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Como Si Nos Cerrarian Las Puertas: Exploring the Development of Critical Consciousness in a Direct Service Nonprofit

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## *Como Si Nos Cerrarían Las Puertas*

Exploring the Development of Critical Consciousness in  
a Direct Service Nonprofit

Capstone Project in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

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## **Introduction**

Since the late 1970s, the United States and the world were introduced to an economic, political and cultural system that is referred to as neoliberalism. Elizabeth Martinez and Arnolde Garcia summarize the 5 main points of neoliberalism as the rule of the market, the cutting of public expenditures for social services (otherwise known as austerity), deregulation, privatization, and the elimination of the concept of public good or community (1997). The point in introducing neoliberalism is to say this project was the motivation for the government's retreat from the provision of social supports. The argument made is that the withdrawal of the state from certain areas of welfare provision will better rather than destroy the lives of those abandoned (Gilmore, 2009). Unlike the social supports, the need for necessities like food, housing, education and childcare and the struggle to meet them did not disappear. Economic inequality in the neoliberal era has greatly increased. As a brief example of this, Jacobs and Myers state that, "In the 12 years before Reagan's presidency, from 1970 to 1981, inequality grew by 4.53 percent, but it expanded by 11.2 percent in the 12 Reagan-Bush years from 1982 to 1993, or by 2.5 times as much (2014, p. 767)." Ronald Reagan is often associated with supporting and advocating for neoliberal policies. Ruben Martinez and Raymond Rocco write that the onset of neoliberal reforms was originally known as Reaganomics (2016). This is the reality that we live in today. One implication of this is that nonprofits rapidly expanded to fill in the gap these policy decisions created. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore states, "...we have seen increased responsibility on the part of non-profits to deliver direct services to those in need of them (2009)." Although this was a very brief introduction to neoliberalism, to summarize, we can say that this project expanded the literal space for nonprofits (particularly direct-service nonprofits) to exist in, as well as the need for them due to an increase in economic inequality.

Throughout the year, I have had the opportunity to work with the Mar Vista Family Center which is a direct-service nonprofit and community center that makes an effort at addressing the educational advancement gap through various services. Its work is primarily in education, with services ranging from early childhood education to tutoring and youth leadership development programs. MVFC, however, also offers many additional services for the community such as computer classes and weekly food distribution. Mar Vista Family Center proudly shares that 95% of their BYFY (By Youth for Youth program) youth enrolled with MVFC since preschool go on to enroll in college. Mar Vista Family Center employs what they call, “the shared-responsibility model.” The center states that, “the model is based on the understanding that we all have a role to play in improving our own lives and empowering ourselves to advocate for our families, as well as taking a leadership role in the community.” While the model is more apparent in some programs over others, in general, the organization requires strong parental and youth participation in the center as a requirement to be in the preschool or the BYFY program, for example. This makes MVFC a unique direct-service provider, in that yes, it is a provider of services, but it has also created a space where there is at least minimal participation from their service recipients. In addition, it must be stated that the Mar Vista Family Center has a strong presence in the neighborhood which is symbolized by the fact that it is at the top of the closed-off Slauson Avenue, which is the major street in the neighborhood it primarily serves; the center’s buildings are very visible in the neighborhood.

The educational advancement gap that Mar Vista Family Center primarily works on as well as the many services and resources it provides for, however, often have deep structural issues that are not openly acknowledged or even understood by many, meaning that the actions to correct for them may be insufficient. We know that when we cannot visualize a problem then

we cannot effectively work to correct for it. The ability to see these issues as connected to something broader and more structural is facilitated by the development of what Brazilian educator Paulo Freire called *conscientização* or critical consciousness. Critical consciousness can be summarized as having the ability to understand the presence of social, political, and economic contradictions that exist in social life and acting against the oppressive elements that are often responsible for those contradictions (Freire, 1970). Critical civic engagement cannot be separated from critical consciousness as the latter requires active participation and action. Given the potentially powerful utility of critical consciousness, it is important to help develop it. Direct-service nonprofits like Mar Vista are a crucial component of civil society, and in the case of MVFC, possess great connections with their recipients and operate as sort of a hub united through the services provided. Because MVFC has this established relationship, I argue it is important for them to use their position to help in this process. There are also additional reasons to support this process. First, MVFC's ability to provide services is threatened by the volatility of funding. If a direct service nonprofit must cease operations or cut back, then what happens to their recipients? It is important to consider the vulnerable positions their recipients will be in and the void in the community. Nonprofits should be working to make significant change on an issue to avoid the vulnerable stage. Second, although Mar Vista is working on particular issues, there are broader concerns such as the prevalence of neoliberalism that affect the people MVFC serves on a daily basis. As I mentioned earlier, in the years since many neoliberal policies have been implemented, inequality has increased, to name one negative consequence.

