



ENSINO E PESQUISA  
EM ADMINISTRAÇÃO

# GUIDING THOUGHTS ON RESEARCH INTO MANAGEMENT: THE CONTRIBUTION OF PAULO FREIRE

REFLEXÕES ORIENTADORAS À PESQUISA EM ADMINISTRAÇÃO:  
CONTRIBUIÇÕES EM PAULO FREIRE

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## ABSTRACT

In this essay we explore the methodological possibilities in the work of Paulo Freire that may be used to guide research in the field of Management. We approach the indivisible binomial action-reflection as a precondition for building the equally indivisible binomial theory-practice. We look at the dialectic, from Freire's perspective, as a methodological practice that facilitates the research process. We argue throughout this paper that if researchers fail to perceive the dialectical unity between theory and practice, they will also fail to understand a particular phenomenon in all its complexity. We conclude that any impossible dichotomy between their intent, which is political, and the methods, techniques and processes by which such intentions are implemented, especially when it comes to social science research and specifically those studies to dealing, in committed way, with issues related to the organizations and their processes, that is, human issues.

## KEYWORDS

Paulo Freire. Research into Management. Theory-Practice. Action-Reflection. Dialectical perspective.

**RESUMO**

*Neste ensaio, exploramos as possibilidades metodológicas em Freire que podem orientar as pesquisas na área de Administração. Abordamos o binômio indissociável ação-reflexão como condição fundamental para a construção do também inseparável binômio teoria-prática. Tratamos da dialética, na perspectiva freireana, como possibilidade metodológica que facilita o processo de pesquisa. Argumentamos ao longo do texto que, se os pesquisadores não percebem a unidade dialética teoria-prática, também não percebem determinado fenômeno em sua complexidade. Concluimos que é inviável a dicotomia entre a intenção, que é política, e os métodos, técnicas e processos pelos quais se põe em prática aquela intenção, principalmente em se tratando de pesquisas em ciências sociais e, especificamente, naquelas pesquisas que abordam, de forma comprometida, questões relativas às organizações e seus processos, portanto, questões humanas.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE**

*Paulo Freire. Pesquisa em Administração. Teoria-Prática. Ação-Reflexão. Perspectiva dialética.*

**INTRODUCTION**

"Someone writes in an attempt to answer the questions buzzing around in their head - tenacious flies that disturb sleep, and what one writes can acquire collective meaning when, somehow, it coincides with the social need for the answer" (GALEANO, 2005, p. 340). In our case, we explore the methodological guidelines provided by Paulo Freire that can be applied to research in the area of Administration, to help us better understand our field. For Freire (1984, p. 50), "the act of knowing involves a dialectical movement that goes from action to reflection on that action and in turn to new action." So, any attempt to develop knowledge without practice,

without action-reflection can lead to pure idealism, and similarly, any action upon an object that is not critically examined in order to understand not only the object but also the perception held of that object when acting upon it, will result in purely mechanical and ill-conceived actions. Thus, researchers should seek to understand the following statement from Freire (1984, p. 17).

The theoretical foundation of my practice is explained within itself at the same time, not as something finished, but as a dynamic movement in which both theory and practice, are made and re-made. Thus, much that still seems valid today, not only in the practice carried out and being carried out, but the theoretical interpretation

that is made of it, could be surpassed tomorrow, not only by myself but by others.

According to the author, this is how man becomes the subject of his action: by reflecting on his situation, on his real environment. Thus, the more the researcher reflects on reality, the more fully aware and committed he becomes and ready to intervene in reality. That is, one cannot act on a certain phenomenon if its essence, the processes that compose it, has not yet been unveiled. The freirean perspective states that only when we do not dichotomize the unity between practice-theory, action-reflection, subjectivity-objectivity, can we understand, in the correct terms, relations between phenomena, the relations between human beings and the world, because the unity of action-reflection about the world is also indivisible.

