



# Structural Violence: Addressing the Root of Illness

**Reading: Health, Healing, and Social Justice**, p. 379-394, from *Pathologies of Power*, Paul Farmer

## Discussion Guide

**Goal:** Gain a foundational understanding of liberation theology and how it calls us to respond to the political, cultural, and economic histories that shape the health of the poor.

### **Suggested Discussion Questions:**

1. Where have you seen or heard about structural violence? How does thinking of poverty as a result of structural violence affect your personal motivations for engaging in this work?
2. Liberation theology posits that genuine change will be rooted in small communities of poor people. Why does liberation theology call on communities of poor people, specifically, as experts on what needs to change?
3. How do you interpret the three steps of the methodology laid out by liberation theology (observe, judge, act)? Is one step more or less important?

### **Key Quotes:**

“To those concerned with health, a preferential option for the poor offers both a challenge and an insight. It challenges doctors and other health providers to make an option—a choice—for the poor, to work on their behalf... It’s also clear that many health professionals feel paralyzed by the magnitude of the challenge. Where on earth does one start?” (380).

“The reality posed by the poor... is no rhetorical question... It is a reality that calls men and women not only to recognize and acknowledge it, but to take a primary, basic position regarding it... This same reality is a question for human beings as themselves participants in the sin of humankind... the poor of the world are not the causal products of human history. No, poverty results from the actions of other human beings” (384).

“Liberation theology would push analysis in two directions: first, to seek the root causes of the problem; second, to elicit the experiences and views of poor people and to incorporate these views into all observations, judgments, and actions” (387-388).

## Lesson Plan

**Goal:** Gain a foundational understanding of liberation theology and how it calls us to respond to the political, cultural, and economic histories that shape the health of the poor.

**Warm Up:** The text states that in response to devoting oneself to populations struggling against poverty, it is “clear that many health professionals feel paralyzed by the magnitude of the challenge. Where on earth does one start?” (380). Discuss this sentiment. Does it resonate with you? Have you ever worked to combat issues of poverty and, if so, how did you initially approach and ultimately follow through with your work?

**Diagnostic:** Few would dispute the statement that “the poor are sicker than the nonpoor” (380). As a group, think critically about the factors (daily life choices, larger systems, etc.) that contribute to poverty. Make a list.

**Teaching Bit:** Gustavo Gutiérrez, a Peruvian theologian regarded as the father of liberation theology, states that “the poor are a by-product of the system in which we live and for which we are responsible” (379). Jon Sobrino echoes this, emphasizing that “the poor of the world are not the causal products of human history. No, poverty results from the actions of other human beings” (384).

**Structural Violence** is a term that refers to systems created by political, economic, or social histories. These systems are shaped by the powerful and keep others captive in poverty. **Liberation theology** responds to structural violence by arguing that “genuine change will be most often rooted in small communities of poor people; and...advances a simple methodology—observe, judge, act” (380 – 381). PIH has worked to address health by:

- 1) Seeking the root causes of the problem
- 2) Eliciting the experiences and views of poor people
- 3) Incorporating these views into all observations, judgments, and actions

Importantly, PIH has called upon liberation theology’s methodology by always observing first. PIH started with Zanmi Lasante, PIH’s Haitian sister organization, in Cange. Here, PIH worked with the poor to respond to their needs and acted in accordance with their desires. PIH is deeply committed to a model of health care delivery that addresses social inequities by analyzing their historical context and working with the local citizens and governments in pragmatic solidarity—solidarity that works to rapidly deploy tools and resources.

**Guided Practice:** While the methodology detailed by liberation theology to observe, judge, and act may seem simple, each of these three steps can take decades or more to achieve. Dissect each of these steps as a group. Talk about what is meant by each step, which questions to ask, and especially, what to be wary of before moving onto the next step.

Observe	Judge	Act
<b>Overview:</b> “ ‘Observe’ leads to descriptions of the conditions of the... poor, and also to claims regarding the origins of these conditions” (382). “‘Observe’... reveals atrocious conditions as atrocious” (383). “[It]... involves careful review of a large body of literature” (387).	<b>Overview:</b> “The reality posed by the poor... is no rhetorical question... It... calls men and women not only to recognize and acknowledge it, but to take a primary, basic position regarding it” (384).	<b>Overview:</b> “The act part of the formula... it’s simple: heal the sick” (389).
<b>Key Question:</b> What are the conditions of the poor and, importantly, why?	<b>Key Question:</b> Do I believe this reality is good or evil, just or unjust?	<b>Key Question:</b> What actions will deploy resources to heal the sick?

**Independent Practice:** With a partner or small group, brainstorm instances of structural violence you have witnessed or heard about domestically or internationally. How have systems caused or propagated poverty? (If stuck, consider locations of clinics/hospitals in the U.S. and abroad, costs of medications, access to and quality of health insurance, disproportionate incarceration rates of the poor, locations of housing projects, the Péligre Dam in Haiti, etc.)

**Assessment:** Share the instances of structural violence discussed in small groups. What are possible ways to rectify some of these wrongs? **In order to enact big-picture change, how might advocacy or PIH Engage play a role?**

**Closer:** Share one action that you, in your current role as a student, professional, etc., can take to help mobilize resources that might aid in the fight to heal the sick, and, specifically, heal the poor.