In this study, I will explore whether critical consciousness has emerged in Mar Vista Family Center's recipients and participants as a result of their participation in the center. It is implied that critical consciousness is necessary and should be explored especially by direct-

service nonprofits who have some sort of aim at solving or addressing social issues. My research question is: What is Mar Vista Family Center doing to develop the critical consciousness of their recipients and to increase their critical civic engagement?

## **Literature Review**

### **Critical Consciousness Ideals**

As I referenced to in the introduction, the work of critical consciousness is often associated with Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. Freire viewed that the point of critical consciousness development was for people to be able to identify the objective causes of domination which are tied to dehumanization and oppression. Dehumanization and oppression are anything that prevents the inherent potential for human freedom and agency that people have (Freire, 1970). Freire writes that, “To surmount the situation of oppression, people must first critically recognize its causes, so that through transforming action they can create a new situation, one which makes possible the pursuit of a fuller humanity (1970).” Freire would argue that becoming aware or conscious of what caused oppression, political/social/economic inequality, poverty, discrimination and other plagues of society occurs through both reflection and action. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire’s signature work) is based on his experiences of working with illiterate and poor people’s in Northeast Brazil. He noted that there was a fear of freedom and an internalized colonized mentality among those he worked with which was grounded in the fact that Brazil served as a colony of Portugal, a process which created racial and class hierarchies. This created what came to be accepted as a true and universally valid form of self-consciousness that comprised people’s identities (R. Rocco, personal communication, November 2017). The point here is that critical consciousness development requires a deep understanding of history as the events in the past very much influence the present. Freire states

that, “One of the gravest obstacles to the achievement of liberation is that oppressive reality absorbs those within it and thereby acts to submerge human beings’ consciousness (1970).” As I briefly mentioned above, the achievement of critical consciousness occurs only “through the praxis of this [refers to oppression] struggle (Freire, 1970).” Freire defines praxis as, “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it (1970).”

### Critical Consciousness in Nonprofits

Much of the literature focuses on critical consciousness development as a method of community organizing. Kristina Smock defines several different models of community organizing, one of which is the transformative model (Smock, 2004). One of the case studies she provides to describe this model is of an organization called The Center for Reflection, Education, and Organizing (CREO) which is focused on providing popular education and literacy training for Latino immigrant communities in Chicago (2004). The organization very openly adopts Freire’s work and they seek to build the critical consciousness of Latino immigrants and keep them engaged in social change (Smock, 2004). Their organization uses English as a Second Language to develop critical consciousness; their staff states that they are trying to teach the people they work with to read not only the word but the world (Smock, 2004). After they develop their English skills and critical thinking skills, they seek to further engage the people they work with on campaigns for social and political change but most of their work is focused on the education side, as Smock points out, they are actually involved in few community-based projects or campaigns (2004). Thus, we can sum, that the proposed ideas are one thing but the results that may emerge are something else.

In other literature, author Rolf Straubhaar provides two case studies of organizations he identifies as Freirean nonprofits (2014). The author visited two different organizations: one in a

favela in Northeastern Brazil, which targeted youth and offered literacy classes, capoeira (Brazilian type of martial arts) classes, and workforce initiatives, the other in Mozambique, which is described as offering different development projects, which includes public health/sanitation initiatives, adult education, and workforce development programs (Straubhaar, 2014). In the author's analysis of the Brazilian organization, he noted that there was mismatch between the leaders' vision in Freirean ideals and what was occurring; the literacy classes did follow Freirean pedagogy but the more popular classes (and most requested by their recipients) like capoeira and more practical workforce training classes did not (Straubhaar, 2014). One of the people interviewed from this organization stated that,

We're elated that we can be a part of helping keep kids off the street and helping people find jobs – but the way we were trained was to seek real revolutionary change in which smaller social programs, like the ones we offer now, wouldn't be necessary (Straubhaar, 2014).

