “Problematizing” is achieved by *naming* a situation as un-just; *reflecting* on why the current situation (reality) is the way it is; followed by *action*, “what can be done to change this situation” (Taylor, 1993, p. 73, emphasis in original)? Thus, problem posing is the process via which teachers and students achieve praxis: “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire, 1970/2009, p. 51).

### **Critiques of Freirean Pedagogy**

In this preceding conceptualization of praxis, reflection is similar to contemplation or “correct thinking” (Freire, 1970/2009, cited in Taylor, 1993, p. 55).

Two questions could be asked: how does the teacher avoid projecting his or her “correct thinking” onto students? Whose version of thinking or interpretation of reality is correct: the student-teacher or the teacher-student (Taylor, 1993)? By way of explanation, Freire states, “to think correctly means to try to discover and understand what is found to be hidden away in things and in facts that we observe and analyze” (Freire, cited in Taylor, 1993, p. 55). However this statement does not define correct thinking explicitly. As such, problem posing may be un-wittingly enacted as a benign form of banking education, because the teacher may unconsciously guide students to a pre-determined “correct” outcome (Taylor, 1993, p.55).

Another criticism that has been directed at Freire is his tendency to dichotomize oppositional forces, for example, if one is not with the oppressed in solidarity, one is an oppressor (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010; Taylor, 1993). Another example: if a teacher does not actively promote a knowledge-as-inquiry dialogical process in all classroom interactions, he/she is perpetuating a knowledge-as-content banking approach to education (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010; Taylor, 1993). The validity of these criticisms is difficult to tease apart. On the one hand, Freire’s use of such dichotomies over simplifies social relations, for example, notions of gender are comprised of the binary men and women, however, the difficulties of women who experience oppression would not be the same as those who identify as trans-gendered (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010). As well, identifying all black people as oppressed suggests that everyone in this group would have the same concerns; black persons from different economic circumstances might have different experiences of oppression (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010). Freire’s use of dialectic roles discounts the idea that a person could be

an oppressor and oppressed at the same time (Dale & Hyslop-Margison). For example, a foreman could be oppressed by management, whilst simultaneously oppressing those whom he is supervising (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010). Further, an educative experience may be both liberating and dominating, depending on the context and interpretation of the participants (Taylor, 1993). On the other hand, in order to understand these oppositional forces dialectically, one must distinguish the characteristics of each, and then consider them in relation to one another (Taylor, 1993).

### **Post-Colonial Critiques of Marxian Theory Relevant to Freireian Pedagogy**

Paulo Freire appropriated Marxian theory in his analysis of the oppression of illiterate persons in post-colonial Brazil. Marx had specific views as to how his theory ought to be applied in post-colonial third world countries (Bottomore, 1991; Said, 1979/2003; Young, 2004). Therefore the following points are presented in order to foreground some questions concerning the suitability of applying Marxian theory to other situations or contexts.

During Marx's lifetime, Britain colonized India and began to trade in material goods such as tea and cotton (Bottomore, 1991; Said, 1979/2003; Young, 2004). Marx was appalled by the endemic suffering of persons in India due to existing feudal systems (Bottomore, 1991; Said, 1979/2003; Young, 2004). Marx argued that feudalism perpetuated oppression through the caste system, and superstitious beliefs amongst the populace prevented progress (Said, 1979/2003). Therefore Marx asserted that such a system must be abolished (Bottomore, 1991). Additionally he deplored the abuse by colonialists towards indigenous persons, but he also believed that imperialist interference in India was a necessary step towards creating a more progressive society (Bottomore,

1991, Said, 1979/2003). In an 1853 essay for the New York Daily Tribune, Marx revealed his belief in the superiority of English imperialism over the so-called backward society of feudal India: “England has to fulfill a double mission in India: one destructive, the other regenerating—the annihilation of old Asiatic society, and the laying of the material foundations of Western society in Asia” (Marx, 1853, cited by Bender, 1986, p. 459).

According to Marx, feudal India must be dis-mantled via imperialist force and re-made in the image of the Western European model of political-economic capitalism (Bottomore, 1991; Said, 1979/2003). Only then, Marx argued, could colonized societies undergo a natural progression from capitalism to communism (Bottomore, 1991). It does not occur to Marx that installing an imperialist government in third world countries would re-produce the kind of oppressive regime he disdained (Bottomore, 1991; Said, 1979/2003). In this regard “the dominant force of opposition to capitalism, Marxism, as a body of knowledge itself remains complicit with, and even extends, the system to which it is opposed” (Young, 2003, p. 34).

