

## Some Challenges of Challenging Psychology

By Lois Holzman, Ph.D.

Co-founder and Director of the East Side Institute, New York, NY USA

I was trained as a developmental psychologist and psycholinguist. As a young researcher, my passion was to discover how children become speakers of a language and how speaking and thinking interconnect in childhood and all through life. As I pursued this passion, I became more and more discontented with the prevailing assumptions and methods of developmental psychology, cognitive psychology, and psychology in general. They begin with the individual, ignore the socialness of speaking and thinking, and measure individual “products” (for example, words, comprehension, Piagetian stages). They ignore process—the process of becoming a “languager,” the process of creating conversation, the process of people and communities developing. They look inside the person for answers, instead of seeing speaking and thinking and overall development as cultural activities. What was I to do, being so unhappy and out of step with the approaches of my chosen profession? I couldn’t be the only one who wanted a different kind of psychology. I would find others who felt the same way.

And I did. Nearly fifty years later, the number of psychologists, social workers, educators, doctors, nurses, youth workers, and others creating or craving alternatives keeps growing. We find each other, and today we number into the many thousands. There is, indeed, something new under the sun.

That something new is a not so much a formal psychology as it is an approach to living that activates and promotes the socio-cultural activities of playing, performing, learning and growing. These socio-cultural activities are, I have come to realize, what fuel the human life force. I now see myself not as a developmental psychologist, but as a *developmentalist*, that is, a person who helps people to learn and grow and change the world. How I came to realize this is a long, story, complete with protagonists and antagonists, encouragements and attacks, achievements and setbacks. It is the story of social therapeutics. Some of this story may surprise you. To the extent that you have

heard of social therapeutics, the East Side Institute, and/or Fred Newman and me, it is largely due to the enthusiastic reception and dissemination of our work by Japanese colleagues. This was far from the situation in the US for most of our history.

Social therapeutics originated from social therapy, the radically humanizing psychotherapy developed in the 1970s in the US by philosopher and political organizer Fred Newman. Over the decades, it broadened and became a methodology for supporting and enhancing the development and learning of persons and communities through activating their capacity to play, perform, philosophize and, in that process, create new ways to see and be and relate. Rooted in the lived belief that ongoing social-emotional-cultural-intellectual development is essential for world-changing, it is a constructive (rather than a destructive) social change approach. In other words, social therapeutics proceeds from the premise that the changing of the world and of ourselves are one and the same task.

The East Side Institute where social therapeutics is developed, taught and researched, and the global development community it has created and supports, have grown without a plan. The growth was not systematic or rational. There was no theory put into practice. There were plenty of inspirations from political struggles, from psychology, from the arts and culture, and from philosophy. Just as important were the inspirations from the people we were organizing to join us in creating organizations that challenge the way established institutions do things, and their creativity and hard work when we invited them to build with us organizations and programs that humanize rather than harm.

The challenges we faced in creating social therapeutics, the East Side Institute, and the broad global community which it spawned and supports were many. Our activity goes back a half a century when we began to build organizations and practices to support and activate people to transform the society (initially US society) so that everyone's needs could be met. These organizations and practices, from the start, went beyond psychology per se. The East Side Institute is part of broad, multi-generational effort to help masses of people reorganize our world in more equitable, democratic and

developmental ways. These efforts have involved us not only in challenging the underlying assumptions of psychology, but also in simultaneously engaging the foundational premises of the status-quo in education, culture, health care, and politics. Throughout social therapy's first few decades, Fred Newman, its founder, would often say words to this effect: "You can't understand social therapy—or its effectiveness in helping people in emotional distress—separate from the community which builds it and which it builds." This multi-faceted challenge has been key in shaping our activities, including our alternative to psychology, and, as we shall see, the root cause of the much of the opposition to our efforts in the US.

Our methodology and organizing practices were, from day one, unorthodox and directly confronted the norms of the establishment institutions of psychology, psychotherapy, academia, culture, education and politics. Sometimes we were ignored by the mainstream; other times we were maligned and attacked. Since it was our intentionally unorthodox ways of working and our significant but uneven organizing successes that the establishment institutions were responding to, we were not surprised by their response, although the viciousness was sometimes shocking.

The fifty-year history of building an alternative psychology in the US mainstream (with the emergence, growth and international spread of the psychology of becoming, social therapeutics, performance activism, and the development community) was, and remains, painstaking and exhilarating. And while this story is culturally and historically rooted in its US context, I hope that our experiences and discoveries might inspire you in your own efforts.