That is, "it is as transformers and creators that men, in their permanent relations with reality, produce not only material goods, concrete things, objects, but also social institutions, their ideas, concepts" (FREIRE, 2005, p 106). They also produce their own conditioning to that reality. In this sense, understanding human beings in their dialectical relations in and with the world, it is not possible if we only take a purely subjective point of view, nor if we only take the objectivist mechanistic angle. Therefore, the analysis of human-world relations begins by attempting to understand the dialectical movement existing between the products that humans create as they transform the world and the conditioning that these products have on them (FREIRE, 1984). From a methodological perspective which is also dialectic so as to avoid the setting

where researchers behave like subjects and other individuals are taken to be objects.

In this essay we look at the indivisible binomial, action-reflection as a precondition for building an equally indivisible binomial theory-practice, since it is through praxis that the human condition itself is changed, it is by praxis that we alter a determined phenomenon (FREIRE, 1984; 2008). Namely, that for Freire (2008), the dialectical movement in research, though deprecated, is often one of the few methods to provide true integration of the researcher within the reality, since, if the researcher does not dichotomize action-reflection, subject-object, in fact, he works with the research subjects and not about them.

#### ACTION-REFLECTION, THEORY-PRACTICE: INDIVISIBLE BINOMIALS IN FREIREAN PRAXIS

Paulo Freire's praxis can be understood as the close relationship established between the way we interpret reality and the practical result emerging from this understanding that can lead to a transformation, that is, it is life is taken in its "dialecticity". Impacts on theory as a set of ideas capable of interpreting a given phenomenon or historical moment, which, subsequently, leads to a new announcement, in which the subject makes a statement about the world and will act to transform the same reality (ROSSATO, 2008). These moments do not happen as if one came after another. They occur simultaneously; because there are not two separate processes - one before and another after - they are two moments within the same a social process.

Freire (1978, p. 121) states that at the

very moment we seek “what to know, for example, we necessarily find ourselves involved with the ‘why’ the ‘how’, the ‘in favor of what’ and ‘whom’, with ‘against what’ and ‘against whom’ should we know”. These are theoretical-practical issues, not just intellectual; they are fundamental issues in dynamic engagement with each other. They are so interdependent on each other that they demand answers that are interdependent on each other. The theoretical-practical issues overlap to such a degree that Paulo Freire does not separate method from theory, or the latter from practice.

From this perspective, Freire (2008, p. 30) states that, when studying an object, a fact, relations between individuals and the world, men are able to act consciously on the objectified reality. The human praxis is precisely this: the indivisible unity between the subject’s action and reflection on the world.

In other words, the act of knowledge, of epistemological construction requires a critical approach to reality, insertion within the history, which may result in the clarification of the obscure dimensions of the very approximation subject-world. Otherwise, what one gets is a kind of theory that proves to be so disconnected from the reality of actual practice that will result in mere verbiage. This is a clear demonstration of failure to understanding that men produce themselves while producing things (RAMOS, 1983).

This leads to empty theories, verbalism. But if, instead, only the action is emphasized, and reflection sacrificed, the result is pure activism. Action for the sake of action, which negates reflection, denies true praxis.

“Any of these dichotomies - which

results in mere words or mere activism - by generating inauthentic ways of existing, generate inauthentic ways of thinking, which reinforce the matrix in which they are constituted” (FREIRE, 2005, p. 90), corroborating with the weakening of the epistemology of the field in question.

It must be clear that, because we are defending praxis, the theory of doing, we are not proposing any dichotomy that would lead to this ‘doing’ to be split into one stage of reflection and another, more distant, of action. Action and reflection occur simultaneously. (FREIRE, 2005, p. 146)

Dichotomization of action-reflection also explains the division made between theoreticians and practitioners, as if one group were on the fringes of action and the others were doers. Nevertheless, “a separation should be made between theoreticians and verbalists. In this case, the former would also necessarily be practitioners. What should be seen to oppose practice is not theory, from which it is inseparable, but false thinking” (FREIRE, 1984, p. 17). Such errors are also found among the supposedly intellectual, which leads to the creation differences in the university environment itself, for example, between academic teachers and non-academic teachers. According to Freire (1984, p. 16):

It is not surprising therefore that the verbalists isolate themselves in their ivory towers and consider those who give themselves to action despicable, while the activists consider those that think about and for action as ‘harmful intellectuals’, ‘theoreticians’ and ‘philosophers’ who do nothing but obstruct their activity. For one, like me,

all practice implies a theory.