In the nonprofit in Mozambique, curriculum based on Freire was provided to instructors who were trained so that they could lead the program in its pilot phase at 3 different towns, but what the author notes is that although Freirean pedagogy was used, it became separate from Freire's more "revolutionary educational project (Straubhaar, 2014)." The author notes that the social action promoted was much more incremental and pre-planned as opposed to how the original theory requires it to be community-generated, in addition even the themes used for discussion and curriculum were pre-planned with only minimal input from community members for cultural purposes (Straubhaar, 2014). Straubhaar writes that, "In short, Freirean pedagogical techniques were used to promote acceptance of an already determined agenda, rather than facilitate and solicit community ideas (2014)." At the same time, many of the people that were participants in the program mentioned that they greatly benefited from the information they



received from the Mozambique organization, which participants stated that they never had access to, and felt that their lives improved (nutrition information, tuberculosis treatment, etc.)

(Straubhaar, 2014). When the author asked about this, one of the Mozambique nonprofit's administrators mentioned that this was intentional stating that,

As much as I admire Freire's idealism, and as much as we want to see our participants live happier and fuller lives, we're not interested in overthrowing governments or radically restructuring society. We're interested in social change, but concrete change now in the lives of people who are suffering the most, who don't have clean water, who don't know how to care for a relative with AIDS. Freire's teaching methods do a great job in teaching what we want to teach – and I don't think what we're doing is that different from what he would teach if he were here (Straubhaar, 2014).

If we can conclude one thing from these several examples of nonprofits attempting Freirean methods, it is that even in organizations that state that they are trying to use critical consciousness theory, the results may vary. As we saw sometimes the leaders in the organizations plan for this, but the outcomes are different. In the case of the Mozambique organization, they felt that it was also important to tackle the basic information and needs that people had. While none of these nonprofits were identified by their authors as explicitly direct-service nonprofits, we can see that the offering of classes and information allows us to at least minimally describe them as such. Nonetheless, there is still not enough research describing the role of critical consciousness theory in direct-service nonprofits, especially ones like Mar Vista Family Center which has lots of education services as well as community programming (since it is also a community center). I do not think that many people would disagree with the goal of Freirean critical consciousness which proposes something that is ideal: the riddance of oppression and the full humanization of people. Of course, this is all easier said than done and the context of Mar Vista Family Center is different than the work Freire was doing which influenced the publication of his book. As I mentioned in the introduction, I believe that because

a lot of the work direct-service nonprofits are trying to correct for are tied to structural issues, that critical consciousness development, which is intended to help make people aware of such things should be explored. However, another gap in the literature is (and related to the one just mentioned) is whether what can be described as critical consciousness and the connected critical civic engagement can be achieved as a byproduct of participating in a direct-service nonprofit that again has the unique shared-responsibility model, even if the Freirean method is not intentionally present. This study will seek to explore this more.

**Stages of Consciousness**

Political theorist Raymond Rocco has extensively worked on studying the theories of Paulo Freire especially as how they can be applied in a more contemporary context as a response to the introduction of neoliberalism. As an undergraduate, I had the opportunity to take several courses with Dr. Rocco, including ones where we studied Paulo Freire. Dr. Rocco presented in his lectures a very helpful chart that contains information that is not as easily accessible in traditional journal articles that will allow us to assess critical consciousness development.