### Community Organizing and Radical Psychology

In the late-1960s, a small group in New York City banded together as political organizers to engage New Yorkers in discussing and addressing some of the ills of capitalism and its oppressive institutions. In addition to the corrupt and undemocratic US political system, the marginalization of the poor, the failing school systems, and the lack of free and

adequate health care for all, these organizers also took on the destructively individualistic psychology and psychotherapy industries. They set up free dental and health care collectives, welfare rights organizations, free schools, and an alternative psychology and radical therapy that its creator, Fred Newman, called social therapy. Newman was the architect of this community's many projects from the 1970s until he passed away in 2011.

Newman was a working-class New Yorker and Korean War veteran who went on to receive a Ph.D. in philosophy of science and foundations of mathematics. He was radicalized during the social upheavals of the 1960s. Like millions of others, he resonated with how cultural and political movements were challenging the Western glorification of individual self-interest and with grassroots communal experiments to transform daily life. He felt the need to confront the failure of the US to deal with its legacy of slavery and racism, as African Americans remained poor and shut out of the country's prosperity. For a few years, Newman taught philosophy at US colleges and universities and then, skeptical that social change would come from the university campus, he left academia, developed dozens of community and political organizing tactics, grew his social therapy practice and attracted followers in all of these tactics. He and a handful of followers set up community organizing collectives in working class neighborhoods of NYC and started a union for poor and unemployed people. It was during this time that Fred created social therapy and began to practice.

I met Fred during these beginnings when a friend invited me to hear him speak on the topic of "Marxism and Mental Illness"—two topics that, at the time, were foreign to me. I had just gotten my Ph.D. in developmental psychology and joined a team of researchers at the Rockefeller University developing a social-cultural alternative to the cognitive model of learning used nearly universally in schools. I loved my research work at the university and, at the same time, was intrigued by Fred's ideas and projects. I discovered that Fred and I shared the same dreams for a world without poverty. Our different life experiences and training had convinced each of us that psychology as a discipline and as popular culture desperately needed to be transformed. Psychology's

individualistic focus, claim to objectivity, emulation and imitation of the physical and natural sciences, and dualistically divided worldview, made mainstream psychology not a force for good but an impediment to ongoing social development and social activism. Fred asked me to join him in creating a space to transform psychology. I said yes. That space is the East Side Institute

At first, the Institute concentrated on building social therapy practices and developing the approach as an active critique of traditional therapy. In its earliest years, social therapy was similar to other new psychologies emerging in the US in the 1960's and '70s. It denied division between the "personal" and the political; it engaged the authoritarianism, sexism, racism, classism and homophobia of traditional psychotherapy; and its reason for being was that living under capitalism makes people emotionally sick and the hope was that therapy could be a tool in the service of progressive politics. What made social therapy different was its engagement of the philosophical underpinnings of psychology and psychotherapy. It rejected explanation, interpretation, the assumption of self-contained individuals, the notion of an inner self that therapists and clients need to delve into, and other dualistic foundations of traditional psychology

We found that the best environment for engaging all that is the group. People don't change themselves, or the world, alone. We do it socially, in groups. It is through the social activity of building groups that people learn and grow. The work of the social therapy group is to create new emotional growth through participating with their group members in building something together—namely, their group. Group-building is a very effective way to deconstruct the deep-rooted senses of self and identity and reconstruct the concept of social relationship. The more diverse the group, the more material the group has to build with—and the more they have to build with, the more they can develop. Unlike most group therapies where the group serves as a context for the therapist to help individuals with their emotional problems, in social therapy the group—not its individual members—is the therapeutic unit.

## Intellectual Inspirations

With the inspiration of Karl Marx, the Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky and the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, Newman and I deepened our understanding of how and why social therapy worked. Although different in many ways, Marx, Vygotsky and Wittgenstein, shared *a social* understanding of human life. To each of them, how we feel, see, understand, speak and relate are not merely social in origin but social when enacted or, in the language we have come to embrace, when performed.

Also, to all three of them, human life and human development are not pre-determined, not defined and limited by biology or psychology or even by history. We humans create our world and have the power to collectively and constantly re-create it. How we think and speak and feel and make meaning are not preordained or static. Marx, Vygotsky and Wittgenstein, in distinct but related ways, show that we are fundamentally social beings and that it is through our *activity* that we create meaning. What Fred and I, working by now with hundreds of others, were able to discover was a way to bring this humane, activist, developmental understanding of what it means to be human to all kinds of people, developing with them a *methodology* for simultaneously engaging daily life and the seemingly intractable social institutions that cause so many painful distortions of life.