Moreover, a praxis should be followed within universities and schools as a whole, because in teaching any dichotomy between teaching and research must also be avoided, since ultimately it undermines both. It is necessary to go a step further, i.e. (re) discover ways to create opportunities around a critical understanding of how to relate the science of the universities with the popular knowing.

For Freire (1978, 2005), the role of the intellectual, the researcher committed to historical praxis, with the will to carry out research in order to intervene in reality, is to work so that their teaching-research activities are not restricted to mere activism, but are associated with serious commitment to reflection, that is, in fact, praxis. That is, a continuous reflection on the actual conditions, not as a purely intellectual pastime, but as a possibility to transform the subject of his relations and therefore society. In studies directly or indirectly related to social management, the management of public organizations or the third sector, for example, it is neither a question of trying to impose solutions, nor of waiting endlessly for them appear. It is not a question of demanding participation, but of convincing, of working with and not about. It is not, then, a matter of assuming neither an idealistic attitude, nor one that is falsely realistic.

In this sense, the first question that should be asked by researchers concerns their view of the other. Do I see the other merely as the object of my research, as an abstract category or do I see the other also as a subject, as a person? If the other is simply an object of action, the attitude of the researcher takes one

direction; if the other is also perceived as a true subject of the action, a being of praxis, the researcher's stance is different.

Freire (2008) believes that this continuous self-questioning, as a method, can clarify the options and practices of the researcher. It is understood that the choice made by the researcher determines his methods of action. If his choice is reactionary, his actions and methods will be directed towards curbing transformations. The tendency is to prefer welfare-based solutions (FREIRE, 2005).

When we analyze the field of Management, from the point of view of Ramos (1983), according to whom there is a chronic conflict between the individual and the organization (firms), since the former is considered a resource of the second and, therefore, its object, we understand that disciplinary praxis in this field is eminently conservative. The individual would be an object, not a subject.

#### THE DIALECTICAL METHOD TO PAULO FREIRE: CONSCIENTIZATION THROUGHOUT THE RESEARCH

For Freire (2008), one of the foundations of the dialectical method is the conviction that no man exists in a void, the conviction that men make and remake themselves in social relations. It is from here that the researcher should start out: the understanding that "every man is located in space and time, in the sense that he lives in a precise time, a precise place, in a precise social and cultural context. And is, therefore, a being with spatial-temporal roots" (FREIRE, 2008, p. 39).

In this case, the theme chosen by the researcher cannot be viewed as being mechanistically compartmentalized, but historically understood in the complexity of the constant coming to be of the researcher himself. The investigation of the theme, therefore, involves investigation of the researcher's own thinking, since this thinking, as stated by Freire (2005), also does not come about outside men, nor in a single man, nor in a vacuum, but in men and among men, and always referred to reality.

That is, if the researcher's perspective is dialectical his thinking occurs from a certain reality and his situation is to think with others. According to the author, the researcher is not able to investigate a certain reality without the active participation of those who would implement it in daily life.

According to Freire (2008), it is natural for the researcher to investigate a theme, a social phenomenon that is part of his perceived reality. Similarly, it is common for the researcher to perceive this reality as dense and impenetrable, hence the research interest. Thus, firstly the researcher attempts to understand this phenomenon or reality, at least initially, by abstraction. That does not mean "that we should reduce the concrete to the abstract, which would mean the method is not dialectical, but that the two elements are maintained as opposites, in dialectical interrelation in the act of reflection" (FREIRE, 2008, p. 35). In Paulo Freire's dialectical perspective, by keeping the two elements - the concrete and abstract - in opposition to each other, in dialectical interrelation during the act of reflection, the researcher may even

begin to understand his own reality in another way.