<b>STAGES OF CONSCIOUSNESS</b>			
<i>Aspects of Problem Solving</i>	<i>Magical Conforming Consciousness</i>	<i>Naïve Reforming Consciousness</i>	<i>Critical Consciousness</i>
Naming the Problem	No problems seen or accepted as inevitable facts of existence	Individual's behavior deviates from system's rules or roles	Unjust, oppressive, or conflict producing rules, roles, policies
Analysis of Causes	External, inevitable; God, fate, luck, chance	Individual inadequacies in self and others	Historical causes: vested interests, internalization of roles and rules by individuals
Action to Solve Problem	Passive acceptance, conformity	Reform individuals	Transform one's internalized roles and rules and change the institutions these defend

As we can see in the chart, Rocco determines that there are three different stages of consciousness which are termed magical conforming consciousness, naïve reforming consciousness, and critical consciousness, the last of which is ultimately the goal of the development process; these are organized as the columns (2017). Rocco states that there are different aspects of problem solving which are referred to as naming the problem, analyzing the causes, and action to solve problem, which I refer to as critical civic engagement, and we mentioned is inherent in critical consciousness; these are organized as rows and are meant to cross with the three stages (2017). There are various descriptive terms mentioned that are intended to help us categorize a person's process. To return to the question guiding this research study, we will use this as a reference to help us understand whether critical consciousness has emerged as a result of their recipients' participation and engagement in the center. We know that Mar Vista Family Center has not intentionally adopted the Freirean model, so it may not perfectly align with what is presented in this chart.

## **Methods**

To properly answer the research question, I decided to conduct a qualitative study because it can demonstrate the process that people have gone through in their involvement with Mar Vista Family Center as well as provide depth. I relied on semi-structured interviews for this research. An interview guide was created, with the literature used to help develop the questions contained in the guide. Additional probe questions were included on the guide, but at times depending on the conversation, interviewees were asked to elaborate on something they in particular mentioned, as such none of the interviews are exactly the same. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, to help address concerns of validity. Most of the interviews were conducted on site at the Mar Vista Family Center with the exception of one,

which was conducted at that participant's private residence. A small stipend was offered to participants as compensation for their time, but it was rejected in two cases. A total of six interviews were conducted, with 5 self-identified females and 2 self-identified males (one couple participated in an interview together). In addition, 4 of the interviews were conducted in Spanish, so those interviews were initially transcribed in Spanish and later in the process translated to English. All of the interviewees had children who either currently or in the past participated in the center's educational programs. For those that did not currently have children of their own in the educational services, they still mentioned being active in other community programs that the center provided or having direct relatives in programs. I also personally attended 2 community forums and 1 preschool meeting, both of which the center hosts on site. The center recommended these meetings as a good place to be to help answer my question, and it was something that interested me upon initial visits to the center. I took note of the conversations that took place in those meetings to complement and provide additional context to what would come out of the interviews. At these meetings, I was allowed time to make an announcement of my research and it became the primary way that I recruited participants for my research. This research was community-engaged, and in the early stages of the research process discussions with the CEO of Mar Vista, Lucia Diaz, allowed me to learn what the center's research interests were and pair them with mine as well. I checked-in and had discussions regularly while I was at the center with the staff, primarily with Lucia Diaz. It was intentional to engage the Mar Vista Family Center community throughout the research process (such as informing them that the study was taking place at their meeting and describing the project). Fielding was conducted between March and late April of 2019.

## **Limitations**

This research project has several limitations. First, and foremost, this is not a longitudinal study. I am not looking at my topic across time but rather relying on interviewees to recollect what their experiences at Mar Vista Family Center have been across the years. Since critical consciousness development is a process that occurs over time, I will only be able to observe one part of that. As is always present in research, you have to accept what your participants are describing to you at face value, which runs the risk, of a participant overstating their participation, for example, in the center. However, there is no reason to believe that the data I have collected is not genuine and I verified their engagement in the center since they were present at the meetings I got to attend; others were referred to me by center staff. It may also be a challenge (and therefore limitation) to classify the participants critical consciousness development based on one interview, which is what has been done in this project. Another limitation is that it has a smaller sample size that limits the generalizability of the findings. I collected 6 interviews, with a total of 7 participants. On a similar note, I was only able to attend 2 community forums and 1 preschool parent meeting. Based on discussions with staff the topics and level of discussion at the community forums often change from meeting to meeting. In addition, the first of the two meetings I attended saw low attendance with only about 10 community members, the city councilman's representative, myself and Lucia Diaz (the CEO). The second meeting saw an increase in the number of community members at the forum with about 40 in attendance but the city councilman's representative was only present for about 15-20 minutes of the meeting. The data I have been able to collect is still very valuable and has been given us some insight into something the Mar Vista Family Center has not previously investigated or considered. As I have mentioned throughout this paper already and is another

limitation in the study, Mar Vista Family Center does not identify as a Freirean nonprofit organization, instead they are a direct-service provider. They have not intentionally adopted a critical consciousness development model. Lastly, I am an undergraduate conducting this qualitative research. While I have had nearly a full-year of research experience on a mixed-methods study at a large research center, I still had limited experience in fully designing and conducting an individual research project. This reality has led me to consult with not only my research advisor but with other researchers at my university who are much more experienced as well as exploring resources to aid my study.

