

Psychological Investigations: An Introduction to Social Therapy

By Lois Holzman

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The title of this presentation—"Psychological Investigations"—could just as well have been "Community Investigations." For the psychology Joyce Dattner and I practice, along with hundreds of others, is not the usual—not a psychology of individuals, of labels, of identities, of diagnoses, of attempting to understand people's behavior. It's a psychology of becoming, of action, of activism, of community.

Our psychology supports people's development in three related ways: • To experience the socialness of our human existence; • To exercise the power of collective creativity; • To live our lives in ways that build community.

We call our psychology social therapy and it is, indeed, a psychotherapy that is practiced in social therapy centers, mental health clinics and private therapy offices. But it is more—it is an approach that is practiced in youth development and educational settings and also in the workplace. It is a discovery that is proving useful to people around the world who are trying to build sustainable community and be a force for progressive social change. In the course of my presentation, I will introduce some of them to you.

Thirty-five years ago, Fred Newman, the founder of the social therapeutic approach, and a handful of students left the City College campus in New York City. They had no clear strategy, no plan of what to do. They just knew they had to get out of the closed and dogmatic academic environment where you had to know things—or pretend to. They wanted to build something from scratch. They went to poor communities, working class communities, middle-class communities; they started health clinics, therapy centers, schools—all the while developing new ways of relating to each other and constantly transforming and restructuring their activities so as to include more and more people who wanted to participate.

Now, in 2004, these efforts and activities are a bona fide development community involving thousands of people all over the United States in dozens of projects. Let me tell you about some of them. • The 20-year old All Stars Talent Show Network is the largest youth development/ supplemental education program for inner-city youth in the US. It involves 20,000 youth in New York City and has begun in Newark, Atlanta and Oakland as well.

- The Development School for Youth is a leadership-training program that introduces inner city high school students to the world of work. It is designed to help them become worldly and create new kinds of relationships to professional adults.

- Youth OnStage! is a theatre dedicated to producing politically and socially engaged plays with young performers.

- The Castillo Theatre is a 21-year old postmodern political theatre that has produced over one hundred plays by thirty authors, most of whom are new.

All these programs, housed at the new All Stars Project's performing arts and education center on 42 Street in Manhattan, provide a growthful environment for all involved—the young people, the theatre activists, the donors and the volunteers. All involve social therapy's understanding and practice of performance in everyday life as key to human learning and development.

- In addition to the programs just described, there are social therapy centers in the New York City metropolitan area, San Francisco, Philadelphia, Washington DC, and Boston. Social therapy is a group approach in which people get help with their emotional pain and problems by coming together and creating their therapy—what we call building the group—and in that process of creating together, they create new emotions. They grow by growing the group.

- Performance of a Lifetime is a consulting firm that blends social therapeutics with theatrical performance and improvisation to humanize the workplace. It works with major business and non-profit organizations.

- The heart of this community and its many projects is the East Side Institute for Short Term Psychotherapy. The Institute advances the approach, disseminates information, produces dozens of books and articles, educates the public on new approaches to human development and community building and conducts research. Through our various training programs and study options, we educate and train counselors, social workers, therapists, psychologists, community organizers, doctors and youth workers. We host retreats, classes and conferences. We link with others around the world to collaborate, build, teach and learn—building a global community for new approaches to human development, learning and community building.

All this work I'm describing is unique in that it is independently funded (that is, without government or university funding). It is grassroots and community supported.