According to Said (1979/2003) and Young (2004), Marx’s view was representative of a belief that was common at the time: *correct* history must be congruent with the trajectory of Western, European Industrialized nations. Such a view implies that Western European history is conceived as one, homologous narrative that can be applied in any context and, due to its perceived superiority to any other governing system, is the correct economic-political structure via which any so-called backward country will become more civilized (Said, 1979/2003). Once capitalism is ensconced in a third world

country, class struggle can ensue leading to the communist vision Marx espoused (Bottomore, 1991).

In much of his later writings Marx re-treated from his philosophy of praxis and tended to focus on the class struggle within only an economic context (Kitching, 1988). Recall that *The German Ideology* was written in 1841 but not published until 1938 (Dunayevskaya, 1973; Kitching, 1988). It was in this work that Marx and Engels laid out their materialist theory of history that culminated in the philosophy of praxis (Kitching, 1988). Throughout his life Marx re-visited themes from *The German Ideology* however, lack of access to this work, combined with Marx's tendency to focus more on an economic determinist view of social relations in his later writings, resulted in some misunderstandings of Marxist theory (Dunayevskaya, 1973; Kitching, 1988). Of course as Marx's earlier work became available, some Marxist scholars re-vised their account of his ideas (Kitching, 1988). However, according to Young (2003), some orthodox Marxists continue to view social relations only through an economic lens, thus minimizing other oppressive relations, such as gender, racial, or cultural in-equality. According to Young (2003), "...orthodox Marxism ...adheres first and foremost to economism, [*sic*] the reductive singular explanation of all human phenomena through economic determinism, whereby all human life and history, all aspects of culture and ideology are merely the reflection of economic relations" (p. 10).

Within this orthodox view of Marxism, the only persons who can mount a revolution are the proletariat, and not persons who are disenfranchised due to gender, racial, or cultural in-equality (Young, 2003). From a Marxist viewpoint, these disenfranchised persons must be conceived as *other*; outside the worker-capitalist

contradiction, and yet paradoxically the only solution to their oppression is to subsume their concerns within the class struggle dialectic (Young, 2003). It is difficult to comprehend how such a solution could liberate these persons (Young, 2003). Such a solution completely ignores the unique issues that each of these other groups may have (Young, 2003). Specifically, Young argues that it would be a mistake to apply Marxist theory of class struggle to colonialism; that is, to think of the colonized as having similar concerns as the proletariat, because present day politics are much more complex, and the foci of power cannot be reduced to “a single source in a master, king, or class – and...thus easily be reversed” (Young, 2003, p. 37).

Such an application of Marx’s theory suggests a one-size-fits-all approach to equalizing social relations in any historical-political context. Such a view of theory would be consistent with an empirical science, wherein one’s *findings* could be generalized to any population or setting (Stevenson & Haberman, 2009). Indeed, Marx and Engels would likely agree with such an application of their theory, since they thought of themselves as social scientists (Bottomore, 1991; Kitching, 1988; Stevenson & Haberman, 2009). Based on the above analyses, one could question whether Marx’s theory of history is appropriate for analyzing oppressor-oppressed relations in post-colonial Brazil, since the concerns and experiences of illiterate persons in that country would likely be much different from those of European workers who lived a century earlier.

These post-colonial analyses of Marxism are significant for critiquing Freirean pedagogy, because in much of his writing Freire relied on Marx’s conceptualization of class distinctions; which he then applied in an educational and cultural context (Taylor,

1993). Bowers (cited by Roberts, 2000), in a critique that is similar to Young (2003) and Said (1979/2003), argued that Freire portrayed a belief that the success of any liberatory education project could only be measured against an interpretation of progress that is equated with the narrative of Western, industrial nations. Bowers also suggested that Freire unwittingly practiced from the perspective that illiterate persons are by definition un-empowered, and are therefore in need of “saving”; thus the more powerful person confers power upon them. Although Freire was careful to warn educators against such dangers in enacting his pedagogy, these critiques are important reminders. Additionally, Freire’s reluctance in not naming the oppressors or the oppressed over-simplifies social (or educational) relations into broad categories that do not assist one to understand how inequality may be viewed by different cultures or classes (Taylor, 1993). Furthermore, one is left to wonder how dialogue ought to take place between individuals, such as between teacher and student, because each of these persons may have unique experiences that cannot be generalized from, or to, a larger collective (Taylor, 1993).