## **Findings**

**The Importance of Mar Vista Family Center's Direct Services:** The center's participants acknowledge how important the services that Mar Vista Family Center provides to their recipients are. As I mentioned in the introduction, there is a need for the educational services like the preschool and afterschool programs, among the others that are provided. Interviewees brought up a diverse amount of services like dance classes, soccer programs, the BYFY program, and the food bank. While it is something that is not explicitly stated by Mar Vista, I noticed that many recipients pointed to what I call "affective services." One interviewee mentioned that, "...there was a lot of help for parents how to understand our children. How to understand even ourselves as parents and how to try to live a better life." Recipients are not receiving something tangible but rather learning information that they then apply to their lives. There was praise for the wrap times, and one interviewee described it as something that helped them release something that they had internalized and which had stressed their familial relationships. At the same time, interviewees mentioned that there would be a gap in their lives should the center have to close. Many were worried about that happening. One interviewee

hoped the center kept improving and existing, stating that, “I’ve heard that they want to close it sometimes...[that] they do not have the resources to continue.”

**Recipient Involvement in the Center:** Through the interviews, I discovered that many of the participants are committed to the center. The center adopts a shared-responsibility model which makes some participation compulsory (more on that later), but some are even engaged in the center on top of this. However, much of what is available for recipients to participate in can be referred to as volunteerism. Many are active in events. One interviewee mentioned that their, “... favorite part of Mar Vista [is to] participate...when there are festivals or...when there was a program for children.” Some interviewees noted that they are active in fundraising, with one interviewee stating that, “I was a volunteer to sell food to raise funds...I made many Cupcakes, brownies for them to sell and raise more income for the Center.” Other participants mentioned that they tried to be present at the Center’s events because they actively benefited from the services they received, and they viewed it as a way to give back to the center and a way for it potentially receive additional resources to keep their doors open.

**Thinking About the Issues Outside of the Walls of the Center:** In the interviews I directly asked the research participants to think about social issues that they cared about and to then elaborate on them and think about who they impacted. Three overall issues consistently appeared in all the interviews: crime, immigration, and security. One interviewee in relation to security mentioned that, “sometimes you do not feel at ease to go out on the street.” All of the participants in this research identified that either themselves and/or their family members/close relatives were undocumented. Some expressed fear for immigration enforcement action. One interviewee, who relied on her parents to watch her son at night when she worked stated that, “Like let's say one of the days they deport them (their parents). It's gonna be hard for us... For me

and for my son.” Interviewees expressed their concerns for gang activity, especially the presence of very young people/teens already partaking in those activities. Crime was also a concern. One interviewee put it very bluntly, “[I have] always heard many shots [and many] have been killed by bullets.” Another interviewee stated that, “What worries me [the] most are the young people who are just on the street.” In regard to crime, one interviewee mentioned that it is something that affects the larger community and really concerns her because she also had children who lived directly on Slauson Avenue where a lot of the activity is most visible. When asked to think more deeply about the presence of gang activity, one interviewee mentioned the role of work stating that sometimes parents were forced to work two or three jobs which limited the time they could be at home with their kids.

**The Center’s Response: the Community Forum:** The existence of the community forum goes back to the center’s shared responsibility model. This is the way that the center tries to increase advocacy. Like I mentioned previously, I attended two of the community forums. One of the things I noticed that stood out for me was that those who attend do not tend to be active in the forums, instead many just attend to listen to information. An interviewee confirmed this by stating that they are sometimes too shy to ask questions or are afraid that they will misspeak. Another interesting thing that I noticed, at least in the two forums I attended, was that when questions were asked they were directed at Lucia Diaz (the CEO), who then communicated them, as opposed to directly to the city councilman’s representative who was also in attendance. Still one interviewee stated that,

...we like it [the community forum] because someone always comes from the councilman's office. And they give us information; they ask us...what needs we have. Sometimes [someone] comes from the police...[they ask] What worries us about the community? What we want to improve in the community...?