In Freire, dialectically constructed research begins when the researcher understands that a particular fact or phenomenon may be *codified* and thus his perspective is that of unveiling that reality, or phenomenon through the *decodification* process.

This implies that a process of decoding reality, if done well, produces a movement of ebb and flow, a dynamic that goes from abstract to concrete, activated in the analysis even of the codified situation, leading the individual to replace the abstraction for the critical perception of the concrete. This means, a reality that once seemed dense or even impenetrable, will become unveiled during the course of the research until it becomes understandable, almost crystalline, to the researcher.

The dynamic of the dialectic method, from the freirean perspective, consists in perceiving encoded reality, decoding it and encoding it once again in order to arrive at an understanding of it. It should be noted that this process, however, does not have a specific purpose, as if reality could be perceived in all its various dimensions and complexities. The understandings of the researcher, even though crystal clear, are always biased, because they are a priori understandings from the researcher's point of view, as a research subject like any other, as steeped in ideology as any other. They are therefore, partial truths.

Therefore, from Freire's perspective, if the goal of research is to understand a particular phenomenon or reality in its dialectical interactions, naturally the activity of researching provides the

researchers and the researched a certain level of critical knowledge of that reality, as the subjects become aware, in the process of decoding their world.

It is necessary to understand, then, three key constructs of Freire's perspective present in the research dialectic: *codification, decodification and conscientization*.

a. Codification - refers to the process of representing a particular situation where only some of its constituent elements appear in the interaction, so this situation is reduced to a form of language that contains a set of problems. Attention should be given to the fact that codification only has some of the constituent elements of particular situationality. That is, in codification only the explicit elements are present. The researcher should be aware of the value of non-explicit codification, i.e. those who need to be revealed in the decodification process in order that the reality is shown just as it is; with its many nuances in dialectical interaction. Obviously, without the pretense of exhausting reality.

Codification, therefore, refers to the process by which a situation is reduced to a kind of language, whose access code is not known by everyone. Hence, certain situations may only be known by a part of what they really mean, at least by those who do not have the code. But what the code hides are exactly the relationships that exist dialectically to maintain the code. It is these relationships that must be revealed.

In that sense, what the researcher should propose, at least initially, would be the analysis of this dimension known by the subject in a context different from

that in which he lives. Thus codification transforms what was a way to live into a real context, into an 'objectum' into the theoretical context.

b. Decodification - is the process of analyzing the code in order to capture the existential elements hidden therein (FREIRE, 2005). Decodification is one of the most important moments for the subject to perceive himself as a subject, that is why it only happens in dialogue, between the researchers and researched. Decodification takes place, therefore, in the continuous movement of the passage from the abstract to the concrete, the concrete to the abstract, from the parts to the whole and the return to all of the parts. Decodification is the analysis and subsequent reconstitution of the experienced situation.

It can be seen then, that "while the coded representation is the knowable object that mediates knowledgeable subjects, decodification - composes the code into its constituent elements - it is the operation by which knowledgeable individuals perceive the relationships between and among elements of the codification and between the facts that the real situation presents, relationships that were not previously perceived" (FREIRE, 2008, p. 36).

c. Conscientization – for Freire (2008), the act of conscientization is not divorced from concrete action, so that, the conscientization of the subject occurs in the process of action-reflection. Therefore, conscientization does not only occur in reflection (theory), nor only in the action (practice). Conscientization occurs in the movement back and forth, from the abstract to the concrete, the concrete

to the abstract, and the analysis of the movement. This is possible because one of the characteristics of the human being is that he is able to step back from the world in order to examine it.