Freire does not define what he means by class or whether he actually equated class with culture (Taylor, 1993). This lack of specificity presents problems for any well-meaning educator, since within any group of teachers-students there may be subsets of persons from different classes, races, and cultures. Recall that Freire believed that the critical reflection that occurred via conscientization and dialogue would result in a changed perception, or transformation for each individual, and then each *transformed* individual would join with others to effect social change (Freire, 1979/2000; Taylor, 1993; Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010). However, it is important to remember that culture is socially constructed, for example, persons who identify with a particular culture

“possess a common code that attaches the same meaning to the same words, the same type of behavior and the same works” (Bourdieu, cited by Taylor, 1993, p. 67). Therefore there is a risk that in the process of conscientization with a group of individuals, an educator could project a particular view of social transformation that is counter to some aspects of indigenous persons’ traditional culture (Taylor, 1993).

### **Part Three: Freirean Praxis in Nursing Education**

At the onset of this paper, it was noted that praxis in nursing education is appealing for several reasons: as a teaching methodology that is an alternative to behaviorist teaching approaches, as an emancipatory theory for addressing the oppression that is perceived to be endemic in nursing and health care, and as a way to close the ostensible practice-theory gap via reflective analysis (Allen, 2010; Bent, 1993; Bevis & Watson, 1989; Boychuk-Duchscher, 2000; Harden, 1996; Lyckhage & Pennbrant, 2014; Owen-Mills, 1994; Rolfe, 1993; Varcoe, 1997). Although there are many other conceptualizations of praxis that nursing has appropriated, including associating the concept with caring or feminism (Connor, 2004), the focus in this paper has been on Paulo Freire’s interpretation of praxis, informed by Marxian philosophy.

This section will begin by discussing the ontological assumptions that distinguish Hegelian, Marxian, and Freireian thought, and contrasting these assumptions with some of the ontological assumptions that inform the discipline of nursing. Such a discussion is important, because one’s chosen teaching or practice methodology ought to align with one’s ontological and theoretical beliefs about nursing (Cody, 2000; Northrup & Purkis, 2001). Following this discussion consideration will be given to the idea, held by some nurse educators that Freireian praxis ought to be extended to include emancipation of the

person who is the focus nursing care. As will be discussed, when the emancipatory intent of Freirean pedagogy is adopted un-critically, students miss-understand the construct *patient as expert in their own health* and risk fragmenting their practice, possibly leading to patient harm.

### **Implications of Hegelian, Marxian, and Freireian Ontology for the Discipline of Nursing**

Hegel, Marx, and Freire held different ontological assumptions about the nature of reality and human consciousness that shaped their views of practice/theory and knowledge/action. Given the nursing appropriation of praxis (as practice/theory, knowledge/action) from Freireian pedagogy, it is important to un-cover these assumptions and contrast these to the ontological assumptions that have been identified within the discipline of nursing.

According to the Oxford World Encyclopedia (2014), ontology is concerned with “the branch of metaphysics that studies the basic nature of things; the essence of ‘being’ itself” (para.1). A philosopher’s worldview is based on his/her ontological assumptions about the nature of reality and what it means to be human (Thoun, 2013). Depending on one’s ontology, different theories (knowledge/science) are developed, and different research or practice methodologies are enacted (Northup & Purkis, 2001).

Currently, there are two dominant ontologies that are prevalent in nursing: one is based on a human science perspective, or a *unitary ontology*. According to this view, human beings are conceptualized as in-separable from their environment, their world, or the universe (Mitchell & Cody, 1992; Newman, Smith, Pharris, & Jones, 2008; Northup & Purkis, 2001). Alternatively, a natural science perspective, or *dualistic ontology* views

persons as separate from their environment, their world, or the universe (Mitchell & Cody, 1992; Northrup & Purkis, 2001; Thoun, 2013).

*A unitary ontology* posits the human being as a “living nexus” (Mitchell & Cody, 1992, p. 54) who is in-separable from the world-universe, interconnected with others, historically and culturally situated and, connected with all that is (Mitchell & Cody, 1992; Northrup & Purkis, 2001). Research from a unitary ontological perspective focuses on understanding human experiences, and “the researcher, a living being too, is inexorably and unequivocally ‘in’ and ‘of’ what is being investigated” (Mitchell & Cody, 1992, p. 55). Nursing practice or research methodologies would seek to understand and interpret human experience as it is lived (Mitchell & Cody, 1992; Northrup & Purkis, 2001).