Interviewees were asked to identify some of the results of the community forums. Several of them mentioned that they were able to get street lamps, a new crosswalk, trash and graffiti abatement, and one interviewee mentioned, increased police patrols that temporarily reduced crime.

**Gaining a Voice through the Community Forums:** One of the important findings that emerged from the interview data is that interviewees mentioned how they benefited from the community forums. As was mentioned, some of the people who were interviewed are undocumented. One interviewee stated, “One sometimes thinks before stepping into another place, especially as you say like the government, for example. You think about it and decide what you prefer ... there is a little bit of fear.” They stated that the fact that essentially government reps came to them at the Center, gave them access and that because they were an undocumented person, they would hesitate to otherwise reach out to their reps directly. Similarly, another undocumented interviewee mentioned that the center’s forum provided them certain opportunities they would not otherwise have, stating that, “I would not have that opportunity. I would not be motivated to go to the police station to ask questions. Just no. And here they give us that opportunity. They give us the choice to be able to ask.”

**Limitations of Shared-Responsibility Model and Participation:** Some interviewees mentioned that the compulsory nature of participation sometimes leads to some recipients not being as committed or motivated, which is reflected and visible in the quality of those recipient’s involvement and engagement. One interviewee stated that, “...I tell you, there are a lot of people who have kids, their children come to this center. But mom comes and works the day she’s supposed to work and that's it.” Another interviewee mentioned that, “I imagine that they [other parents] do not want to or do not care to like I’ll just bring my son and I pick him up and that is

all.” Another interviewee who as part of the shared-responsibility model has to work at the preschool stated that she believes that most parents are interested but of course that there are some who are only doing it because they are compelled. On another note, others discussed that the lack of childcare sometimes prevents further participation and engagement with the center, and others state that again their work prohibits more participation, with one interviewee stating that,

I spent a time that I was always there and now I do not go so much because of my work because where I work I have been there just one year and (many hours)... it is many hours so when I arrive I cannot anymore.

In addition, the existence of organizational limitations also surfaced. The same interviewee as above mentioned that,

She (Lucia, CEO) sometimes...has a lot of work...[and there is] no time for her...[so] she puts someone else... then like people [notice]. It is not the same when she is not there because they do not give as much information [at the community forums].

## **Discussion**

Perhaps one of the major findings that is not entirely surprising but nonetheless very important is that the direct services that Mar Vista provides to their recipients are a necessity and something that their recipients have come to rely on. They have committed themselves to the center because of how crucial these services are. People mentioned that they participate in events and engage in fundraising because the issue of funding is very real, and they sense that they would be affected. The research participants seem to have been aware of the issues with funding. One participant mentioned that they liked to be present because they viewed it as a way for supporting the center, with the hope that they would receive more funds. All of this is important because participants in the Mar Vista Family Center want to do more. They are participating as volunteers because that is the principal way that they are able to get engaged. Perhaps if there

were additional opportunities they would partake in more. The interest and desire to be more engaged and active is crucial to critical consciousness development since it is a very collaborative process. If we refer to the critical consciousness development chart provided in the literature review, we can see that the participants are definitely not in the first stage of consciousness. Instead the findings show that they may be in the second stage called “naïve reforming consciousness” because in the interviews the research participants were able to name the existence of a problem (funding, need for resources) and they were not passive, with some engaging in again those volunteer activities. The analysis of the cause of the problems did not arise in the interviews.