As Newman and I shared our understanding through our writings and as social therapy practices expanded across the US, we met many who had similar understandings and many more who were excited to hear about what we were doing. Could this approach work outside of the therapy room? Could people build groups, create ensembles, build developmental environments anywhere—schools, hospitals and clinics, their homes, entire communities—where everyone could learn and grow?

In this way, social therapy, an approach to emotional development, became social therapeutics, a methodology of group-building that engages the subjective and the personal in a way that simultaneously allows us to challenge the political, economic

and cultural institutions that are generating so much underdevelopment, pain and violence.

### Enter Play and Performance

This growth, however, would not have happened without play and performance. The catalysts for our realization of how powerful they are were: poor New York City mothers; Lev Vygotsky; and the Castillo Theatre. First, the mothers.

In the 1970s one of our organizing efforts was a union/advocacy group for poor and unemployed people. Thousands of people joined the union, most of them women trying to raise their children in devastated neighborhoods. They would ask us over and over again to do something so their children wouldn't hang out on the streets and get in trouble. We went to the young people and asked them what they wanted to do. They said they wanted to put on talent shows. This was the period of hip-hop's emergence, and youth in the Black and Latino communities were eager to showcase their break dancing, rapping and other performance skills.

Our organizers and the young people worked together to produce a talent show, then another, and another. In addition to performing on stage, the young people were soon producing, ushering, running the tech and organizing their friends and neighbors to attend. At each talent show, participants were told from the stage, "If you can perform on stage, you can perform in life."

And we meant it. We had learned from Lev Vygotsky that performing is what babies and little children do—of course *they* don't know that's what they're doing. We learned from him that playing at being someone you are not is the key to learning and growing when you are little. They play at speaking and become speakers. They perform as dancers and artists and learn how to dance and draw. Performing, we realized, is being who we are and not who we are/who we're becoming at the very same time. When we are little, adults support us and cheer us on as we perform our lives. Vygotsky's social-cultural understanding of human beings linked learning and

development together with play as a centerpiece. Playing is how children develop, he said, because in play children are as if they were “a head taller”—they stretch; they do things they don’t yet know how to do; they suspend the “real world” and create something fantastical out of what they’ve experienced. They perform as if they were someone else and, in doing this, they actively create who they’re becoming.

How we got to see the similarity between play and performance was through forays into theatre and improvisation. Our community began a theatre, the Castillo Theatre, and an improv troupe in the 1980s. Writing, directing, casting professionals and amateurs, and putting on plays; doing improv comedy shows and inviting audience members to come on stage and improvise—these community-based creative activities helped us see that not just babies and toddlers, but actors on the stage too are appreciated for being who they are and other than who they are at the same time. We wondered, “What if everyone was supported to play and perform in this way? “

Newman and I began to see everything our colleagues and I were doing as performance pieces. The social therapy group building is like the ensemble building necessary to put on a show. Meaning emerges through social activity in both social therapy group talk and in creating a production, where script, characters, set, lighting, costumes, etc. come together to create the play. Our experience creating theatre and bringing performance to inner city youth corroborated Newman’s and my hunch that Vygotsky’s insights about young children were applicable throughout the life span. The potential to perform “as if a head taller” is always there. Realizing this, we infused our projects with our new-found discovery, and all of our activities became explicitly playful and performatory.

### Discovering Fellow Travelers

At around this same time, awareness and interest was growing for social therapeutic methodology and our understanding of play and performance. It was becoming known internationally and within some scholarly traditions as a method of social engagement

and personal transformation. Face to face and Internet connections with people developing or searching for new ways to build community, heal trauma, engage the devastation of poverty, transform the learning model, etc., blossomed. We discovered that lots of people world-wide were experimenting with the creative arts and performance approaches to psychological and social issues. Among scholars, colleagues of ours were also coming to appreciate the potential of performance, and through a series of conversations with some of them, we decided to host a conference on performance together. We called it Performing the World (PTW). 120 people from 14 countries came together in October 2001 for this three-day experiment in performing a conference. Since then, the Institute has hosted in the New York City area nine more PTWs each with 300-500 participants from dozens of countries. When the COVID lockdown took place, PTW went virtual as Performing the World Happening(s), becoming even more diverse in terms of who presented and attended.

The growing international interest in social therapeutics, as well as the spark of that first PTW, prompted us to create a way for people from outside NYC to train with us. In 2004, the Institute launched The International Class, a nine-month course of study in social therapeutics. Before the pandemic, The International Class combined virtual study and conversation with three immersive residencies at the Institute. Since 2020 it too has shifted online. As of this writing the Institute has graduated 19 cohorts. There are 160 alumni from 40 countries.