In contrast, natural science is based on notions of Cartesian dualism, wherein a person is conceived as a bio-psycho-social-spiritual being who is viewed as separate from the world (Northrup & Purkis, 2001). As such, biological or sociological processes are studied in isolation, and the researcher endeavors to control or remove any other data that may interfere with objective study (Northrup & Purkis, 2001). The scientist is seen as an objective observer, who determines what counts as “truth”, and seeks to *explain* rather than *interpret* phenomena (Northrup & Purkis, 2001, p.64). This view of science is consistent with empirics (Mitchell & Cody, 1992; Northrup & Purkis, 2001).

In nursing, differences in the natural and human sciences are used to frame how one practices, for example, health is conceptualized differently between these two paradigms (Northrup & Purkis, 2001). From a natural science perspective, health is conceptualized as the absence of disease, or compared to a standardized norm, however,

proponents of a human science perspective would argue that one's interpretation of health is based on one's values, and can "only be described by the person experiencing it" (Northup & Purkis, 2001, p. 67).

In Hegelian philosophy, God-Man, Idea-Spirit is dialectically united in a continuous unity-separation-unity process that plays out across infinity (Dunayevskaya, 1973; Kitching, 1988; Tucker, 1972). Hegel's dialectic expresses his ontology, as he sees man as continuously evolving to recognize himself as God, and, the idea (thought) as united with human essence, or spirit, deepens in this Self-understanding over time (Kitching, 1988; Tucker, 1972). According to Tucker (1972), Hegel's ontology expressed the view that "God and world are one" (p. 47), and this is a different ontology than that of Marx, Freire, and clearly, nursing. Recall that the Hegelian dialectic can best be understood as a historically situated psychological process of "Hegelian spirit in its quest to know itself as the Absolute" (Tucker, p. 58). When this happens, God-Man experiences absolute freedom (Kitching, 1988; Tucker, 1972).

Marx asserted that it is through material productive forces that one becomes alienated, not via an estranged relationship with God-Self that can never be reconciled. Thus Marx rejected the Idealist ontology of Hegel but re-formulated Hegel's dialectic to conceive Man's relationship to the material world as a continuous unity-separation-unity process that occurs across history. Therefore the ontology of Marx is based on a materialist, objective view of reality that is consistent with the natural sciences, and Marx's dialectic method expresses this ontology. Marx conceived historical materialism as a scientific endeavor that sought to explain human relations; a theory *proven* in

practice, and then *generalized* to other persons, situations, or contexts (Young, 2003). Generalizability is another tenet of the natural sciences (Northrup & Purkis, 2001).

Although Marx was a materialist, he never rejected Hegel's dialectic methodology, but employed it to demonstrate theory-in-practice, thought-in-action as a dialectic unity, and perhaps more importantly for Marx, he believed that his philosophy of praxis must portray a revolutionary intent; to change the world (Dunayeskaya, 1973). As Dunayeskaya asserts, Marx's praxis is based on a "dialectic scaffolding of liberation" (p. 265) that, if removed, would strip Marxian praxis of its full meaning. Marx's dialectic of theory-in-practice implies that there can be no theory-practice gap, because the theory and the practice are (or should be) always happening continuously (Kitching, 1988).

Marx's dialectical philosophy of praxis must be taken in to account when studying Freire's conceptualization of praxis, because Freire claims to draw from Marxian praxis in his work. However, as will be discussed, Freire does not appropriate Marx's, or Hegel's dialectic, and therefore his view of praxis is dichotomized as theory and practice, reflection and action. Such a view of praxis would perpetuate the theory-practice gap, reflecting a dualist ontology that would seem to be at odds with a unitary ontology that some nurses espouse. Recall that some nurse educators are concerned about the ostensible gap between theory and practice in nursing, because of the perception that theory is not relevant to practice. Therefore, a dialectic of *theory-in-practice*, rather than *theory and practice*, may provide a different way to conceive praxis for nursing; this idea will be discussed later in the paper.

Although Freire read Hegel it is not clear to what extent Freire identified with Hegel's ontology. Some Freirean scholars suggest that Hegel's historicism resonated for

Freire, as he believed that people everywhere were impacted by the time period and the culture within which they lived (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010; Taylor, 1993).

However, Freire views human beings as separate from the world that he hopes persons will transform via conscientization, and their *labor*. The following quote reflects the objective, materialist ontology of Freire (1970/2009), that is distinct from Hegel's:

I shall start by reaffirming that humankind, as beings of the *praxis*, differ from animals, which are beings of pure activity. Animals do not consider the world; they are immersed in it. In contrast, human beings emerge from the world, objectify it, and in so doing can understand it and transform it with their labor.