On a similar note, the findings demonstrate that the research participants are able to identify social issues that impact them and the community. The three main issues that recurred are security, crime and immigration. While the analysis of the causes of these issues still seems to be lacking, there was one participant who did state that the role of work played a role in gang activity, because some parents had to work multiple jobs and were not as present at home, which suggests some deeper thinking about the issue, although we cannot be certain if this emerged out of their involvement with the Mar Vista Family Center. The center hosts a community forum that they view as an extension of their shared-responsibility model which creates the space where their recipients can engage with different government representatives and access information. With critical consciousness, however, one of the goals is develop the agency and the power of people so that they may be very active and engaged as change agents. In the interviews, research participants noted that they sometimes did not feel comfortable to ask questions. In addition, in my field observations I noticed that Lucia Diaz acted as sort of an intermediary for requests and questions. This signals that there is still work to be done in developing the service recipients

leadership and agency. In addition, some of the issues discussed during the forums are what are referred to as constituent services like cleaning up trash or increasing more patrols in the neighborhood. Again, deeper discussions about why these needs exist did not surface in the interviews or while I was observing. Something that is important to mention about the community forums, however, is how they are effective at bringing a group of people together (which signals that again people are not passive and show an interest in their community) but also how they connect people to their government representatives, with police or city council reps noted as being consistently present. As two of the research participants mentioned, they would not otherwise have access to the information presented or to be in a place with these reps because they felt more vulnerable as a result of their immigration status.

One of the other findings in this research study was that Mar Vista Family Center despite having their shared-responsibility model still struggles with full engagement on behalf of their recipients. The fact that participation is compulsory in the preschool, for example, led some research participants to say that some of their fellow recipients are not as engaged or interested. Others mentioned that there is reluctance on behalf of some parents to engage with the center more, instead only seeking to receive the services. This is a concern because critical consciousness development requires strong commitment and obviously the willingness for people to be engaged. This is not only a challenge MVFC faces, however, it is something we see in many places and organizations. In the interviews, additional limitations that are both external and organizational also surfaced which should also be taken into account when considering the results of this research (and considering future research). First, people noted that work limits how much they get to participate in the center's programming, as well as access to childcare. Some research participants said that these are obstacles to them being more engaged. Second, there are

also organizational limitations. One interviewee mentioned that they are used to Lucia Diaz's presence at and facilitating of the community forum. This demonstrates that some MVFC recipients still rely on the organization and are not as comfortable with different leadership styles. The organizational limits are similar to the limitations on participation. The center also has staffing concerns, funding concerns, and concerns over managing all of their direct services so essentially, they are also limited in what they can do. Like I mentioned previously, I do not believe many people would reject the goals of Freirean critical consciousness. The uniqueness of MVFC (because of the shared-responsibility model) has allowed some consciousness-raising occurring, but the limits they have as a nonprofit and the fact that some of their recipients are not as engaged or face time/childcare conflicts impacts what they can do and the levels of critical consciousness we have seen.

### **Recommendations**

As an advocate of critical consciousness development, my overall recommendation for Mar Vista Family Center would be to try to be more intentional about incorporating it into their programs because of how powerful of a tool it can be in resolving many of the issues that they are presently working on. The programming should address questions of social, political, and economic inequality. Many direct service nonprofits do not do much advocacy or organizing work that should go together with the provision of services in order to really solve problems that are most times tied to structural issues. I would also recommend that in that process, the people who participate in the community forums should receive more leadership training so that they could apply more pressure to the different representatives that already attend the forums. Another recommendation would be that the center should explore partnerships with other organizations, academics, or organizers in the Los Angeles area that have more experience in critical

consciousness development and can help MVFC one of their own. Lastly, the center should explore the possibility of having their recipients engage in different ways at the center, besides the participation of event and fundraising (volunteerism).

### **Conclusion**

My main conclusion for this study would be that despite this direct-service provider not identifying itself as a Freirean nonprofit as the ones we saw in the literature review or really adopting a critical consciousness development curriculum, it seems that the unique way it engages its recipients through the shared-responsibility model as well as its strong presence in the community still creates a unique space where some levels of consciousness emerge as a byproduct of that participation. Additionally, while research participants did not identify a sense of empowerment, which is crucial to critical consciousness development, the fact that the recipients at Mar Vista are able to participate in volunteering and in the community forums/meetings as well as essentially be stakeholders in the center, could be described as empowering, even if it is not defined as such. It is clear that Mar Vista Family Center is not a typical service provider which are usually described as very transactional. At the same time, I do offer certain recommendations because if critical consciousness development was intentionally incorporated into the center's model, one can imagine that the positive ideals of empowerment, agency, humanization, and critical civic engagement in society would be realized.

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