Sustainability and Transformation

Viewing these activities, these projects, this ever-expanding community from the perspective of sustainability, I'd say we've done very well over these thirty-five years. And we've discovered something very interesting about

sustainability, something seemingly paradoxical. *To sustain something we need to change it. Sustainable living requires constantly changing our form of life.*

The way I've come to understand sustainable living is that it means sustaining our humanity. And to sustain our humanity in this current historical moment that is in so many ways inhuman, we have to continuously and radically transform—as individuals, as cultures, as a species. We have to not just be who and what we are, but become other. Put another way, *to build community human beings need to develop, and to develop human beings need to build community.*

Different understandings of both community and human development are central to “the becoming activity” I'm speaking about. Community is usually defined by membership, identity or geography. It's seen as an entity. For us, community is an activity, a creative activity, a process of becoming, and a process of developing, open to all who want to participate. Human development, according to mainstream psychology, is an unfolding, a series of stages human beings go through. It supposedly stops at certain point, and it is measurable. For us, development is an activity, a creative activity, a process of becoming, not something that happens to us, but something we create. We aren't just who we are, but simultaneously who we are becoming. Viewing and relating to people in this way, I believe, comes closer to what ordinary people want and need than viewing and relating to them as objects to be fixed.

In terms of intellectual or academic traditions, this understanding of human development and of community building is identified as activity-theoretic and postmodern. Those of you who are interested in learning about our practice from these vantage points can find in-depth discussions in the books by Fred Newman and me that address academic audiences and theoretical concerns.

Illustrations

However, for now I'd like to try to give you a picture of what it looks like to relate to people as social, activistic and creative performers. I'll illustrate first with social therapy and then with the All Stars Talent Show.

Unlike most psychotherapies, social therapy relates to the group, not the individual, as the unit that grows emotionally because we believe people grow in social units. What does this mean? I'll let Fred Newman, the founder of social therapy, tell you by reading from a dialogue from the book *Psychological Investigations*. The dialogue is one of more than 70 teaching sessions in the book, conversations between Newman and therapists and therapists-in-training. Newman says,

People come into therapy and, understandably, they want to know what's wrong with them. They feel bad. They're upset. They're hurting. They're anxious.

They're panicked. They're fearful. They're distressed. They're depressed. They can't sleep. They can't eat. They eat too much. They eat too little. They're having terrible fights. They're in emotional pain, or worse than that. They've been diagnosed. They've been labeled. All kinds of things have happened to them. Some of the people have felt improvement from things they've already done. Others don't feel that at all. They come to me, as they've come to others of you who are therapists, and they, quite reasonably and understandably, ask if we can make them better, and it seems to me that the only honest answer that one can give to that question is "No." We can't make anybody better. It seems to me that what we can do to help people who come to us in all of this pain and distress is to help them to live. We can help them to create something new. We can help them to be who they're not. We can help them to perform.

To me, what is fundamental to helping someone to deal with the terrible pain they are in is to help them to see their capacity to exercise their power to be someone other than who they are. We have the human capacity to be other than who we are, and we simply, for the most part, don't make use of it. Now what is the term that we give to the human capacity to be other than who we are? We perform. We each have the human capacity to get up on a stage and to be King Lear or Lady Macbeth or whoever, to tell a bad joke, to stick out our tongues, to wiggle our nose, to jump in the air. We are capable of performing. We are capable of becoming who we are not. "Wait a minute," you might say, "that's just on a stage." "But look here," I say, "this stage wasn't always here. I remember when we built this stage and put it up. We created this stage." We can create stages anywhere. We are performers. It's a wonderful talent that we have. The performatory talent is the exercise of our capacity to be other than who we are.

When people come to therapy, I try to help them be other than who they are. I'm not looking to get to the deeper interpretive inside of who a human being is. What I try to do is see if I can get a grouping of people to perform, to create a performance, to play a game. Some people react to this as trivializing human life. I think therapy as traditionally practiced trivializes human life; for me, the exercise of the capacity to perform other than who we are is the glorification of human life. We don't have to be who we are, we don't have to accept someone else telling us who we are, and most importantly, we don't have to accept ourselves telling ourselves who we are. We don't have to sit back and say, "I can't do that or I can't do this because that's not who I am." That's the wonder of life. (From Psychological Investigations, Dialogue XX)

Let's turn now to the All Stars Talent Show Network. Young people from 5 to 21 produce and perform in talent shows in their neighborhoods with the help of adult supporters (many with performance or arts backgrounds) and adult

contributors. The young people find a site, usually a high school, leaflet their neighborhoods, talk to other kids, and sign up acts for the audition.