(p. 125)

Freire's statement that praxis is "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (1970/2009, p. 51), also suggests that Freire conceptualizes persons as outside or separate from their world, and also, that the reflection occurs first, followed by a transforming action. In dichotomizing reflection and action, Freire appears to be promoting a dualist ontology that is in contrast to Marx's ontology: synthesized theory-practice, thought-action dialectic that is happening continuously. It would seem to this author that Freire's view differed from Hegel's ontology, but, also, Freire's view of praxis represents a different ontology to Marx's.

Freire is not consistent in describing his view of praxis; sometimes he states that persons are "beings of praxis", and other times he states that praxis is reflection and action (Holmes & Warelow, 2000). This inconsistency does not help educators understand Freire's view of praxis; however it appears that in dichotomizing practice and theory, Freire did not embrace Marx's dialectical or revolutionary stance towards praxis

(Taylor, 1993). This is an important point, because Marx uses the Hegelian dialectic to express the practice-theory relation. In rejecting the ontological basis of Hegelian and Marxian dialectics, Freire takes up a different view of dialectics entirely, and therefore his ontology is different. It appears to this author that Freire attempts to employ dialectics to assist persons to view their relationship to a world that is outside themselves, and to identify theory and practice as binary opposites.

The differing conceptualizations of theory and practice, thought (or reflection) and action, by Marx and Freire have implications for the ways in which nursing has interpreted praxis and the ostensible practice-theory gap. For Marx, theory-in-practice is a continuous dialectical process. While Freire does employ dialectics to juxtapose theory and practice, reflection and action, these constructs are dichotomized within an objectified world and separated from Marx's revolutionary intent (Taylor, 1993). This is not to suggest that Freire did not espouse a liberatory approach to literacy education; only that in rejecting the dialectic and revolutionary *scaffolding* of Marxian praxis, Freire re-conceptualized praxis in a different way in which practice and theory, reflection and action are separated. One purpose of attempting to delineate differences in Hegel's, Marx's, and Freire's ontologies is to give nurses a context for contemplating how such ontologies are congruent with one's own ontological assumptions about nursing.

Un-covering the ontologies that inform various theoretical perspectives is essential for the discipline of nursing, because one's ontology ought to align with one's personal beliefs about persons, health, and the environment (Cody, 2000). Freirean pedagogy is based on a dualist ontology that conceives persons as divisible and separate from their environment, and shares the same ontological foundation as empirics. Nurses

who espouse allegiance to a unitary ontology whilst simultaneously practicing from a theory that is congruent with dualist ontology perpetuate the dominance of a mechanistic view of human beings (Northup & Purkis, 2001). It is possible that some nurse educators are not aware of this ontological difference, or perhaps, they have not examined their own ontological assumptions about nursing, and therefore any theory that seems to meet their needs is deemed adequate for the teaching and practice of nursing. As such there is no recognition that the ontology that is espoused in nursing is different from the one that is practiced.

### **Questions Concerning the Appropriation of Praxis into Nursing Education**

Freire's critique of the banking approach to education appealed to nurse educators who were concerned that evaluating nurses based on learning outcomes, competencies, and multiple-choice examinations was limited (Bevis & Watson, 1989; Boychuk-Duchscher, 2000; Harden, 1996). Freirean pedagogy is viewed as a teaching methodology, wherein the teacher aims to equalize the student-teacher relation, and promote *a knowledge as inquiry process*, rather than *a knowledge as content product* (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010; Freire, 1970/2009; Taylor, 1993). However, Freire's conceptualization of the oppressor-oppressed contradiction also resonated with nurse scholars who argued that nurses are an oppressed group, because of an identified subservience to physicians and the privileging of bio-medical knowledge over nursing knowledge (Bevis & Watson, 1989; Boychuk-Duchscher, 2000; Allen, 2010; Owen-Mills, 1995, Varcoe, 1995). Therefore, according to some nurse educators, the action in Freire's praxis must be directed at changing these oppressive circumstances (Boychuk-Duchscher, 2000; Allen, 2010; Owen-Mills, 1995; Varcoe, 1995). As will be shown, such

an interpretation of *action* negates the importance of other kinds of nursing actions that are required in professional nursing practice.