About ten years into Performing the World and The International Class, after experiencing their steady growth, we realized that social therapeutics was becoming a methodology for a new kind of social activism—*performance activism*—which is neither resistance nor reaction, not a negation of what is, but a positive becoming of what can be.

Performance activists need each other's support. They need community. A new kind of community. What social therapeutics calls a development community. A development community is not based on geography or culture or race or profession—or identity of any kind. It is open to anyone and everyone who wants to join it and joining

it consists of participating in the work of building it. A development community is constantly changed and transformed by those who participate in it. It is not a static formation determined by the past; it is a dynamic process constantly generating new possibilities, including evolving versions of itself.

The notion of a community as an entity for creating social change is new. It is not a movement or political party; it is not an intellectual or spiritual discipline. Our development community emerged from the activity of building groups. We tried building all sorts of groups. Some of them worked, many of them didn't. But in the process of building organizations and activities from the ground-up, the development community emerged.

Thirty years ago, Newman described a development community and why we need it. He said, "There is no haven, no place to hide. There is no escaping the cruelty, the pain, the torture. Many people try. They turn to families, to intellectual endeavor, to relationships, to drugs, to crime, people look to politics, people look everywhere to find a haven. People join communities because they seek a haven in a heartless world. But there is, in my opinion, no haven." He continued, "To me, community is the specific and passionate activity of supporting people who, far from seeking a haven in a heartless world, want to engage its cruelty, to do something to change it, to create a world in which havens are not necessary."

While there may be no haven, Newman said, we have the potential to create a Heart, that is, to do the work of developing "a world in which havens are not necessary." This is the process by which social therapy gave birth to social therapeutics and performance activism. The ever-expanding development community, grounded in an alternative to institutionalized psychology, was not built by theory or ideology. There was no pre-conceived plan. The process emerged from what we saw happening, both on the ground in our own activities and in the broader culture. Nor does the development community rely on political agreement or cultural conformity, although the values of collectivity, cooperation, and non-violence constantly guide us.

## Our Illegitimacy

Our unorthodox ways of building organizations and of challenging the status quo earned us enemies. We were illegitimate in the eyes of many in the psychological and political establishment, be they right, left or center, for bringing our radical challenges of their authority to masses of people. Some tried to destroy us.

One of the ongoing accusations that the establishment (both psychological and political) have flung at our community is that if you “mix” politics and psychology, you are brainwashing people. During the 1980’s, as social therapy was getting popular, those of us involved in it were also building an independent electoral political party (New Alliance Party) to challenge the US two party system and to loosen the Democratic Party’s hold on what had become its faithful constituency of the poor, the working class, African Americans, Latinos, the gay community and progressives. The stronger our new party became, the louder and more demonizing the attacks on it and social therapy became. In 1982, the then leading liberal newspaper in NYC, called the *Village Voice*, published the frontpage story, “Psychobabble: What Kind of Party is This, Anyway?” Attacking both social therapy and the New Alliance Party, the article accused Fred Newman of brainwashing people to become political. People who go to see a therapist, the article claimed, are vulnerable and can be manipulated (brainwashed).

This attack (and variations on it for the next three decades) gave us the opportunity to examine the assumption of vulnerability that underlies the brainwashing charge and to challenge the infantilizing and/or sick identity that is placed upon a person the moment they seek out a therapist. We have never stopped bringing this issue and other instances of both the psychological harm and the social control done by psychology out to the public.

The majority of attacks on our work came from progressive forces within psychology and politics, including the official US Left. Our understanding of this is that how we worked and what we were building were threatening to those in the academy and those in politics. The significant, if limited, successes of the New Alliance Party,

followed by the US-wide community organizing to get Lenora Fulani on the ballot for US President as an independent, continued to expose and challenge the deals that liberals and progressives made in order for them to remain legitimate players within the Democratic Party, as its left wing.

Within academia, our succession of published books with the most prestigious academic publisher, and the growing attraction to our work among students was threatening to those who were the unofficial radicals at US and British universities. As radical, critical, political scholars, we were unique in having an independent location. And we had a viable and growing practice, which was what allowed us to have anything theoretical to say. That was (and remains) one of our most direct challenges to how social science is done.

The East Side Institute was and remains an educational, research and training center that, from the beginning, was not attached to a university and, therefore, sustained itself, not with university funding, but with modest fees and donations from supporters. But we discovered that without institutional funding, what we did was “not real” in the eyes of scholars. Even as Newman’s and my body of scholarly work on the need for alternatives to mainstream psychology was well placed by virtue of our publications (and conference presentations), the fact that Newman and I worked out of the organization *we ourselves had built* and not at a university, and the fact that we did not (and still do not) depend on funds from universities, foundations, or government agencies to function, meant that an aura of suspicion surrounded us.