The more the conscientization, the more reality is revealed, the more it penetrates the essence of the phenomenal object, before which we find ourselves in order to analyze it. For this same reason, conscientization does not consist in standing before reality while assuming a falsely intellectual position. (FREIRE, 2008, p. 30)

This is the essence of Freire's dialectical movement: in the decodification process, there is simultaneous conscientization of the researchers, because as man reflects on his reality, his reflection leads him to discover that not only is he in reality, but with it and that, therefore, he can modify it.

#### FREIRE'S REFLECTIONS ON THE METHODOLOGY INHERENT IN ACTION-REFLECTION, THEORY-PRACTICE

The implications of dichotomizing action-reflection, theory-practice, prevent, or at least temporarily interdict, conscientization of the researchers. The consequences are also easily observed in the methodological procedures used by researchers. "Hence the necessity for the researcher to clarify his choice, which is political, through his practice, which is also political. His choice determines his role and his methods of action" (FREIRE, 1984, p. 39).

That is, one cannot separate theory-practice, or the methodological issue inherent in this binomial. In this sense, the method chosen by the researcher

who chooses to dichotomize this relationship represents nothing less than the fragmentation imposed on the dialectical unity between theory-practice." The fundamental question in this case is that, when men lack a full understanding of the totality in which they are located, capturing it in pieces in which they do not recognize the constituent interaction of the whole, they are unable to know it" (FREIRE, 2005, p. 111).

The freirean perspective affirms there is an indispensable need to first have a totalized view of the context in order to, then separate or isolate the elements or the particularities of the context and, through the same division, which exists only as a research method applied to the study of a determined juncture, the researcher would return with more clarity to the analyzed whole. This effort is made in an attempt to understand significant dimensions of his reality, critical analysis of which facilitates recognition of the interaction among the parts. "Thus, the significant dimensions which, in turn, are composed of interacting parts, when analyzed, must be perceived by the individuals as dimensions of the whole. Thus, the critical analysis of a significant-existential dimension enables individuals to take a new critical stance" (FREIRE, 2005, p.111).

Unfolding a situation, understanding a phenomenon, implies going to the parts to the whole and back from this whole to the parts, which demands recognition of the subject in the object and of the object as a situation in which the subject is located. In this sense, the methodology advocated by Freire (2005) requires, for this reason that, in the flow of research - the researcher and

the researched are both the research subjects, not a subject that investigates and a subject that, apparently, would be the object of the research. This methodology, where the researcher and the researched both become the subjects of the research, provides men a more active role in investigating the processes of their own reality, and the deeper their conscientization concerning this reality, the greater the possibility of in fact appropriating it. This is because in this type of research if the researcher is committed, there will be a return both for study subjects as much as himself (FREIRE, 1996). The research can be carried out, then, for the subjects – the researcher and the researched - as a joint effort of awareness of reality and self-awareness that forms the starting point of the dialectical process. Research is no longer reduced to a mechanical act and becomes a process for seeking out knowledge, due to all this, of creation, and requires that the subjects go on discovering and revealing reality, in the connection of the significant themes, in the interpenetration of problems. That is why the investigation becomes more pedagogical the more critical it is and that much more critical, as it no longer gets lost in the narrow schemes of the partial views of reality, of the 'focalistic' views of reality, it is set in the understanding of the whole.

Accordingly, what is expected in the research process guided by the dialectical method is that researcher and researched, while examining the reality in which they are inserted, at least, begin to perceive it from the analysis of their previous perception of would result in a new perception 'that reality' that

was perceived distortedly. That is, the subject would begin to question their own perception, and at a later moment, perceive the distortions of his own thinking that were due to the codification to which he was submitted.

Therefore, as the Freire (1984) points out, the analysis of relations between men and the world begins by trying to understand the dialectical movement existing between the products that humans create to transform the world and the conditioning effect that these products have on them.

Finally, choosing the dialectical movement also allows researchers to understand "the role of practice in the constitution of knowledge and, consequently, the role of critical reflection on practice." This is because "the previously mentioned unity between theory and practice, action and reflection, subjectivity and objectivity, will be understood in terms correct, the analysis of those relationships (man-world)" (FREIRE, 1984, p. 61).