Freirean pedagogy is a teaching methodology embedded in a theory for emancipation. Therefore it is not surprising that nurse educators who extol the merits of Freire's teaching methodology frequently segue into a discussion of the many ways his work can be used to address the oppression of nurses, students, and persons who are receiving nursing care (Boychuk-Duchscher, 2000; Harden, 1996; Longo & Lindsay, 2007; Owen-Mills, 1995; Penney & Warelow, 1999; Warelow, 1993; Varcoe, 1997). Many nurse educators believe that emancipatory pedagogy can be used to draw attention to care of persons who are marginalized, such as those who live in poverty, are homeless, or are experiencing domestic abuse (Snyder, 2014). Thus, the focus of teaching-learning in nursing is often directed at drawing attention to the larger political, social, and economic conditions that affect health. This focus may include discussion of a film that depicts such in-equities, or engagement in letter writing campaigns wherein students advocate for changes to government funding policies (Snyder, 2014). Although raising awareness of social justice issues is laudable and important work, focusing on emancipation as the primary goal of the patient-nurse encounter miss-represents the social mandate of nursing and identifies a predetermined goal of professional practice that does not account for the personal goals of individuals.

The privileging of emancipatory praxis has resulted in some nurse educators who equate *praxis* with emancipation at an individual, collective, or political level; according to this view, praxis is understood as a process for freeing nurses, students, and patients from oppression and thus nurses are expected to take action for their own and others'

emancipation (Connor, 2004). Such a view eclipses other conceptualizations of praxis that have been appropriated by nursing, such as “hermeneutics as praxis, the theory-practice gap, nursing as praxis, and praxis in nursing theory” (Connor, 2004, p. 59). Furthermore, Freire’s reluctance to clearly identify the oppressors and the oppressed is a major weakness of his pedagogy (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010; Taylor, 1993). As Taylor (1993) states, it is difficult to understand the complexity of un-equal power relations, and “the causes and consequences of oppression or liberation” (p. 67), when one cannot name the oppressors and the oppressed in any particular situation. Also, it is difficult to conceive how individual preferences and goals can be understood and attended to when the persons who are the focus of nursing care are subsumed into a collective discourse of *oppressor or oppressed*. This is a problem for a profession such as nursing, where the focus of care is based on understanding individual goals and wishes.

Marx’s historical materialist view that social relations cannot be understood without understanding the particularities of each time period, should give nurse educators pause. Nurse educators may want to draw attention to the many ways relations between persons differ from those of Marx’s industrial Europe in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and also with those of Freire’s Brazil in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Furthermore, in view of Young’s (2003) statement that political and economic circumstances have changed since the time of Marx to the point where power cannot be reduced to “a single source in a master, king, or class – and...thus easily be reversed” (Young, 2003, p. 37), it may be challenging for nurses to identify the complex nature of hegemonic practices in health care that constrain their practice, and thereby effect change.

The idea that *the patient is the expert in their own health*, and should therefore be empowered by the nurse to make their own decisions, is a common theme that is associated with Freire's work (Dowling, Murphy, Cooney, & Casey, 2011; Varcoe, 1997). However, when student practice incorporates the construct of *patient as expert* without a thorough exploration and understanding of its theoretical underpinnings, patient safety may be compromised, as the following example illustrates.

A student was caring for a patient in her 70s who had been acutely ill with pneumonia, requiring intravenous antibiotics and high flow oxygen therapy. As the patient's condition improved the oxygen was weaned to 2 L by nasal prongs; however, as soon as the oxygen was removed, the patient would become short of breath and her oxygen saturation level would drop below 90 %, indicating hypoxia. The patient could not go home until she was able to breathe comfortably on room air. The student wrote in her reflective journal that the patient asked her "why am I on this oxygen? I don't need it". The student wrote that she removed the oxygen, because, according to the student "the patient is the expert in her own health". When I read this student's account of her practice, I became concerned, because she had not indicated in her journal whether she had assessed the patient: what was the oxygen saturation level pre and post oxygen removal? How was the patient's respiratory rate and effort? Did the patient understand the purpose of the oxygen and the potential risks if she removed it? These assessments were essential to ensuring patient safety.

When asked about this incident, the student stated, "I asked the nurse and we assessed the patient together and after the oxygen was removed I checked her Oxygen saturation again, and she was ok". Although reassured that indeed the student did know

the appropriate assessments in this scenario, the student's journal description remained very troubling. The student seemed to have fragmented her practice and was unable to integrate her thinking. That is, she was unable to synthesize and articulate the different kinds of theoretical knowledge that nurses use in practice, such as knowledge of biology or theories of oxygen supply and demand. The student had privileged the *patient as expert* construct, without understanding that nurses have expert knowledge and thus a responsibility to insure that patients are informed about the medical or biological aspects of care. Once a patient has the necessary information, the patient can make an informed decision.