The critiques and judgements from academic psychology about social therapy did not remain static as our influence grew. Scholarly reviews of our work illustrate this, and we can see five phases through the decades. The very first review of a book of ours in a journal of the American Psychological Association (APA) denied that social therapy existed! Some years later, the APA-journal review of *Lev Vygotsky: Revolutionary Scientist* (1993) stated that the title was misleading because the book had nothing to do with Vygotsky! In later years, on the one hand, we saw appreciation of our theoretical work and the rigor of our scholarship coupled with uneasiness about our practice. On

the other hand, at the same time, we saw appreciation and enthusiasm for our practice, coupled with scant attention to our theoretical and conceptual innovations. I am happy to say that today perhaps history has caught up with us, as there is acknowledgement of and appreciation for the unique unity of theory-practice that is social therapeutics.

The changes in how our work coincided with the interest from postmodern, language-oriented, and sociocultural psychologists to what Newman and I wrote about the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky—that they were brilliant methodologists with a practical therapeutic bent—and how they have been synthesized in social therapeutic practice. In addition, the changes coincide with mainstream psychology becoming increasingly and alarmingly medicalized, producing more and more frustrated and unhappy practitioners and professors who see alternatives.

If anything we have done for the past fifty years has any chance of making some difference in the world., it will not be the theory or the practice. It will be the theory-practice unity, the practical-critical approach, the totality of our work. What are the implications of a new understanding of therapeutics as a developmental way of life? What might research become if we embrace that the activity of human and community development is the continuous organization of being and becoming? How might a non-psychological, performatory approach that is fundamentally anti-epistemological contribute to a cultural transformation in which people learn how to live together?

One of the new ways of learning how to live together that was so challenging throughout our history might be much less controversial today, as skepticism and mistrust of government has become a global phenomenon with fewer and fewer believing governments can be relied on. I do hope so. I am referring to self-governance and independence—people learning to finance and run their own projects and organizations independent of universities, corporations, foundations or the government, and designing horizontal (as opposed to hierarchical) structure. Financial independence was critical to our success and sustainability. Our circumstances were unique to that time and place in the urban US. Your circumstances are quite different.

Nevertheless, our experience could very well be helpful in opening up creative ways to create, build and sustain your work. If one wants to fundamentally changing society, it is extremely difficult to do so if you are dependent on the money and legitimacy of institutions that function as pillars of the very society you want to change. Just as important, we have found that when you invite people to join you in building an activity, organization or project with their labor, connections, skills, or finances, you are engaging in an organizing activity, you are giving them a stake in that activity or organization. The lived experience of being part of bringing into being an activity or organization is fundamentally different from being involved in a project funded from the top down. It is empowering and creates hope.

For decades our financial independence *itself* was attacked. At first, our critics simply would not believe that we were actually funding our work from the grassroots, that is, from those we were organizing. “Where does the money *really* come from?” they would ask with a sneer. Among the absurd answers they provided to their own question were, for example, the C.I.A. or the Federal Bureau of Investigation (the political police in the US). The other side of that attack was to question where the money went. Here again, they made up absurd stories. For example, that instead of funding the Institute or its sister organizations such as the All Stars Project, the money was being raised to fuel Newman’s supposedly decedent lifestyle on an (imaginary) luxury yacht in the Caribbean. These kinds of hysterical attacks have subsided as our success and our base of activists and supporters have grown around the world. Yet as late as the first decade the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, a local New York City television news station revived the “brainwashing” slander with the variant that Newman (then very ill) and his followers practiced social therapy so that they could have sex with patients.

As I said at the beginning, the challenges that the Institute and its development community have faced, including the nature and tone of the attacks on social therapy, are specific to the U.S. historical and cultural context. The history of psychology in Japan and your politics and culture are obviously very different. Also, the world changed enormously over the last half century. We are gratified that among those changes is the

fact that social therapy, social therapeutics, and performance activism have spread around the world and have sunk some significant roots in a wide variety of cultures.

Nonetheless, as you in Japan create your challenge to the premises of psychology, you must expect your own stumbling blocks, including various forms of push-back. When you decide to create new possibilities, rather than to shape people and history into preconceived solutions, when you listen and build with whatever your communities and history throw your way, when you challenge old ways of thinking and of living together, then the institutions and people who directly or indirectly benefit from those old ways, will challenge you.

I welcome the birth of *Re:mind*. In your own unique ways, you will be helping to generate self-and-world-changing.

*I invite you to reach out and share your comments and questions. Write me at [lholzman@eastsideinstitute.org](mailto:lholzman@eastsideinstitute.org)*