There are three phases to an All Stars Talent Show cycle. First is the audition. Every act must audition but here's the twist—everyone makes it into the show. A few weeks later is the workshop phase. Everyone comes to the workshop with an original poem. They are put into groups with people they don't know, they read their poems, and the groups create improvised skits from the poems, and perform them on stage for the entire audience. This is an experience in improvisation and in working with people they don't know. Finally, a few weeks later is the show. The young people have sold tickets to their friends and family and on the day of the show as many as 50 acts perform to an audience as large as 1200. In light of the bad press inner-city young people and their communities constantly get in the media, it is hard to overestimate the significance of the positive statement these young people are making about development and community.

Political Implications

The linking of human development and community building that I've been talking about has implications for how we think about changing the world and how we do politics. For I believe that unleashing the capacity to develop and the capacity to create community are profoundly political issues.

Recently a psychologist colleague asked me how participating in an All Stars Talent Show was doing anything to change the world or about inequality and oppression. How was it developing class-consciousness in young people? Where was Paulo Freire in my work? I responded that at this moment in history I wasn't interested in developing class-consciousness, that what I cared about was young people developing human consciousness—the consciousness of changers, builders, creators—and not the consciousness of the oppressed.

Hope for a better world lies in ordinary people coming together—in small groups and large groups—and creating something new together. In that process, they become changers. They develop the kind of political consciousness that can make a difference. In my work as an international community organizer, I travel all over the globe training, teaching, collaborating, learning and building. I am thrilled and touched by the creative and committed people I meet who are building something positive no matter how devastated or hopeless the circumstances.

There're my friends Vesna and Jovan, Yugoslavian psychologists who, when their country fell apart and war broke out, left the university to do something—they didn't know what—for the refugees, especial the children, of their country's civil war. Over the decade they and their colleagues have built a community of

several hundred who provide services to tens of thousands of children, teens and adults—services that deal with trauma through performance and creative activities, that is, through development rather than diagnosis.

There's my friend Betsi who added a Masters in public health to her training in social therapy and went to South Africa where she's created the Living Together Project. This program uses performance, music, movement and storytelling to develop leadership and fight stigma within HIV infected and affected communities.

There's my friend Olga, a Russian psychologist who came to the United States this year and is beginning a two-month study with us at the Institute to get help in her work to develop a counseling program at her university. Olga says that therapy is even more of a stigma in Russia than here in the US. She wants to learn social therapy's group approach because, she told me, people need to learn the skill of living in groups. Her country went from an ideology glorifying the collective (capital C) to one glorifying the individual (capital I) in a matter of days, no small part of how come it is in crisis today.

There's my friend Alex, a theatre professor in Grahamstown, South Africa who formed a theatre troupe with street children living in the township. Each year, a theatre festival draws many thousands of visitors to Grahamstown. The street children, those orphaned by AIDS who live in a shelter, descend on the festival and perform a local song and dance for small change. Within hours, they become invisible to the tourists. Alex joined with The Ubom! Theatre Company to develop a way for the children to create a legitimate public voice. About 20 children created a multimedia event out of their stories and performed it as part of the festival, transforming their relationship to the audience, to the festival and to creating culture.

These people—and so many others—are the true revolutionaries of our time. It's a privilege to create with them and it's been a privilege to introduce them and our work to you tonight.

In closing, I want to return to the term “investigations.” Who conducts them? Where are they done? Typically we think of investigations as legitimate if they take place in a lab, a university or a courtroom (special places) and are conducted by experts (special people). I think this view limits us so that we often don't see what's in front of our eyes. We don't recognize the investigations of ordinary people in their daily lives, people like Alex and Jovan and Vesna, who create things and through that activity make discoveries. Investigation is an activist activity. It involves changing what is.

References Holzman, L. and Mendez, R. (Eds.) (2003). Psychological investigations: A clinician's guide to social therapy. New York: Brunner-

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