Furthermore, the student appeared to have un-critically adopted *the patient as expert* construct, and to re-produce it for the teacher. As such, the student was complying with and conforming to what she believed would meet the teacher's requirements for an appropriate narrative account of her practice, much like the "banking concept" of education against which Freire (1970/2009, p. 72) argued. Such a re-production of the emancipatory discourse does not require that the student *think* about her practice or recognize the breadth of knowledge that guides her practice with persons. In this example, the privileging of emancipatory pedagogy obscured the breadth of knowledge that was required for professional nursing practice wherein *person as expert* had been taken up within an emancipatory view alone.

A study by Hatlevik (2011) found that "Emphasizing the development of nursing students' reflective skills and facilitating their *theoretical understanding* in initial nursing education might enhance nursing students' ability to perceive coherence between theory and practice" (p. 876, emphasis added). It is possible that the student in this example was

not aware of the various theoretical understandings that guided her practice; therefore it was nurse educator's responsibility to clearly articulate theoretical understandings and to facilitate student learning so that such coherence can be made explicit. Furthermore, students should be encouraged to recognize the different philosophical perspectives that inform various theories and to consider how the philosophical underpinnings of a theory are congruent with their own beliefs.

This example obscures the numerous ways in which *person as expert* has been theorized in nursing and calls into question the ostensible goals of praxis, particularly when thought and action, theory and practice, are narrowly directed towards emancipatory purposes. Such a view leads one to wonder, what is the knowledge base that we, as nurse educators, want students to use to guide professional practice? What philosophical frameworks require exploration before students can understand their own views of nursing and those of various theoretical perspectives? Is emancipation from oppression the expectation of persons who seek nursing care? Has empowerment been miss-construed as the sole social mandate of nursing?

Turning again to the prevalent ontologies in nursing, perhaps nurse educators could help nursing students learn to discern differences among and between philosophical perspectives and to choose to engage theories that align with personal values and beliefs. Such an understanding would enable the nurse and person to identify how to address the many aspects of the person's care within theoretical goals, as well as the goals and wishes of the person him or herself. In this way, the nurse can engage in activities that align with the different perspectives. For example, one's approach to patient comfort or relief of pain and suffering can vary considerably when practising within various philosophical

perspectives. This understanding, along with an ability to draw from and integrate knowledge from many sources, such as biological and medical sciences, must form the basis for the delivery of safe, competent, compassionate nursing care.

### **Nursing's Appropriation of Freirean Praxis: Ontological In-Congruence?**

When praxis is discussed in nursing education literature, Freire's pedagogy and his conceptualization of praxis are predominant (Bent, 1993; Bevis & Watson, 1989; Boychuk-Duchscher, 2001; Harden, 1996; Lyckhage & Pennbrant, 2014; Owen-Mills, 1994; Varcoe, 1997). Freire's conceptualization of praxis separates reflection from action, and theory from practice, reflecting an approach to knowledge and inquiry that is consistent with dualism. A dualist ontology suggests that "knowledge is 'out there' somewhere in the external world waiting to be discovered" (Thoun, 2013, p. 4). Freire's pedagogy is based on a dualism, and as such, the world is understood as outside oneself, and acted upon (Thoun, 2013). Such a view suggests that objects in the external world can be manipulated or altered by people, with, in Freire's case, *their labor*. Such a view is not consistent with a unitary ontological view that posits the human being as immersed in the world-universe, and capable of constructing knowledge via personal meaning and experience (Mitchell & Cody, Northup & Purkis, 2001; Thoun, 2013).

The dualist ontology of Freire's work would seem to be at odds with Freire's *knowledge as inquiry*. Freire frequently states that any claims to *truth* must be investigated; there are multiple interpretations of knowledge, and knowledge is socially constructed between teacher-student and student-teacher (Allman, 2009; Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010; Freire, 1970/2009; Taylor, 1993). It would appear that the way Freire views knowledge (epistemology) is more consistent with understanding human

experience and is more congruent with a human science perspective (Mitchell & Cody, 1992). What seems apparent is that nurse educators have appropriated Freire's conceptualization of knowledge without an awareness of the dissonance between ontology and epistemology in Freirean pedagogy (Bevis & Watson, 1989; Boychuk-Duchscher, 2000; Harden, 1996; Owen-Mills, 1994; Varcoe, 1997). Greater understanding of the ontological basis of Freirean pedagogy requires a depth of exploration that would surface the complexity of Freirean philosophy and theory.