#### CLOSING COMMENTS

The dialectical movement, in the freirean perspective, allows the researcher to seek the reason for being of a certain reality, even though he may still 'soaked in this reality, and initially unable to view it critically, because the reason for the search is always embedded in the awareness of those involved in the research, both the researchers and the researched. So that, to investigate a certain phenomena or reality, individuals investigate themselves, their relationships in the world, their thinking and how they perceive this entire set up, including their

own thinking. The subject, therefore, is made and remade in the act of research, of action-reflection. The researcher at this moment occupies a special position, because the dialectical movement implies for him that, on one hand, "he needs a theoretical tool to operate the knowledge of reality and on the other, he recognizes the need to reformulate it in light of findings arrived at through its application." This is because, if the movement is dialectical, "the results of his act of knowing are constituted as standards for judging his own cognizant behavior (FREIRE, 1984, p. 136).

The researcher who chooses, therefore, for the decodification of encoded reality or phenomenon, from the perspective of Paulo Freire, in fact, opts for the conscientization of himself and those involved in the research. That is, he assumes a commitment to transform himself from that which is now presented, considering that the act of knowing, if authentic, and the unveiling of reality or phenomenon, demands, action from the researcher in order that his reflection is turned into the dialectic praxis of the research. In other words, if the dialectical movement has resulted in the conscientization of the individuals, which provides a "the self-consciousness of the human beings also implies the consciousness of things, of the concrete reality in which they find themselves as historical beings and that they learn through their cognitive ability" (FREIRE, 1984, p. 144).

In this regard, the dialectic movement also gains importance as the practice of the unveiling social reality proceeds, in the process of conscientization, it becomes clear that this reality is made

by men and therefore can be undone and a new one built in its place, by new men more aware of their role as subjects in history. That is, in the freirean perspective, research that is guided by the dialectical movement educates the researchers and the researched that reality is not something that is fixed, pre-defined, but instead it is a series of transformations, something that is being, and that depends crucially on the relations and how these are established in a particular historical context, at a determined time.

In a dialectical process of inquiry, it is of fundamental importance to clarify the role of the research, because if we understand, as Paulo Freire, that nobody gains conscientization separately from the others, we understand the research to be a means by which, together, the subjects, the researcher and the researched, gain conscientization in the dynamic the research.

Accordingly, we must remember, then, that for Freire (1984, p. 96), "no issue is just what it appears in the linguistic form that expresses it. There is always something more hidden, deeper, whose clarification is indispensable for its general understanding." Perceiving the subject or the phenomenon being studied, dialectically, implies then, unveiling as far as possible what is hidden, the dialectical relations that determine the material conditions of society. Thus, writing about a topic, grasping it, implies untangling it from appearances in order to study it as a phenomenon by giving it a concrete reality which mediates men. Therefore, from the freirean perspective, whoever writes has to assume, when confronted by theme to which he is committed, an epistemological attitude.

In essence, this means that “the more we learn the regarding the historical and social reality in which the themes are constituted in a dialectical relation with their opposites, the more it becomes impossible for us to be neutral before them” (FREIRE, 1984, p. 97 ). Hence the importance, also, that the researcher is aware of his own posture and does not accept “that the act of knowing is exhausted in the simple narration of reality nor, even worse, in decreeing that what is, is what should be.” (FREIRE, 1984, p. 137).

After all, to the extent that researchers do not understand the dialectical unity between theory-practice, it will also not

be possible to understand something so obvious, namely that a certain phenomenon cannot be understood in itself, but in its dialectical relation with other phenomena and from the context in which these relationships occur.

Finally, it is still necessary to insist once more with the researchers that any impossible dichotomy between their intent, which is political, and the methods, techniques and processes by which such intentions are implemented, especially when it comes to social science research and specifically those studies to dealing, in committed way, with issues related to the organizations and their processes, that is, human issues. ➤

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