Freire's pedagogy is based on a materialist, objective view of reality that reflects inconsistencies with a unitary ontology, wherein thought and action or theory and practice are seen as divisible. Therefore, it would seem important that nurses shed light on the ontological perspectives of different nurse authors in order to determine the philosophical underpinnings of their conceptions of praxis. However, most nurse authors do not make their ontological views of nursing explicit in their writing and each author uses slightly different language when discussing and using Freire's work in a nursing education context. For example, the notion that "knowledge as truth is socially constructed and ... the facts are relevant only in the lived experiences of persons" (Boychuk-Duchscher, 2000, p. 454), suggests that Boychuk-Duchscher shares the same epistemological orientation as Freire, but does not explicate the ontology that underpins her stated view. Therefore it is hoped that drawing attention to these ontological and epistemological variances will provide nurse educators with information with which to reflect upon their own ontology of nursing.

It must be acknowledged that one's alignment with a unitary or dualist ontology and epistemology is based in one's beliefs about being and knowledge. Such views

reflect difference, not correctness. What is important is that nurse educators who are enamored of Freire's conceptualization of praxis must be aware that this view espouses a dualist ontology that is: reflection and action, theory and practice (Bevis & Watson, 1989; Boychuk-Duchscher, 2000; Mooney & Nolan, 2006; Varcoe, 1997). As noted previously, Freire seems to be describing a dualist notion of praxis: "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire, 1970/2009, p. 51). Furthermore, Freire claims to employ dialectics to juxtapose reflection and action; however this is not the same as Marx's dialectic of theory-in-practice, thought-in-action. The result is conceptual confusion as to how Freire's notion of praxis is to be taken up and this confusion is often reflected in the nursing literature. For example, as stated previously, there is often an absence of conceptual clarity related to the Freirean dialectic.

Moreover it is unclear whether some nurse authors believe that the Freirean dialectic unites (or synthesizes) reflection-in-action, or whether reflection and action are in fact separate entities enacted by persons upon the world, or both. When Boychuk-Duchscher (2000) writes of praxis as "fluid" (p. 459), it is unclear whether this is meant to evoke Freire's notion of dialectic (as he claims it as a unity); however, in the same article she states, "knowledge is exposed to critical reflection and results in action that challenges and changes meaning" (Boychuk-Duchscher, 2000, p. 459), suggesting a dualist interpretation of praxis that objectifies reflection from action. Therefore, it seems apparent that the issue of conceptual clarity not only rests with nurse educators, but is obfuscated by Freire's own lack of clarity in this regard. As such, nurse educators such as Boychuk-Duchscher (2000) are one of many who perpetuate this confusion (Bent, 1993; Bevis & Watson, 1989; Owen-Mills, 1994; Ford & Profetto-McGrath, 1994).

When Freirean praxis is taken up as reflection and action, theory and practice, these binaries are incommensurate. Therefore this conceptualization of praxis cannot provide a structure for *closing* the perceived practice-theory gap. As noted earlier, a Marxian conceptualization of praxis, as theory-in-practice, thought-in-action implies that there can be no gap, because theory and practice occur simultaneously. Marx's notion of praxis does not seem to be represented in nursing education literature, however, such a view, if conceptualized within nursing, might be more consistent with the unitary ontology that has been identified in nursing. Recall that in Marx's philosophy of praxis, "thought and world are always already connected through human activity" (Kitching, 1988, p.29) and the activity of praxis is conscious, creative and practical (Kitching, 1988); therefore Marx's theory-in-action conceptualization of praxis could be developed into a pedagogy that is consistent with a unitary ontology. However, the idea of aligning nursing education with Marx's revolutionary stance concerning the proletariat and the capitalist might be difficult to overcome.

### **Conclusion**

This paper investigated the philosophical roots of Freirean pedagogy, specifically highlighting the ways in which Marxian philosophy informed Freire's concept of praxis. This exploration was intended to assist nurse educators to identify and explore the legacy of Marx in Freire's work. Furthermore, this paper brought to light the ontological differences between Hegelian, Marxian, and Freirean thought, thus providing nurse educators with an opportunity to consider how these ontologies align with their own ontological views of nursing. Marx's philosophy of praxis, as theory-in-practice, and

thought-in-action, presents a complex of unitary and dualist perspectives that provide a place from which a new pedagogy for nursing could be developed.

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